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His Dirty Little Secret
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Book Blurb

Graham Craig and Darren Sanford have been having an affair for nearly a year, a secret affair. Graham doesn't want anyone to know. When Darren's emotions become too deeply involved, Graham knows he has to break things off, even if it feels like he's cutting out his own heart.

When his self-imposed separation from Darren becomes more than he can stand, Graham goes back to beg for another chance. He sets out to prove what they have together is special. Then Graham learns some terrifying news that changes everything. Someone has put a hit out on him and everyone he loves is in danger. Graham knows what he has to do. As much as it pains him, Graham tells Darren they are over, again. He knows that this time, Darren will never give him another chance, but at least the man will be alive to hate him. Graham goes into protective custody, along with other members of the drug task force he works on, and his family.

But when well-meaning friends interfere, can Graham save the man he loves before an assassin's bullet gets him, or will he lose Darren before he has a chance to tell him – and the entire world – how much he loves the man?

Chapter One

He walked into the bar like he owned the place. His self-assured presence made everyone in the room look at him, want him. Darren moved to stand against the back wall of the bar. He needed the darkness the shadows provided to have just a few extra moments to gaze at the six-foot-four Adonis.

No one walked like Graham Craig. No one looked liked him. And no one had the ability to take the breath from Darren's lungs the way Graham did. Even after several years of knowing the man, Darren felt the same; Graham still took his breath away.

"Are you going to shoot or what?"

Darren regretfully pulled his gaze away from the man of his dreams and focused on the man in front of him. He frowned and took the pool cue Paul held out to him then studied the table. It was hard to concentrate on the game when he could see Graham approaching out of the corner of his eye.

Hell, Darren didn't even like playing pool. He only learned how because it allowed him to be closer to Graham. It allowed him to have Graham's muscular body pressed close to his as Graham taught him the rules of the game without anyone knowing of Darren's growing attraction for the man.

Darren finally leaned over the table and took his shot. He was surprised when the white ball did exactly what he wanted, shooting across the green felt and hitting three other balls, knocking two into the pockets.

Darren glanced up quickly, wondering if Graham saw his shot. The smile and slight nod of approval he received from the man was better than any birthday present he'd ever been given.

"Nice shot, Darren," Graham said in his deep, gravelly voice. "You're learning."

"I had a good teacher."

"True." Graham chuckled as he stepped close enough for Darren to smell his musk aftershave. "But I had an eager student."

Oh, I'm eager, all right; eager to be alone with you and show you what I can really do with a long stick, two balls, and a flat surface. Darren swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat. He really needed to not think that way, not right now. It wouldn't bring him anything but pain.

"Does anyone want another beer?" he asked. "I'm going to hit the men's room then head over to the bar."

"I'll take one if you're buying," Graham said, smirking as he reached for the pool cue in Darren's hand.

Darren's tongue almost fell out of his mouth when Graham leaned over the table to take the next shot. The faded denim of Graham's jeans stretched tight over his perfect ass. God, the man was a masterpiece. A living, breathing masterpiece.

"Yeah, this round is on me," Darren said as he quickly turned from the arousing sight and walked away. He *had* to walk away or he'd be reaching out to caress that perfect ass. He wouldn't be able to stop himself.

Darren walked across the bar and made a beeline for the men's bathroom. He checked each stall, thankful when he found them empty. Walking to the last one, he stepped inside and locked the door behind him. He had his cock out of his pants and in his hand in three seconds flat.

Images of Graham floated through his head as he stroked his aching cock, each one more exotic than the last one. Graham had held the top position in Darren's fantasies for ages. Darren masturbated to them nearly every day.

His breath heaved as his hand moved over his engorged shaft faster and faster. He could feel his balls start to tighten up against his body and knew his orgasm was only moments away. Darren pictured Graham laid out on his bed, the man's naked body glistening in the low lights. He stroked faster.

"Darren?"

Darren froze, mere seconds away from coming. He bit his lips to keep from groaning. He was so damn close. Beads of pre-cum dripped from the head of his cock. His balls felt heavy, achy.

"Darren," the deep voice said again. "I know you're in here. I watched you come in. Answer me, damn it."

"What do you want, Graham?" Darren croaked out, embarrassed beyond belief at being caught jerking off in a public bathroom. He just hadn't been able to help himself.

"What do you think I want?"

Darren groaned and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them and turned his head he could see Graham peering over the edge of the bathroom stall door. Darren felt his skin flush. He knew he'd be turning several shades of red. His skin was pale. He always showed his embarrassment.

"So, this is what you do when you go to the bathroom." Graham chuckled and Darren felt his face flush again. Much more of this and he'd be red all of the way down to his toes. "And all this time, I thought you were coming in here to piss."

"Can't you see I'm busy?" Darren snapped.

"Open the door and I'll help you out with that."

Darren couldn't get the door open fast enough. He unlocked it and stepped back, feeling delightfully crowded when Graham stepped inside and locked the door behind him.

"I've missed you, baby," Graham whispered against Darren's neck. The small lick of Graham's tongue made Darren's legs weaken. "It's been weeks."

"Whose fault is that?" Darren retorted.

"Don't be like that," Graham said as he leaned back and looked down into Darren's face. "You know I've been busy working on that damn drug taskforce. I've barely had time to sleep, let alone have a social life."

Darren frowned and glanced down. "Sorry," he said. "I've missed you too."

And he had. God, how he'd missed him. It'd been weeks since they had been able to spend any time together. Theirs wasn't the usual sweetheart type of relationship but Darren still savored every moment they spent together.

"Did you?" Graham crooned as he wrapped his hand around Darren's cock and started slowly stroking his length. "Show me how much, baby."

Darren's legs trembled. He pressed his head back against the stall wall. "It's been so long, Graham," he moaned quietly. "I need you."

"You can have me," Graham replied. "Let me come over tonight."

"Yes." Darren groaned. He groaned louder as visions of Graham fucking him filled his head. "Yes! Oh God, yes!"

Graham claimed Darren's lips at the same moment his orgasm ripped through him. So overcome by the fire burning through his body, Darren could barely respond to the tongue thrust into his mouth.

Darren tried to extend the kiss, but Graham pulled away and put pressure on Darren's shoulders, pushing him down. Darren dropped to his knees and reached for the zipper of Graham's jeans.

He licked his lips as he watched the button slip free and the zipper slide down. Darren gasped, his heart pounding frantically as Graham's cock bounced out of his jeans.

"Christ, Graham," he groaned. "You're not wearing any boxers."

Graham chuckled above him. "I was hoping to see you tonight. I thought I'd cut out the middle man so we could get right down to business."

Darren was in full support of that idea. He leaned forward and swiped his tongue across the head of Graham's cock, groaned as the flavor of Graham's pre-cum exploded across his tongue.

He leaned in farther and swallowed Graham down until his nose brushed against wiry pubic hair. Graham tasted so good, Darren didn't even mind when the man pulled back then snapped his hips forward, driving his cock into Darren's mouth.

"Fuck, Dar," Graham growled. "It's been so long; this won't take much."

Part of Darren regretted that. The quicker Graham got off, the quicker he pulled away, and Darren would have to go back to pretending they were just friends. Another

part of Darren wanted to get Graham off from the sheer pleasure he could bring the man.

Hands clenched in Darren's hair. "Your mouth is fucking perfect, Dar."

Darren sucked harder, licked with more enthusiasm. He wanted to bring Graham to the heights of ecstasy. He wanted Graham to never consider having sex with anyone else again except him.

Darren knew his feelings were misplaced where Graham was concerned. They were strictly *friends with benefits*. And they were only friends because they met through Graham's best friend, Jamie. Still, Darren couldn't help but feel satisfaction when Graham growled and jerked and filled his mouth with hot cream.

He licked Graham's softening shaft clean then tucked the object of his desire back into Graham's pants and carefully raised the zipper. Darren stood and placed his own cock back into his pants, straightening his clothes.

He finally glanced up at Graham. The closed look in Graham's eyes as he stepped back toward the door made Darren's heart seize. Only moments ago, they were lovers. The look in Graham's eyes now told him that they were back to being just friends again.

Darren didn't know how much longer he could continue this charade. He wanted to be Graham's lover and partner, the one Graham came home to at the end of the day.

He was tired of being Graham's dirty little secret.

Chapter Two

Graham frowned as he watched Darren gulp down another beer. Darren usually wasn't much of a drinker, but tonight he seemed determined to tie one on. That was the third beer Darren had drank since they left the bathroom.

Graham would have thought Darren would be in a much happier mood. They hadn't been able to get together for several weeks. Tonight, Graham made arrangements so he could be with Darren, even if it was only for a few hours.

"Jamie, you made it."

Graham glanced away from Darren's sullen face to see his best friend, Jamie Everson, standing a few feet away. He arched an eyebrow at the arm Jamie had wrapped around the shoulders of a sexy little brown-haired man.

"Hey, Jay, how's it going?" Jamie said with a nod.

"I can't complain," Jay replied, grinning.

"I can," Paul, Graham's work partner, called out. Paul stepped over and placed his arm around Jay, pulling him close. "He's working too hard. I haven't been laid in days."

"Hey, Paul." Jamie laughed.

"Hey, Jamie," Paul replied. He gestured to Sammy. "And who's this gorgeous creature?"

Jamie smiled down at Sammy. "This is Sammy Dane."

"Nice to meet you, Sammy Dane," Jay said, holding his hand out.

"Please, call me Sammy." Sammy shook the man's hand. "James is the only one who calls me Sammy Dane."

Jay laughed. "I can tell from the grin on Jamie's face that there's a story behind that."

"James?" Paul asked. "You call him James? You are a brave man. The last guy who called him James went away with a bloody nose."

Graham chuckled and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He remembered that incident, and not necessarily in a fond way. He'd been the moron that called Jamie by his given name. He only ever did it once.

Jamie rolled his eyes. "Don't believe a word he says, honey. Paul likes to exaggerate."

"Do not," Paul protested.

"Do too," Jamie insisted.

"Do not," Paul argued again.

"Oh, just shut the hell up." Graham laughed as he walked over to stand in front of Jamie and his friend. "You two are worse than a bunch of toddlers."

"Hi, I'm Graham," he said as he held his hand out to Jamie's friend. "I work with Jamie."

"Hello." Sammy nodded.

Graham heard a snort from behind him and quickly guessed that it came from Darren. "The red-headed fellow getting ready to shoot pool is Darren." Graham chuckled. He looked over at Darren. "He's okay . . . for a nurse."

Darren glanced up, shooting Graham an evil glare. "You do know that I can kill you in fifty different ways and not leave a trace, don't you? I also happen to know a couple of police officers that could help me hide the body where it would never be found."

"I'd help," Paul chimed in.

"Me too," said Jay.

"I'm in," Jamie said.

Graham rolled his eyes. "See what I have to put up with, Sammy? I don't know why I go out with you guys. You're always picking on me."

Sammy laughed.

"So, what do you do, Sammy?" Graham asked as they all moved toward the table the men had reserved.

"I . . . uh" Sammy stammered.

"Sammy Dane is an author."

"You're an author?" Jay asked, sliding closer. "What do you write? Anything I might have read?"

"You can read?" Paul asked. Jay reached over and slugged him in the arm, making Paul grunt. Paul rubbed his arm. Graham laughed. "Sure you want to get involved with these people, Sammy? They're brutal."

Sammy laughed. "I think I can handle myself."

Graham was curious about the look Jamie gave Sammy. *Intriguing.*

Sammy turned to Jamie. "Can't I, sweetheart?"

Jamie gulped. "Oh, yeah."

Graham's mouth dropped open in shock. He'd never seen Jamie this way.

Jamie shot them a half smile and shrugged.

"So, Sammy, what type of books do you write?" Jay said, directing the conversation away from Jamie's burning face and back to their discussion.

The panicked look Sammy gave Jamie intrigued Graham almost as much as the strange look on Jamie's face a moment earlier. There was an interesting story between these two and curiosity was eating away at Graham.

Jamie nodded. "You write them, you tell them."

"I write erotic gay romances."

"No way!" Jay exclaimed, acting like he had just met a celebrity. "Do you have a pen name or do you write under your real name?"

"Dane Summers."

Jay bounced up and down. "Oh my God! I've read all of your books." Jay grabbed Sammy by the hand and started dragging him to sit down at the table. Sammy glanced back at Jamie. Even Graham could see the confusion and desperation on Sammy's face. He was surprised when Jamie just waved.

"So, tell me about pretty boy."

Jamie looked over at him. "Sammy Dane? We've been dating for a few weeks."

"A few weeks?" Graham gaped. "And you're just introducing him now?"

Jamie shrugged. "This is all a little new to me. We want to take things slow."

"Dating is new to you?" Graham scoffed. "Jamie, you're with a different man every time I see you. What makes this one so different?"

"Oh, Sammy Dane's very different," Jamie assured him. "I'd move him into my house tomorrow if I thought he'd agree to it." He glanced back over to Sammy. "He's different than any man I've ever met."

"You're in love with him." Graham was astonished, and just a bit jealous. Jamie looked like he was totally ensnared by Sammy, something Graham had never seen in the man.

He glanced over to where Darren played pool with Paul and Jay, wondering why things had to be so difficult for them. There was never any way that they could be more than friends with benefits, no matter how much Graham might wish differently.

"Yeah, I am. Is that so strange?"

"I've just never seen you like this before," Graham replied as he looked back at Jamie.

"I've never been in love before."

"Not even with Steve?"

Jamie shook his head. "No. Granted, at the time I thought I loved Steve, but I was wrong. What I felt for Steve doesn't hold a candle to what I feel for Sammy Dane."

"I don't think I've ever heard you talk about someone like this, Jamie." Graham grabbed Jamie's arm to gain his full attention. "Are you sure, Jamie? I'll admit that he's hot but how can you be sure? Looks aren't everything. Steve should have proved that."

Steve had been gorgeous and Jamie had been head over heels for the guy. Too bad Steve needed constant reminding of just how gorgeous he was. He tended to get it from any man he could screw behind James's back. Jamie had been devastated when he found out. Graham remembered getting Jamie through his three-day drunk with not so fond memories.

"You see how gorgeous he is?" Jamie asked, gesturing to Sammy.

"You can't miss it, Jamie. He's the hottest damn thing I've ever seen."

"He didn't look like that yesterday, believe me."

Graham felt his mouth drop open again.

Jamie grinned. "Yesterday, he wore glasses, tan slacks, button down dress shirts, and had longer, darker hair. This is a recent development, courtesy of Nicky."

"Your brother gave him a makeover? Why?"

“Apparently Sammy asked him to. He wanted to make a good impression. Didn’t want my friends to think I was dating a geeky bookworm.”

Graham whistled as he glanced over at Sammy again. The man was simply hot. There was no other way to explain it. He was sex on a stick. “I’d say he accomplished that in spades.”

Jamie chuckled. “And to think I didn’t fall for him because of his looks. That’s just a bonus.”

“Seriously?”

Jamie leaned closer to Graham. “The man’s hung like a fucking horse and he knows what to do with it.”

“No shit?” Graham groaned. “I think I’m jealous. Not only is he gorgeous and smart, he got into your ass.” Graham snorted. “I’ve been trying to get there for years.”

Jamie laughed. “You didn’t ask as nicely as he did.”

“He asked? And you just let him? I thought you only topped.”

“So did I,” Jamie said. “I was wrong.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

Jamie grinned. “Oh yeah.”

“Oh, now I *am* jealous.” Graham had often wondered what it would feel like to have Darren fuck him. He’d even fantasized about it. He just hadn’t gone there with Darren. His ass was reserved for the man he’d spend his life with. He knew that couldn’t be Darren.

“You’d be even more jealous if you knew just what type of guy Sammy Dane is.”

“Oh?”

“Well, he’s a vegetarian, which is a little interesting for us. We’ve learned to compromise most of the time. But besides that, he’s the simplest, nicest guy I’ve ever met. His idea of a good time is soaking in a bubble bath with a good book. Anything beyond that is like celebrating.” Jamie laughed, pushing a hand through his short hair. “He calls me just to say hi, to say goodnight every night. He leaves me little notes

telling me things. Christ, I came home the other night and he was naked, spread eagle on my bed."

"Holy shit!"

Jamie nodded. "Did I tell you that I pursued him? We met at a bar and had a one night stand. I had to track him down. Took me forever. I didn't know he was Troy's brother at the time."

Graham snorted. "Bet that was interesting."

"Not really. Troy and Nicky were planning on introducing us anyway. We just beat him to it. Funny thing is, if they had, I'd probably have never given Sammy Dane the time of day. Meeting him on my own?" Jamie shook his head. "I couldn't stop thinking about him. I was like an obsessed stalker or something. Hell, I even dreamed about him. Once he agreed to go out with me, I was done for. That's it. I'm not even interested in fantasizing about other guys. I have him."

"Dude, you have it bad," Graham said.

"Yeah, and I couldn't be happier about it. I'm crazy about him."

"Good for you, man," Graham said, patting Jamie on the back. "I just have one question."

"Yeah?"

"Is Troy his only brother?" Graham meant it as a joke, sort of. He couldn't let their friends know that he and Darren were seeing each other. Making the occasional play for other men was what he needed to do, even if his heart wasn't in it.

Graham immediately regretted his words when Darren slammed his beer bottle down on the table, grabbed his jacket, and stormed out of the bar. Graham had seen the look on Darren's face, knew he'd heard Graham's question and his words hurt the man.

Darren's feelings were becoming too involved. Graham knew he'd have to break it off with him soon. He'd known it for awhile now. He'd just been putting it off, wanting just a little more time with the man. But maybe he was being crueler than he thought by prolonging things. Maybe it was time to let Darren go?

Chapter Three

"Hello?" Darren said.

"Hey, baby, it's me."

"What do you want?" Darren asked when he recognized Graham's voice on the phone.

"I thought we were going to spend the night together?"

"Why don't you go spend the night with Troy's brother?" Darren snapped. Graham's words had quickly brought home the fact that they would never be an item. He would always be Graham's dirty little secret.

"Oh, come on, Dar," Graham said. "You know I didn't mean it that way. I had to say those things."

"No." Darren snorted. "You didn't. You really didn't."

Darren heard Graham sigh deeply. He knew what Graham was going to say even before he said it and his heart ached.

"Darren, you knew how things had to be before we got involved. I explained it all to you and you agreed to it."

"Yes, I did." And agreeing to Graham's stipulations had been the biggest mistake of his life. But back then, Darren just wanted to get the man in his bed. He would have agreed to anything. He had no idea he would grow to love Graham.

"Then let me come in," Graham said softly.

Darren's breath caught in his throat. He got up from his bed, walked over to the bedroom window and glanced out the slit in the curtains. He could see Graham sitting in his car, the cell phone held to his ear.

Darren closed his eyes and leaned his head against the window. He knew what he needed to do, what he should do. He took a deep breath and tried to find the words to send Graham away.

"Please, Dar?"

"I'll unlock the door," Darren whispered as he pushed himself away from the window and walked out of his bedroom. With each step he took, Darren berated himself for his weakness.

Graham was bad for him. He knew that. Oh, Graham would never physically hurt him, but the emotional whirlpool Darren swam in every time he saw Graham was devastating.

Darren had been so sure he could handle an emotionless relationship with Graham. They could be friends and just fool around occasionally. In the beginning, that's exactly how it worked, but the more time Darren spent with Graham, the more he grew to care for the man.

Now, a year later, Darren knew he was head over heels in love with Graham. He'd do anything for him. He'd even tried to hide his feelings from Graham so they could continue to see each other.

Graham knew, though. Darren knew he did. Over the last couple of months they spent less and less time together until they barely saw each other at all. Darren saw more of Jamie, Graham's best friend, than he saw of his occasional lover.

Darren just didn't know what to do. He could no more deny Graham's request to come inside than he could ask for the man to acknowledge him to their friends. He was damned if he did and damned if he didn't.

He unlocked the door and opened it a crack before turning away and walking back to his bedroom. He heard the front door close and the lock click into place before he even reached his bedroom doorway.

Graham was here!

Darren's heart beat faster when he heard Graham's footsteps behind him. Strong, muscular arms encircled him. Darren leaned back against Graham's chest and closed his eyes. He stood there, savoring the feel of his lover wrapped around him.

"We can't keep doing this, Graham," he whispered. He didn't want to say the words but he knew they had to be said, for both of their sakes.

"I know, baby."

Callused fingers stroked the side of Darren's face. Darren felt tears pool in his eyes and closed them tighter. "Isn't there —?" he whispered.

"No, Dar," Graham said. "You know this is the way things have to be."

Darren turned in Graham's arms and opened his eyes to look up into his face. His fingers plucked at the fabric of Graham's shirt. "Can't we —?"

His heart sank as he watched Graham's eyebrows furrow. Darren closed his eyes again and dropped his head forward to rest against Graham's chest. He took a deep breath then wished he hadn't. Graham's rich, musky scent filled his nostrils, overwhelming him.

Darren opened his eyes and tilted his head back to look at Graham again. He tried to smile but knew he failed when Graham frowned. Darren reached up and stroked his fingers over Graham's lips.

"Okay, Graham, we'll do it your way." Darren's chest ached as he said the words he knew Graham needed to hear. He imagined he could feel the actual breaking of his heart.

Darren grabbed Graham's hand in his and pulled him over to the bed. He stopped and turned to Graham, reaching for the hem of the man's shirt. "Make love to me."

Darren lifted the shirt up until Graham took over, pulling it over his head and dropping it to the floor. Darren let his hands trail down the smooth chest in front of him. He caressed every hard contour, every dip and ridge, before he reached the waistband of Graham's jeans.

He unzipped Graham's pants then leaned down to help him push them, and his boots, off his feet. Straightening, Darren took in all the glory that was his gorgeous lover.

Graham really was a thing to behold. From the top of his smooth head to the bottoms of his feet and every sexy inch in between, Graham screamed raw, masculine male. He made Darren's toes curl.

Darren pushed his pajama bottoms down to the floor then crawled on the bed. He leaned back against the pillows and spread his legs. A small smile on his lips, he crooked his finger at Graham.

Graham growled, his face feral-looking as he climbed up the bed. Darren whimpered when Graham's weight settled over him. He couldn't think of much he liked more than feeling Graham's body press him down onto a flat surface.

He stroked his hands over Graham's broad shoulders. His gaze followed along as he drank in all the dark, naked skin exposed for his viewing pleasure. He wouldn't get enough of looking at Graham if he lived to be a hundred years old.

He shuddered when he felt Graham's hand move over his skin. No one had the ability to arouse him the way Graham did. Every touch, every caress, left a burning path of desire in its wake.

By the time Graham reached into the nightstand for a condom and the bottle of lube, Darren felt like he was going to come out of his skin. He almost jumped off the bed when Graham pushed two lubed fingers between his ass cheeks.

Panting heavily, Darren clenched his hands in the sheets. He was going to explode in a burning ball of fire. He just knew it. His body was so sensitized he could feel Graham's breathe blow across him.

Graham continued easing his fingers into Darren's ass, and Darren pushed out when Graham pushed in, allowing better access. The burn was slight but there. Darren didn't care; he wanted more. He wanted everything Graham had to give him.

Instead of speaking his need, Darren pulled his knees up to his chest. Somehow, this time, Darren knew that speaking out loud would break the spell he and Graham were currently under. Besides, words weren't needed.

Darren felt another finger join the first two, all of them pushing inside of him. He felt full but not as full as he knew he would feel when Graham replaced those fingers with his hard cock.

Darren pressed his head back against his pillows when Graham began thrusting his fingers into him over and over again. He could feel the pressure building in his body with each push.

When he finally thought he couldn't take any more, Darren dropped his legs and dug his heels into the bed beneath him. He thrust his hips forward and reached for Graham, his grasp desperate.

Graham seemed to instinctively understand what Darren needed. Fingers were pulled from Darren's ass. His face strained, Graham he moved up to kneel between Darren's thighs.

Darren expected Graham to be forceful, strong. The sex between them was usually desperate and needy. It was never slow and loving, so when Graham leaned over him, one hand planted next to his head, the other guiding his cock into Darren's body in a slow and gentle movement, Darren's breath hitched in his throat. Graham was so close their noses were mere inches apart. Darren wrapped his legs around Graham's waist, grunting when he felt Graham's cock slide deeper.

Graham stared down at him with a mysterious look in his eyes as he moved above him. Darren tried and failed to read the emotions he saw in their blue depths. He'd never seen that look in Graham's eyes before.

When Graham cupped the side of his face and leaned down to kiss him gently Darren knew what Graham was trying to say without actually saying it. Darren squeezed his eyes tight to hide the tears gathering in them.

He wrapped his arms around Graham and buried his face in the man's neck. Even as passion overrode him, Darren struggled with the urge to cry. Now he understood the slow, loving Graham was giving him. Graham was saying goodbye.

Darren let his cry of completion hide the real cry of denial he wanted to let loose. He felt Graham shudder above him; pulses of hot liquid filled him. Still, Darren refused to relinquish his hold on the man. Just a little bit longer, he thought. *Give me just a few minutes more.*

He swallowed back a whimper when Graham finally pulled away and rolled onto his back. If it wasn't for the arm Graham wrapped around him, pulling him close, Darren knew he would have lost it.

He laid his head on Graham's chest and listened to the soft beat of his heart. His hand rested gently on Graham's chest, absently rubbing circles along the smooth muscles.

"Dar," Graham murmured softly, "we can't do this anymo—"

Darren reached up quickly and covered Graham's lips with his fingers. "Don't say it," he pleaded. He wasn't above begging, not right now. "Please."

"Darren, you know things can't continue the way they are."

"Yes, they can," Darren insisted. "We've done okay for nearly a year now. We can just continue on as we have been."

Even as Darren said the words he knew they weren't true. He loved Graham. He couldn't keep pretending he didn't. Eventually he'd start to resent Graham and his love would turn into hate.

"Darren," Graham whispered.

Darren pushed himself away from Graham and rolled over to face the other way. His heart was breaking and there was nothing he could say or do to fix it. Graham refused to acknowledge their relationship and Darren couldn't make him.

Darren tried to ignore the sounds Graham made as he got dressed but they were as loud as a wrecking ball. He clenched his hands around the edge of the comforter and prayed he'd hold out until Graham left.

A hand gently caressed his back as a large weight settled on the side of the bed beside him.

"I'm sorry, Dar," Graham whispered. "I wish things could be different."

Darren nodded. There didn't seem to be any words. He wished they could be different too. He wasn't sure he understood exactly why they couldn't. Graham wouldn't discuss it, had merely insisted their relationship be kept secret from the very beginning.

Graham stood and started walking across the room. Darren rolled over, his heart aching as he watched his lover leave. He forced the words he'd longed to say for months now past his lips. "I love you."

Graham paused in the doorway, indicating he'd heard, but then he kept on walking away. A moment later, Darren heard the front door open and close then the sound of a car driving away.

He pulled the covers up and rolled back over to stare out the window, wondering why he wasn't bawling his eyes out. The best thing that ever happened to him just walked right out the door and there was nothing he could do to stop him.

Chapter Four

"How's that beer?"

Graham shook the bottle in his hand. "Empty."

"Well," Jamie snickered. "You've had enough of them today to know."

"Mind your own damn business," Graham grumbled.

"I'm just saying —"

"Well don't," Graham snapped. He got up and headed for the fridge. "If I want to drink myself into a stupor, that's my business."

"True," Jamie said as he followed Graham into the kitchen and leaned against the counter. "But wouldn't it be easier just to go see Darren and beg him to take you back?"

Graham's mouth dropped open as he stared at Jamie in shock. "How'd you —?"

"Oh, please," Jamie said as he waved a dismissive hand at Graham, "I've known for months that you and Darren were sleeping together. Hell, everyone knows. We just couldn't figure out why you weren't saying anything." Jamie shrugged. "We wouldn't care, you know."

"Christ!" Graham rubbed his hand down his face and then glanced around his small kitchen before returning his gaze to Jamie. "Everyone knows?"

Jamie nodded. "Just about."

"And you all never said anything?"

"It wasn't our place to say anything, Graham," Jamie replied. "If you and Darren wanted us to know you were an item, you would have said something."

"We're not an item," Graham said. Even saying the words pained him. He missed Darren, hadn't seen him in nearly a month. A very *long*, very *lonely* month. "We never were."

"Okay, fuck buddies then."

Graham frowned as he saw the smirk on Jamie's face. He didn't like the tone in Jamie's voice. It made what he experienced with Darren feel cheap and sleazy. "We were not fuck buddies."

"Yeah, okay."

"Jamie!" Graham growled.

"What in the hell do you call it then?" Jamie asked. "You never acknowledged each other in front of your friends. You two barely even acknowledged each other at all. But we both know you and Darren were fucking."

"You don't understand," Graham spit out through clenched teeth. He gripped the edge of the counter tightly instead of wrapping his hands around Jamie's neck as he really wanted to. "It wasn't like that."

Jamie slammed his beer bottle down on the table. "Then what in the hell was it like, Graham, tell me? Explain it to me because I don't get it."

"I can't," Graham whispered and dropped his gaze to the countertop. "I'm not sure I know myself."

"Do you like Darren?"

Graham groaned. He closed his eyes and leaned to rest his forehead against the overhanging cupboard. "Yes, I like him." Graham wasn't even sure he could adequately put into words how much he liked Darren.

He hadn't been able to get Darren out of his mind since he walked out on him a month ago. Darren haunted his thoughts, his dreams. He woke up thinking about the man and went to sleep wishing Darren slept next to him.

"So, what seems to be the problem then?"

Graham took a deep breath. He opened his eyes and pushed himself away from the cupboard, turning to grab another beer out of the fridge. He popped the top and took a large swig then turned to face Jamie.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "Whatever was between Darren and me is over. It's been over for awhile now. He's gone his way and I've gone mine."

"Yeah, right down the neck of a beer bottle."

Graham rolled his eyes. He wasn't drinking that much, not really. He just needed to be able to go to sleep a few nights without thoughts of Darren plaguing him. The lack of sleep was starting to affect his work.

"I'm not drinking that much, I swear." Graham held up his beer. "It's just a few beers to help me relax and I only do it when I don't have to work the next day. I never drink before work. You know that."

"Look," Jamie said, "I'm not trying to ride your ass here, Graham, but I'm worried about you. Hell, Paul's worried about you too. Your head isn't where it needs to be."

Graham nodded. "I know."

"Then either stop drinking or swallow your pride and ask Darren to take you back. You're a mess."

Graham chuckled and poured his beer down the sink. "Guess I'll have to stop drinking then."

Jamie shook his head. "That wouldn't have been my first choice but whatever."

Graham tossed the beer bottle into the trash and then looked back at Jamie. "I had to end things with Darren. I didn't want to but I needed to. He was becoming too involved, too emotional."

"And that's a bad thing?" Jamie scoffed.

"For him, yes," Graham replied. "I told Darren from the very beginning that we could never have a real relationship. We can never be more than *friends with benefits*. That's just the way things have to be."

"You're serious."

Jamie looked astonished. Graham couldn't blame him. Even to his own ears his words sounded bad. There just wasn't anything he could do about it. Things were what they were.

Jamie shook his head. "That's cold, man, even for you."

Graham frowned. "What in the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Let's face it, Graham, you don't have a reputation for long, committed relationships. You're more the fuck 'em and leave 'em type. When you started seeing Darren, I thought you were finally settling down. Guess I was wrong."

Jamie's words gave him pause. Was that really how his friends saw him? Was that the image he produced? The thought made him sad, and *that* surprised him. He should be elated. He'd successfully hidden his feelings from everyone. He'd done just what he'd set out to do.

"Yeah, I guess you were," Graham said absently. "I guess I'm just not ready to settle down."

* * * * *

"Graham!"

"Hey, Mom," Graham said as he leaned down to kiss his mother on her cheek. "How are you and Dad?"

"You're father is driving me out of my mind," Anita said as she shut the door behind Graham. "I love the fact that he's slowing down but he's always under foot. I swear that man needs to find a hobby before I strangle him."

"Retirement is not for everyone, Mom," Graham said. "Maybe Dad should think about taking on some patients down at a clinic? It would give him something to do and keep him out of your hair."

Anita waved her hand at Graham as they walked into the kitchen. "Don't be ridiculous. Your father has been planning his retirement since before you were born. Let him enjoy it."

Graham didn't think that was exactly true. His mother had been planning his father's retirement, not his father. Graham was pretty sure his Dad only retired to get his mother to shut up.

Anita Craig was a woman to be reckoned with. When she got something in her mind, she held onto it with every fiber of her being. Graham and his father learned years ago to just let her have her way.

For the first time since he could remember, that was coming around to bite Graham in the ass. "Where's Dad? I need to ask him a few things."

Anita turned away from the bowl she was whisking to look over at Graham. "Anything I can help with, dear?"

Graham smiled. "No, this is kind of guy stuff."

Anita smiled. "Did you meet a girl?"

"I'm gay, Mom, you know that," Graham said. "But yes, I did meet someone, someone I care very much about."

Anita frowned and went back to whisking. "I don't know why you insist on dating men, Graham. You'd be so much happier if you settled down with a nice young lady. Just think of the grandchildren you could give me."

Graham took a deep breath and tried to control his urge to shout at his mother. This wasn't an argument he hadn't heard before. His mother didn't seem to understand that he didn't choose to be gay. He just was. She seemed to think he could decide to be straight and it would just happen.

"Just because I like men doesn't mean I can't give you grandchildren, Mom."

Anita shook her head. "It's not the same thing and you know it. You need to find a nice young lady and settle down, have a family, build a life with someone."

"I have met someone I want to settle down with, Mom. I want to build a life with him, have a family." Graham had been thinking about this for days, ever since his conversation with Jamie. He missed Darren more than he thought possible.

Anita snorted, a sound Graham never thought to hear his proper mother make. "I still think you'd be happier with a woman but if you must choose a man you know the rules."

And there was Graham's issue, the entire reason he had broken things off with Darren. It was the reason that he was alone instead of being with the man he wanted. "Yes, I know. You made yourself very clear the day I told you I was gay."

Graham walked away without saying another word and went searching for his father. He found him in the garage, tinkering with the engine to the lawn mower. Graham chuckled and leaned back against the counter next to his father.

"You've been repairing that thing longer than I can remember, Dad," he said. "You're never going to get it to work right. Why not just buy a new one?"

Robert Craig chuckled but stayed bent over the small engine. "There's nothing wrong with this engine that a little bit of elbow grease won't fix."

"And it keeps you out of Mom's hair."

"And it keeps me out of your mother's hair."

Robert stood up straight and set his screw driver down on the counter. He reached for a rag and wiped his hands. "It's good to see you, son, but I can tell from the look on your face that you didn't just drop in to watch me tinker. Want to tell me about it?"

Graham crossed his arms over his chest and looked down at his feet. "I met someone, Dad." Graham wasn't surprised when his father patted him on the shoulder. His father was always supportive of him, no matter what.

"Congratulations, son, what's his name?"

Graham chuckled. "Mom asked me what *her* name was."

"Your mother would." Robert shook his head. "Your mother loves you, Graham, never doubt that, but she still hasn't come to terms with you being gay. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure she ever will."

"It's not going to change anytime soon, Dad."

"No, I don't imagine it will." Graham could feel his father's eyes on him. When he looked up, he could see the concern in them. "So, tell me about this man of yours."

"At the moment, there's not much to tell," Graham said. "We've kind of been seeing each other for awhile now. He's a nice guy, Dad, a nurse."

"What aren't you telling me?"

"What makes you think I'm not telling you everything?" Graham asked as he tried to avoid his father's intense gaze. Sometimes it was unnerving to have someone know him so well.

"Graham."

"He's white."

"So am I."

Graham rolled his eyes and pushed himself away from the counter to walk across the room. He ran his fingers over some of the projects his father worked on—a model of a 1957 Chevy, an old model boat, a wooden jewelry box. His father did like to keep busy.

"The day I told Mom I was gay she told me she would only accept a man in my life if he was black like her. She said if I was going to do one thing unnatural then I could balance it out by doing something natural, like being with someone of my own race."

Graham swung around when his father snorted. His jaw dropped open in surprise when he saw the look of disgust on his father's face.

"Your mother, bless her soul, is full of shit!" Robert tossed the rag in his hand down on the counter. "Do you know why she said what she did?"

Graham shook his head.

"Your mother believes that a black man is less likely to admit he's gay than a white man. She thinks if you can't find a black man to be with, then you'll eventually turn to a woman and give her the grandchildren she wants so much."

Graham frowned. "That's ridiculous. I know plenty of gay black men."

"Even knowing how your mother felt, you've never brought one home." Robert regarded Graham strangely. "Why is that?"

Graham shrugged. "Until I met Darren, I never had anyone I wanted to bring home."

"Then bring him home. I'd like to meet him."

Graham's shoulders slumped. He rubbed a hand over his face and turned to look out the small window in the garage. "It may not be that simple, Dad. I kind of screwed things up with Darren. I'm not sure he'd give me the time of day if I begged on my knees."

"Is it something you can't fix?"

"I don't know," Graham admitted.

"Have you tried?"

Leave it to his Dad to get to the heart of the problem. He wasn't one to mince words.

Graham chuckled. "No."

"If you want this guy in your life, don't you think it might be a good idea if you did? I don't imagine he would agree to come home to meet your folks if the two of you aren't even seeing each other."

"You don't know Darren," Graham said. "He just might."

Chapter Five

"Hello?"

"Darren?"

Darren's heart pounded at the softly spoken sound of his name. He sat down suddenly as his knees weakened, and gripped the phone tightly in his hand. "Graham."

It had been over a month since he'd spoken to Graham. He'd seen him a few times, but only at a distance. Darren refused to be present with all of their friends if he knew Graham would be there. Other than that, he only saw Graham through work.

Darren didn't realize until this moment how much he truly missed the sound of Graham's voice. He ached inside to hear it again. And here he'd thought he'd been doing so well.

"Darren, are you there?"

"Yes," Darren whispered.

"I want to see you."

Darren bit back his groan. "I don't think that's a good idea, Graham."

"I miss you, Dar."

Darren blinked several times to keep his tears at bay. Graham was torturing him. He knew Graham didn't mean to hurt him but each word out of the man's mouth felt like a knife in his gut.

"Did you hear me, Darren?"

"I heard you."

"Can I see you?"

Darren shook his head desperately in denial. "Okay."

The sudden knocking at the door made Darren jump. He stared at the door for a moment then down at his phone. He placed the cordless receiver back on its charger and went to answer the door. He stopped with his hand on the knob, took a deep breath, and then opened the door.

Darren's breath caught in his throat when he caught sight of Graham. The man looked horrible. Deep circles shadowed his eyes. The corners of his mouth were turned down, his lips in a thin line. His hair was ruffled as if he'd run his hand through it several times.

"Hey," Graham said.

"Hey."

"Can I come in?"

Darren stepped back. His eyes drank in Graham's tall form as the man walked past. His pants seemed a little looser, as if he had lost some weight. But his ass still looked gorgeous in them.

Graham had his hands shoved in his pocket as he turned around to look at Darren. He seemed nervous, his gaze darting around the room, his steps jittery. "So, how have you been?"

"I've been okay," Darren replied. "You?"

Darren was shocked by the intense agony in Graham's blue eyes as the man finally looked at him. "I'm not doing so hot, Darren."

Darren's eyebrows furrowed. He was instantly concerned, all his misgivings about seeing Graham falling away at the man's words. "What's wrong? Are you sick? Did something happen at work? Are your parents okay?"

"I made a mistake, Darren."

"A mistake?"

"I never should have left you," Graham said. "I knew it was wrong when I did it but I couldn't think of anything else to do."

"W-what are you saying?"

"I miss you, Dar," Graham whispered as he took a step closer. "I miss being with you, seeing you. I never should have broken things off between us."

Darren didn't know whether to cry or shout at Graham. His emotions were chaotic, not settling on one. He wanted to accept what Graham was offering him. Being without the man was torture.

But Graham wasn't offering him anything. Graham was telling Darren that he missed his booty call. Darren knew he couldn't be Graham's fuck buddy anymore. It would destroy him.

He wrapped his arms around his waist and stepped away from Graham. "I'm sure we can spend some time together," he said. "Aren't the guys getting together next week for a pool game down at the bar?"

"That's not what I mean, Darren, and you know it. I want to spend time alone with you."

Darren shook his head. "I can't, Graham." He bit his lip for a moment. "I gave you my heart and you didn't want it. I can't do it again. And I won't be your little sex toy anymore."

"This isn't about sex, Darren. I can get that anywhere."

Darren sighed. "Then what is it about?"

"It's about you and me, us, being together."

Darren stared at Graham, waiting for him to say something more, anything more. He needed some reason to let Graham back into his life, something beyond his desperate need for the man.

When Graham suddenly stepped forward and dropped to his knees before him, Darren's mouth fell open in shock. "Graham, wha – ?"

"Please, Darren, give me another chance," Graham begged. "I'll prove to you that I'm worth it. I want to take you home to meet my parents. I want us to be a couple when we go out with our friends. I want us to be together when we're alone at night."

Graham was saying all the right things. Even the suspicious glint in his eyes said he was telling the truth. Darren just didn't know if he could take that last step, the one that would put his heart into Graham's hands again.

"Graham, I don't –"

Graham held up his hand. "Wait. Before you saying anything else, I got you something for you." He reached into his pocket to pull out a long, thin, black box. "I wanted to give you something that would let everyone know you belonged to me."

Darren's hands trembled as he reached for the box and popped the lid open. His breath caught in his throat; one hand fluttered at his neck. "Oh, Graham, it's beautiful," he said as he looked down at the necklace, a simple gold chain with a miniature key hanging in the middle.

"Will you wear it for me?"

Could he? Letting Graham put the necklace on him said he agreed to be with the man again. Could he do that? Could he let Graham back into his life knowing that they didn't have much of a past together?

"I won't be your fuck buddy, Graham," Darren said. "If I agree to see you, I want a relationship with you, not the occasional fling behind closed doors. I won't hide anymore."

Graham grinned. "Yes."

"I want to be able to kiss you or touch you whenever I feel like it, even in front of our friends."

"Yes," Graham said again. "Yes, please, yes."

"No more making comments about other guys and pretending you're single."

Graham flushed. "Only you, I promise."

Darren couldn't think of any other objection he had to give. Graham was agreeing to everything he wanted. Darren didn't know if it would work but he loved Graham too much to give up this chance with him.

"Please say yes, Dar," Graham whispered. He looked desperate, his eyes shining with unshed tears. And those tears were what finally threw Darren over the edge. He'd never seen Graham so emotional before.

"Yes, Graham."

Graham's eyes widened for just a moment before he let out a loud whoop, jumped to his feet and grabbed Darren around the hips, lifting him into the air and swing him around in a circle. Darren grabbed the man's shoulders and laughed.

He watched Graham's face when the man slowly lowered him to the floor. Graham looked like he wanted to say something but didn't know how. Darren reached up to caress the side of his face, hoping to give him courage.

"Thank you, Dar," Graham whispered. "I'll take good care of your heart this time. I promise. I won't let you down."

Darren nodded. Whether Graham took good care of his heart remained to be seen but he wanted that chance. "Why don't you take good care of my body right now and we'll worry about the rest of it later?"

Graham grinned and swung Darren up into his arms to carry him down the hallway to the bedroom.

"Graham, I'm too heavy." Darren laughed, feeling light and free for the first time in weeks. "You're going to break your damn fool neck if you don't put me down."

"I have every intention of putting you down, Dar," Graham said as he stopped at the bottom of the bed. "Just not before I have you where I want you."

Darren's body slid down as Graham let him go. He caressed the tight muscles under his hand and looked up at Graham. "Is this where you want me?"

"I'd actually prefer you naked and flat on your back on the bed, but this is a good place to start."

Darren could feel the blood start to pump rapidly through his body as Graham reached for the buttons on his shirt. It seemed to take forever before Graham pushed the shirt off Darren's shoulders.

The strong hands that stroked over his torso made the wait more than worth it, though. Darren groaned and leaned into the soft touch. He never thought he'd feel Graham's hands on his body again and he'd missed them so much.

"Graham," Darren whispered desperately. He wanted to be fucked fast and hard. And he wanted that slow loving Graham gave him the last time they were together, only this time, Graham wasn't leaving.

"You are so fucking sexy, Dar."

"Glad you think so." Darren chuckled.

"I do," Graham said. "You're the sexiest damn thing I've ever seen."

"You're more than welcome to see the rest of me but you need to hurry the fuck up before I lose my mind."

Graham chuckled and pushed against Darren's chest hard enough to knock Darren back onto the mattress. Darren laughed as he bounced a couple of times but his laughter quickly turned into a moan when Graham unbuttoned his pants and pulled them down his legs.

Graham stood at the bottom of the bed, his gaze roaming over Darren's body like a caress. "Now, you're exactly where I want you."

"You're not," Darren said as he spread his legs. "I'd prefer it if you were up here with me."

Graham grinned. Darren watched as Graham shed his clothing faster than he'd ever seen anyone get undressed. He was pretty sure he saw a couple of buttons go flying and heard a rip or two when Graham tore off his shirt.

Graham crawled up the bottom of the bed until he settled over Darren. The weight of Graham's body pressing him into the mattress thrilled Darren right down to his toes. He wrapped his legs around Graham's hips, his arms around the man's broad shoulders.

"Hi."

Graham grinned. He brushed his hand along the side of Darren's face. "I missed you so much, Dar."

Darren dropped his eyes from Graham's intense gaze as remembered pain assailed him. The time apart from Graham had been hell. Darren still wasn't sure how he survived it.

"No, don't look away from me, Darren." Graham tilted Darren's face back up. "I know I fucked up. I know I have a lot to answer for and I will. But I just want to love you right now, okay?"

Darren nodded. What else could he do? He knew he and Graham needed to talk more. Darren desperately wanted to know why Graham denied him for so long. But right now he needed to feel Graham make love to him.

The hands that began caressing his body drove every other thought out of Darren's head. Each touch felt like flames along his skin, igniting Darren's desire to a fever pitch. His body was on fire.

"Graham," Darren groaned. He instinctively arched his body against the tongue that laved at his nipple. The touch was electric and seemed to have a direct line to the hardness of his cock.

Darren barely felt Graham move until slick fingers pressed against his puckered hole. Darren tensed for a moment then breathed out slowly as Graham pushed inside. He closed his eyes as the intensity of the sensations flooding him became too much.

"Damn, Dar, you're so fucking tight," Graham said as he started moving his fingers.

"Been no one else," Darren said. He moaned when the fingers in his ass paused. He opened his eyes to find Graham staring down at him.

"No one?"

Darren knew he could have been offended by Graham's words but the uncertainty shining in Graham's eyes sent him off in another direction. Darren shook his head.

"No one," he said. "I love you. Why would I want to be with anyone else?"

Darren jerked back in shock when Graham suddenly lunged forward and claimed his lips. It took him just a moment before he melted into the kiss, his tongue caressing Graham's.

He thought he'd died and gone to heaven when the fingers in his ass continued to stretch him as Graham kissed him. Darren wrapped his hands in Graham's hair and pulled him closer.

Graham pulled his fingers away, and a moment later, Darren heard a rustling then felt Graham's cock push against his stretched entrance. He stopped moving, stopped breathing, as Graham slowly pushed into his ass, filling him.

Graham froze above him as he sank all the way in. Darren stared up at him as Graham lifted his head. His eyes were closed, a strange, pained expression marring his handsome face.

"Graham?"

Graham opened his eyes and looked down at Darren. His lips started to lift at the corners. "You feel so fucking good, Dar."

Darren grinned and locked his legs around Graham's waist. "I'll feel even better when you start moving."

Graham suddenly pulled back then thrust forward, stealing the breath from Darren's lungs. "Like this?"

Darren panted heavily, unable to do anything except nod as Graham started pounding into him. Graham was only a few inches taller than him but his body was much broader, much stronger. To have the larger man above him, loving on him, sent a quiver of desire surging through Darren's body.

One of Graham's hands rested on the mattress next to Darren's head. The other hand gripped Darren's hip, holding him up at an angle that made Graham's cock hit Darren's sweet spot with every thrust.

When Graham leaned down and claimed his lips again, Darren was all too ready to surrender to the hard, searching kiss. Darren stroked his hands down Graham's back and grabbed his ass as he joyfully submitted.

The savage intensity of Graham's kiss combined with the thick shaft pounding into his ass was more than enough to send Darren over the edge. He ripped his mouth away from Graham's and cried out as he filled the space between them with his release.

"Dar," Graham growled as he thrust deeply into Darren's tight grasp. Darren watched with a bit of awe as Graham froze above him, his face a hard mask of ecstasy. "Fuck!" Graham shouted a moment later as he thrust in again, then again, filling condom in Darren's ass with hot seed.

Darren gratefully accepted the weight of Graham's body as the man collapsed on top of him. He wrapped his arms around Graham's shoulders and slowly stroked his sweaty back until their breathing returned to normal.

Darren moaned in protest when Graham lifted away from him. This was usually the point where Graham got dressed and left or rolled over and went to sleep. Darren braced himself, waiting for that to happen.

When Graham simply rolled to his side and pulled the covers up over the both of them Darren didn't know what to do. They'd never really gotten to this point before. He didn't know how to behave.

Graham solved that problem by grabbing Darren and pulling him close. Darren sighed deeply as he settled his head on Graham's chest, closing his eyes when Graham's arms wrapped around him. He felt like he was home.

Chapter Six

Graham rolled over and grabbed for his cell phone. His hand slapped against the top of the nightstand several times before he located it. Flipping it open, he held it to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Graham, this is Troy. I need you to get down to Sacred Heart Hospital right away. Jamie's been shot."

"Shot?" Graham shouted as he sat up, suddenly wide awake. His heart pounded. "What do you mean, he's been shot?"

"He was leaving for work when someone shot him," Troy replied. "As far as I can tell, it was pretty bad. The doctors are looking at him now."

"But Jamie's alive, right?" Graham asked, his heart squeezing in his chest as he waited for Troy's reply.

"Yes, he's alive but I don't know how bad his injuries are."

Graham felt Darren's hand stroke his arm as he took a deep breath. He wrapped an arm around the man and pulled him close. A strange emotion entered his heart as he realized he had someone to share this with. He wasn't alone. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Look, I'm sorry about this, Graham, but I need you down here. Sammy's here and he needs someone to sit with him. Nicky kind of lost it and the doc's had to sedate him. I have to be with Nicky."

"No, no, I understand completely," Graham said. "I would want to be there anyway. I'll get dressed and come right down."

"Yeah, thanks, man."

Graham could hear the tension in Troy's voice. He wanted to know what in the hell happened, who shot his best friend, but for now, making sure Jamie was alive and okay was more important.

"I'll be right there." Graham hung up his phone and reached for his clothes, his thoughts on Jamie. A small movement behind him caught his attention. He turned to see Darren regarding him cautiously from the bed.

"Can you come with me?" Graham asked.

Darren grinned and moved to his side of the bed. Graham knew he'd said the right thing when Darren reached for his clothes and began getting dressed. This would be different for Graham. He never had anyone at his side during tense situations. It would be nice for once.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Darren asked as he tied his shoes.

"Jamie was leaving for work and someone shot him. He's alive but that's all I know right now."

Darren got up and crossed to his dresser. He grabbed a small plastic badge off the top of the dresser and held it up, waving it at Graham. "I'll bet I can find out a little more information than the average guy."

Of course! Why hadn't Graham thought of it before? Darren was a nurse and he worked at Sacred Heart Hospital. No doubt he'd be able to get a lot more information.

Graham crossed the room and pulled Darren close. He leaned down and stole a quick kiss. "You're wonderful, have I told you that yet?"

"No, but I'm willing to listen if you want to tell me about it." Darren smiled and patted Graham's chest. "First, though, let's go check on Jamie. You can sing my praises later."

Graham grinned and finished dressing. In just a few minutes he had his keys in one hand and Darren's hand in the other as they raced out of the house and jumped in the car.

Getting to the hospital took a little longer than usual. Graham felt Darren's hand on his thigh the entire drive, and he reached down when he could to cover it and give a small squeeze.

Graham parked and jumped out of the car, hitting the remote lock as he moved around to the front of the car. Darren joined him, starting toward the hospital until Graham reached over and grabbed him arm.

"Wha – ?"

Graham stopped Darren's question with a kiss. He needed the connection to him, to feel the beat of Daren's heart next to his. When Graham lifted his head a moment later, Darren looked dazed. His eyes didn't quite focus and his lips appeared plundered. He looked sexy as hell.

"Love you, Dar," Graham whispered, giving a piece of himself to Darren that he knew he'd never get back. It was scary and exhilarating all at the same time. But the warmth of joy that filled Darren's eyes warmed Graham all the way down to his toes.

"Love you, Graham."

Graham nodded. It was the only thing he could do. Speaking past the lump in his throat just wasn't possible. He turned Darren toward the hospital door and started walking.

"I'm going to go see what I can find out about Jamie," Darren said as he started to pull away. "I'll meet you in the waiting room."

Graham watched Darren walk away, realizing that the next time he saw the man they would be a couple in front of their friends. As desperate as the situation was, Graham could feel a little bounce in his step as he hurried to the waiting room.

Despite what Darren might have thought, it always killed Graham a little inside when he needed to pretend they were just friends. He wanted to shout from the rooftops that Darren belonged to him. He wanted everyone to know. He didn't want to hide anymore and now he didn't have to.

"Graham."

Graham turned to see Paul rushing toward him. "Hey, any news?"

Paul shook his head. "I just got back from the scene. There's not much I can tell you at this point. Jamie was on his way to work when someone shot him just as he left his house. We think the perp was waiting for him."

Graham pushed his hand over his smooth head, frowning. "Any clues?"

Paul shook his head. "Not a damn one. We canvassed the area and no one saw a damn thing."

"Do you think it has anything to do with the drug task force?" Graham asked, suddenly panicked that someone might be after all of them. His concern for Darren's safety fogged his mind until he wanted to scream.

If someone had gotten wind of the drug task force and the undercover operations they had in place, it would only make sense that they would know about all of them and not just one of them on the task force. The quickest way to hurt Graham would be to go after Darren or his family.

Paul shook his head as he pulled his cell phone out and flipped it open. "Man, I just don't know. But I'm calling Jay. I can at least warn him to keep his eyes and ears open."

Graham nodded and waited for Paul to talk to Jay. Once he was done, he pointed to the waiting room door. "Let's go see how Sammy's doing. Troy said he was pretty upset."

"Wouldn't you be if your lover got shot?" Paul asked then shrugged. "Well, if you *had* a lover."

"Yeah." Graham frowned. He didn't like Paul's tone and started to open his mouth to inform him of his new *couple* status when thoughts of Darren being hurt hit him again. Graham pressed his lips together and didn't say anything. Maybe he'd talk to Darren first.

"Any news?" Graham asked when they reached the waiting room doorway. He saw Sammy standing by the window watching outside. At the sound of Graham's voice, the man turned toward him.

Graham could see Sammy's anguish in the paleness of his face. Sammy shook his head, bit his lip and glanced back out the window.

"Nicky got so upset he had to be sedated," Sammy said. "Troy's with him now. So, I don't know anything. I've been sitting here for nearly an hour waiting for someone to tell me something."

"Jamie's a tough guy, Sammy," Graham said, walking across the room to pat Sammy on the shoulder. "He'll make it. He has something to live for."

Sammy cast him a curious look.

Graham chuckled. "You, dummy. Jamie's crazy about you. I've never seen him act the way he does with anyone else and I've known Jamie for a lot of years."

Sammy shrugged. "No one will tell me anything," he whispered. "I don't know what happened, how he got shot, where he got shot, nothing."

"What?" Graham asked. "You did tell them that you and Jamie are an item, didn't you?"

"Doesn't matter," Sammy said. "I'm not considered family."

"That's bullshit!" Graham turned and gestured for Paul. "Paul, you stay here with Sammy. I'm going to go find whoever is in charge and give them a piece of my mind. Don't you worry, Sammy, we'll get this all worked out."

Graham tried to keep his rage to himself until he got out of the waiting room. Sammy didn't need to be any more upset than he already was. Graham was pissed off enough for the both of them.

Graham rounded a corner and ran right into his chief. He stumbled and stopped himself by resting his hand on the wall. "Hey, Chief, you might just be the person I'm looking for."

"Craig," the chief said, "any word on Everson?"

Graham shook his head. "No, the doctors are supposed to be looking at him right now but we have another problem. Jamie's partner is here and he —"

"Troy Summers? Good, I want to talk to him, find out if he —"

"No, Chief, Jamie's *life partner*, a man named Sammy Summers." Graham chuckled. "Actually, Sammy is Troy's brother but he's also Jamie's boyfriend. No one here will tell him anything. He's been sitting in the waiting room for an hour. He doesn't even know if Jamie's dead or alive."

"His boyfriend?" Chief Russo asked. "Have they filled out the domestic partnership papers? That would give this young man total access to Everson."

"I'm not sure they've moved that far in their relationship but I could be wrong." Graham grimaced as he thought about filling out papers with Darren. "It seems I've been wrong about quite a few things lately so I'm not sure I'm a good authority to ask."

The chief nodded. "Very well, let's find someone who can tell us something then go see how this young man is doing. Even if they haven't filled out the paperwork, I'll bet he's losing his mind right about now."

Graham followed after the chief until they tracked down someone that looked like they might know what was going on. Sometimes it helped to have the chief of police standing there when dealing with medical personnel.

Besides, Graham had told the chief up front when he was hired that he was gay. The man simply looked at him as if he waited for Graham to say something else then mentioned that Graham better keep his hairy ass away from the man's gay son.

The chief knew several of Graham's friends and coworkers were gay and as long as it didn't affect their work, he couldn't have cared less. The chief didn't believe a person's sexual preferences had anything to do with their ability to perform their job.

"Doctor, I need an update on my officer," the chief called out.

"I'm afraid I'm not the attending physician."

"I don't care if you're the pope," the chief snipped as he pointed to the waiting room. "There's a young man in there who has no idea if his life partner is alive or dead. Now, I want you to find out what you can and go in there and tell him something."

"Oh, Chief, I can't —"

Graham bit his lip to keep from snickering when the chief planted his hands on his hips.

"You can and you will. Now!"

Graham and Paul had been on the receiving end of one of Chief Russo's tongue lashings more than once. He knew how intimidating it could be. He was in no way surprised when the doctor hurried away.

"Egotistical quack."

"Chief!" Graham exclaimed in shock.

"These guys all think they're god or something," the chief said as he turned around to face Graham. "I just want to know if one of my officers is going to make it or not and they have to make a god damn federal case out of it."

"I may be able to help you with that, Chief."

Graham glanced past the chief to see Darren standing there with a clipboard in his hand. Graham smiled, wanting to take the man into his arms but not sure if he should in front of his boss. He didn't know how Darren would feel about that.

While they had talked about coming out as a couple to their friends, they never talked about coming out to the people they worked with. Even if the chief hadn't been standing there, they were still in Darren's workplace.

"If you would go with Dr. Jenson" — Darren gestured to the doctor standing behind him, the same one the chief chewed out — "and let Sammy know that Jamie is alive, I'll get his current condition and bring it to you."

Graham sent a quick smile. Darren's grin was brilliant in return and warmed Graham just a little bit more. As he walked behind the chief and the doctor, passing Darren, Graham reached over and nudged him.

"Thanks, Dar," he murmured.

"You're more than welcome." Darren chuckled lightly and nudged him back.

Graham winked then hurried after the chief. He easily caught up with the two men and passed them just before they walked into the waiting room. Graham wanted to get back to Sammy as soon as he could and get him some news before the man totally lost it. And then he wanted to find Darren again and hold the man in his arms before *he* lost it.

"Sammy, this is Chief Russo," Graham said as he gestured to the man in the suit.
"He's Jamie's boss."

"Mr. Summers," Chief Russo said, "I understand from Officer Craig that you and Officer Everson are partners?"

"Uh, well, we're —"

"Yes, they are," Graham interjected. "I'm sure that once he's out from under sedation, Officer Everson's brother, Nick, would be more than happy to confirm that for you, Chief."

"Sedation?" The chief asked, turning to look at Graham. "I was under the impression that Officer Everson was the only one wounded in the incident."

"Nicky got a little overcome after we arrived at the hospital," Sammy explained. "The doctor suggested he be sedated. Troy, his partner, is with him now. They're upstairs."

"Oh, that's too bad but I can understand." The chief motioned for the other man to come forward. "This is Dr. Jenson. He's going to explain Officer Everson's condition for you." The chief reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card. He handed it to Sammy. "If you have any other problems, you be sure to give me a call. I don't care what time it is, day or night. If you're Officer Everson's partner, you deserve the same respect that any spouse of a police officer would receive."

Graham almost chuckled when Sammy gaped at the chief and replied, "Thank you."

The man nodded. "James is a good officer. I wish him, and you, the best of luck."

With that, the man turned and started to walk out of the room.

"Chief, wait," Paul called out. "Sammy said he might know someone Jamie pissed off enough to go after him."

Graham's head snapped around to stare at Sammy in shock. Sammy took a step back as all eyes in the room turned on him and pressed his hand against his chest. Graham could see Sammy was scared but he needed to know what the man knew.

"Sammy," Graham said as he stepped toward him, "do you know something?"

"I . . . uh . . . I don't know."

"Just tell us, Sammy."

"It's probably nothing," Sammy hedged.

"Just tell us what you know, Sammy," Graham encouraged in his mellowest voice. He could see the guy was panicked.

"There's this guy, Frank Bristol," Sammy said. "He owns a bookstore down on 5th Street called the Bookworm."

"Yeah, I know that place," Graham said. "Go on."

"Nicky and Troy set us up on a blind date and we went out to dinner. It was just that once but somehow the guy got it in his head that we were meant to be together or something. He thinks the characters I write about are him and me."

"How does Jamie come into it, Sammy?" Graham asked.

Sammy shrugged. "Frank was constantly calling me or leaving me little presents. I finally had to move but he found me. James showed up when Frank was there and told him to leave and not come back, that he was my boyfriend and Frank had better leave me alone."

"That'd do it," Paul said.

Graham glared at him silently.

"James thought Frank might have done this to someone else," Sammy added. He sat down heavily on one of the waiting room chairs. "Did I do this? Did I get James shot?"

"Oh God, no, Sammy," Graham rushed to say, sitting next to him. He grabbed Sammy's hand and squeezed it gently. "You had no control over what someone else did, Sammy. If indeed Frank did this, it was his fault. Not yours."

"But . . . But if I hadn't gone out with Frank in the first place or written those damn books, none of this would have happened."

"Well, by the same way of thinking, if you hadn't written those books, you never would have been in that bar where you met Jamie. Of course, if Nick and Troy hadn't

gotten together, meeting Frank wouldn't have happened either. Maybe it was their fault."

Sammy rolled his eyes. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I could say the same thing to you, Sammy," Graham said. "And Jamie would kick your ass if he knew you were down here beating yourself up over this. He might even think you didn't want to be with him anymore."

Sammy blinked then snickered. "You're a butthead."

"That's all you got?" Paul scoffed. He pointed to Graham. "You have this to work with and all you can come up with is *butthead*? Sammy, we have got to get you out more."

"If he keeps hanging out with you two, I'm sure his vulgarity will increase."

Graham's heart raced faster at the soft voice from the doorway. He turned to find moss green eyes staring right back at him. Graham smiled, feeling calmer just by seeing his lover.

"Shut up, Darren," Paul said.

"Hey, Darren," Sammy said.

"Hey, Sammy, how are you hanging in there?" Darren asked as he walked into the room. It was all Graham could do not to continue watching Darren and turn his attention back to Sammy.

Sammy shrugged. "Just waiting to hear about James."

"I have the latest update on him," Darren said as he pointed to the clipboard in his hand. "If you'll give me just a moment with the doctor, he can fill you in better than me."

"Oh, Dar —"

"He's alive, Sammy," Darren said as he handed a clipboard to the doctor. They murmured between themselves as they flipped through the pages.

Graham knew the waiting had to be killing Sammy. The man's fingernails were digging into his palm.

Finally, the doctor turned to face Sammy. "Mr. Summers?"

Sammy nodded. Graham squeezed his hand.

"Officer Everson was shot in the head but —"

"Oh my God!" Sammy exclaimed, tears starting to fall down his face.

The doctor held up his hand. "But, the bullet just grazed him. There was no damage to his brain. He has a deep laceration, but we were able to take care of that with a few stitches. We did have to give him some plasma due to blood loss. Head wounds tend to bleed a lot. He will more than likely have a scar but it shouldn't be too noticeable. Unfortunately, when he fell, he suffered a concussion that knocked him out."

"So, he's going to be okay?" Sammy whispered.

"Well, we need to keep him overnight for observation due to his concussion and the fact that he was unconscious when he came in. Barring any complications, I think it's safe to say you can take him home tomorrow."

Graham caught Sammy as the man collapsed into tears against him. He quickly searched around, grateful when Darren held out a box of Kleenex. "*Thank you*," he mouthed to Darren, who just smiled back.

Graham patted Sammy's back and held out a tissue to him. "Come on, Sammy, wipe those tears away. Jamie's waiting to see you."

Sammy lifted his head. "I can see him? Now?"

"As soon as you wipe those tears away," Graham said. "He'd kick my ass if he knew you were crying right now."

Sammy chuckled, grabbing some Kleenex to wipe his face then suddenly paled again. "Oh God, Nicky!" Sammy exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "Has someone told Nicky?"

Darren held up his hand. "You go with Graham to see Jamie. I'll go give the good news to Nicky and Troy."

Sammy nodded. He tossed the used tissue in the garbage and smiled at the doctor. "Where is he?"

The doctor nodded over his shoulder. "Just down the hall, room 234. I'll let the nurses know who you are and that you have spousal privileges."

"Spousal privileges?" Sammy asked.

"It means you get all the privileges a spouse does," the doctor explained. "You can stay the night in his room, make decisions for him, and you get to take him home with you tomorrow."

"Oh." Sammy stopped when he got to the doorway to look back at the chief. "Thank you, Chief Russo, for everything. If I can help in any way to catch the bastard that hurt James, you know where I am."

The chief nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Summers."

"Please, call me Sammy."

"Craig, I'd like a moment to speak to you after you take Mr. Summers to see Everson."

"Yeah, chief, no problem," Graham said. "I'll be right back."

Chapter Seven

Graham was still shaking his head as he hurried down the hallway to find the chief. Jamie and Sammy seemed to have things well in hand but they were going about it as crazily as he and Darren.

The love between the two men was obvious to even the blindest person on the planet. Jamie and Sammy were meant to be together. Graham could only hope things worked out for the two men.

And he could only hope things worked out between him and Darren. The more he thought about it, the more he wanted something permanent down on paper for him and Darren.

Graham wanted to know the man belonged to him, wanted *everyone* to know, not just to their friends or co-workers. He wanted to tie Darren to him in every way possible, legal or otherwise. Maybe they could travel to Canada and get married? Would Darren be interested in that? Would he even consider it?

Graham nervously admitted to himself he didn't know. He spent so much time trying to pretend he didn't have an emotional attachment to Darren that he missed really getting close to the man. He'd have to rectify that and soon.

"Hey, Chief, you wanted to talk to me?" Graham asked when he spotted the man talking with a couple other officers.

Chief Russo nodded. He said goodbye to the two men he was talking with then gestured for Graham to follow him into a small, private waiting room. Graham walked into the room, frowning when the chief shut the door and turned to face him, a pensive look on his face.

"Chief?"

"We've had word through the ratline that there's been a hit placed on all the task force members, as well as your families."

"What?"

"We don't know if Everson's shooting is connected but we don't want to take any chances. A squad car has already been sent to your parents' place to pick them up. You all need to go into protective custody until we find whoever is after your head."

Graham stepped back and sank down into one of the chairs lining the wall.

"Someone put a hit out on us?" he asked slowly. "Why?"

Graham couldn't wrap his mind around this new information. True, he worked the drug task force that had been set up to investigate the drug trade in town but it didn't really seem like anything that major. The drug line through town wasn't *that* big. Was it?

"Well, we're pretty sure it has something to do with the Bruce Garren case."

"Nicky's ex-boyfriend?" Graham asked, remembering the drug dealing boyfriend who roughed up Jamie's little brother, Nicky. "But I thought he was pretty small potatoes."

"With Jamie being shot, I'm thinking it has to be about the task force," the chief said. "Garren hasn't testified yet. If his drug contacts get rid of all the witnesses and evidence then the prosecution might not have a strong enough case against them."

Graham shook his head. "But I didn't have anything to do with that case. Bruce took the plea deal before I even joined the task force."

"You're on the drug task force that's investigating all those names Bruce had on Nicky's laptop. That right there put a bull's eye on your forehead. Add in the fact that you're best friends with the man who is bringing them all down . . . you see where I'm going with this?"

Graham nodded slowly, his heart racing. "You've sent a car for my parents?"

The chief nodded. "I've placed a police officer on Nicky's door and one on Jamie's. I'm also rounding up Paul and Jay. Is there anyone else we need to arrange protection for?"

Graham immediately thought of Darren and opened his mouth to say something then snapped it shut. No one knew he and Darren worked things out. No one knew they were an item. No one knew Darren was the love of his life.

No one except Darren.

"No, Chief, there's no one else." Graham felt the words stab him in the chest even as he said them.

"Fine then," Russo said. "I have an officer waiting outside to transport you to a safe house where your parents will be taken." The chief held out his hand. "If you want to give me your car keys and a list of stuff, I'll have someone return your car to your house and gather your things for you."

"How long will I need to be in protective custody?"

"Who can say? It could be a few days or a few weeks." Chief Russo patted Graham on the back. "We will find out who put a hit out on you all, Graham, I promise you."

"Yeah." But by then it would be too late. Graham already knew what he had to do. "I need just a few minutes before I leave. I need to talk to someone. I can't leave until I do."

The chief looked like he wanted to argue but nodded after a moment. "You have about five minutes then I want your ass back here, and you're taking a police officer with you."

Graham wanted to say something but he knew he couldn't. The chief would know something was up. He just nodded and walked out of the small room. A uniformed officer waited for him right outside.

"Go with Officer Craig," the chief directed the uniformed officer. "He has some business to take care of and then take him to the safe house. Do not leave his side for any reason."

Graham felt like the walking dead as he went searching for Darren. He was cold, bone deep cold. The pain radiating from his heart made him feel like it was permanently broken. He wasn't even sure if it beat in his chest anymore.

"I'll need just a moment," he told the officer when he spotted Darren coming out of Jamie's room. The officer nodded and Graham walked a few more steps.

"Darren," he said softly, feeling his stomach clench at what he was about to do, "can I speak to you?"

"Of course, Graham," Darren said. "What's wrong?"

"I need my necklace back."

"What? No," Darren said, his hand pressing the necklace against his skin as if he guarded the crown jewels. His face paled and filled with pain. "You gave it to me."

"And now I'm taking it back." Graham could see the confusion in Darren's eyes, the dawning anguish. He wished he could spare Darren all of this, but he couldn't, and at least Darren would be alive.

"But – but you said you loved me," Darren whispered. "You said –"

"People say a lot of things in the heat of the moment they don't really mean."

Graham watched the sparkle in Darren's moss green eyes fade and knew he had killed something he would never get back. For a moment he considered taking his words back, considered asking Darren to go into protective custody with him, but he

knew he couldn't. He couldn't ask Darren to put his entire life, his career, on hold. Not to mention put himself in jeopardy. Put his family in jeopardy.

Graham held out his hand. The gold necklace, so recently warmed by Darren's skin, felt cold as Darren laid it in Graham's hand. Graham closed his fist around the chain and pushed it into his pocket.

He didn't know what else to say to Darren, not with the man looking at him like he just died. Graham knew he'd never forgive himself for the pain he just caused, but he didn't see any other way.

"I never want to see you again," Darren whispered before turning away and walking down the hall. Halfway down, he seemed to sway, catching himself by putting his hand on the wall for a moment.

Graham almost went after him. He even took a step toward Darren. But when Darren righted himself and kept moving, Graham made himself stop. This was for the best. He had to believe that.

No matter how hard it was going to be to be away from Darren, at least he'd know Darren was out there somewhere and alive. It still didn't make him feel any better, not at the moment. Right now, he was dying.

Graham took a deep breath then turned toward the officer. "Alright, let's go."

* * * * *

"Hey Erin," Darren said as he walked into the patient room. "How are you feeling today?"

"Like I'm dying." Erin laughed. "Pretty much the same as any other day."

"I don't want to hear you talk like that," Darren said as he walked over and took the young woman's frail hand in his. "You're going to beat this."

"Darren, you're a doll, but I'm dying and we both know it. I'll be lucky to make it to Christmas."

Darren's heart clenched at the thought of losing one of his favorite patients but he knew Erin was probably right. Her prognosis didn't look good. He was going to miss the kind-hearted woman with the big, soulful eyes.

"I wanted to let you know that today is my last day," Darren said, swallowing hard. He didn't get emotional like this with his other patients, but Erin was a special case. They'd spent many nights talking when she couldn't sleep due to pain.

"You're leaving?"

"Yeah, it's time for me to move on. Your new nurse is a great lady, though. You'll like her, promise."

Erin stared at him, her eyes seeming to see into his soul. He quickly averted his gaze and started straightening her blankets and fluffing her pillows.

"You've made your arrangements, haven't you?"

Darren glanced quickly up at Erin then away from her piercing gaze. "I've sold my house, yes, but I'm sure I'll find someplace else to rest my head."

"That's not what I'm talking about and you know it," Erin said. Darren was surprised by the steel in her voice. "You haven't lied to me so far, Darren. Don't start now."

Darren closed his eyes as he bowed his head and drew in a deep breath. Erin had been able to read him like a book since they met a couple of months ago. She knew when Graham left him, both times.

Darren felt a hand on the back of his head, stroking through his hair, and the simple gesture almost brought him to tears. It seemed so long since someone offered him comfort he nearly forgot what it was like.

"We're a pair, aren't we?" Erin said softly. "I'm broken in body but whole in spirit. You're broken in spirit and whole in body. Together we make one broken person and one whole person."

Darren opened his eyes and chuckled through the gathering tears. "It sounds like we're perfect for each other. Maybe we should get married."

Erin was silent for so long Darren thought he might have offended her. He looked up, surprised to find a thoughtful look on her face.

"Actually," Erin said, "that might not be a bad idea."

"What?"

"Darren, did you know that I'm independently wealthy?" Erin asked. "And I mean freaking rich. My mother left me a small trust fund and I turned it into a multi-million dollar business."

Confused, Darren nodded. "I kind of figured that with you having a private room and all."

"Did you also know that I have no living relatives at all besides my daughter, Denny, and this baby?" she asked as she smoothed her hand down her rounded stomach.

Darren's heart ached. "I'm sorry, Erin, I didn't know that." He still didn't quite understand where Erin was going with all of this or what it had to do with them getting married.

"How do you feel about kids?"

* * * * *

Graham waited until the house grew quiet, hoping everyone was asleep. He soundlessly opened his bedroom window, slipping out of it before closing it most of the way. He ran the few blocks over to where the cab he'd called waited for him and hopped in.

After giving the driver Darren's address, he sat back and thought about what he was going to tell the man he loved. After all the shit he put Darren through, he wouldn't be surprised if Darren slammed the door in his face. But he had to try. Two weeks without Darren and Graham knew he couldn't live without the man.

The cab pulled up in front of Darren's place and Graham's jaw dropped. There was a sold sign on the front lawn. Darren had moved? How would Graham find him now?

Desperate, knowing he was probably pulling at straws, he gave the driver the address for the bar they hung out at. The ride took only a few minutes but it felt like a thousand years. Graham clenched and unclenched his hands the entire way.

Graham paid the driver once they arrived and got out. He slipped into the bar, looking around for Darren. After several minutes of searching, he realized Darren wasn't there either.

He walked back outside feeling completely defeated. Where was Darren? Just as he thought of going to the hospital, he heard a whizzing sound and instinctively hit the ground. The bullet landed in the wall behind him.

Shit! Graham rolled on the ground and came back up on his feet, gun in hand. Searching the dark in the direction the bullet had come from, Graham couldn't see anything. He had no idea who'd fired at him or from where.

Graham carefully crept along the wall, only to have another bullet hit the bricks just above his head. Ducking back down, he looked up to see the damage to the wall behind him. These guys weren't messing around. The hole the bullet made couldn't have come from a regular gun.

He was being shot at by a long range sniper rifle. That meant the shooter needed to have an elevated position, otherwise it would be too easy to see him. Graham crawled farther along the building, edging his way into the alley. He was pinned down, but by how many shooters, he wasn't sure.

Grimacing as he realized what he needed to do, Graham sent Jamie a quick text message with his location and situation. Fuck! He hated to be caught sneaking out of the safe house, but it wasn't worth getting killed over. Jamie would be pissed when he found Graham.

Although the situation did reaffirm his decision to walk away from Darren for his own safety, Graham felt his heart break. All he wanted was Darren. Was that really too much to ask?

Now that he was hidden from the surrounding rooftops, Graham sat down on the ground and waited for Jamie. As much as he'd like to think he was a big, strong man, at that moment he felt completely defeated. Hot tears rolled down his face.

Thankfully, several minutes later when footsteps approached, it was only Jamie. But at that point, Graham wasn't sure he'd even give a shit if it had been the men sent out to kill him.

Chapter Eight

Darren frowned as he watched red and blue lights flash in his rearview mirror. He quickly looked down and checked to make sure he wasn't speeding. He wasn't. He was on a straight stretch of road with no stoplights or stop signs so he knew he hadn't gone through one.

Darren slowed and pulled into a parking lot. He rolled the window down and turned the car off, waiting for the officer to come tell him why he'd been pulled over.

"Are you Darren Sanford?" the officer asked as he stepped up to the window.

Darren nodded, unsure of what exactly was going on. Didn't officers usually ask for license and registration when they pulled someone over? "What did I do, Officer? I know I wasn't speeding."

"Please step out of the vehicle, Mr. Sanford."

Darren glanced at the two car seats in the backseat of the new minivan he recently bought then slowly climbed from the car. He followed the officer's directions to the front of the vehicle and placed his hands on the hood.

"Do you have any weapons on you, Mr. Sanford?" the officer asked as he patted Darren down. "Anything I need to be aware of?"

"No, of course not," Darren snapped. "Why am I being pulled over? What have I done?"

"Please place your hands behind your back, Mr. Sanford."

"Wha – ? Now wait just a moment," Darren said as the officer placed handcuffs on his wrists. "I haven't done anything. You can't just handcuff me for no reason. I have kids in the back of the car."

"They'll be taken care of, sir."

"Please, tell me what I did," Darren cried out. "Why am I being arrested?"

"Detective Everson will explain everything when he gets here, sir."

"Everson?" Darren shouted. He clenched his fists, wishing they were currently wrapped around Jamie's throat. He didn't know what sort of game Jamie was up to but when he saw the man, he'd give him a good piece of his mind . . . and maybe a good punch in the nose just to make himself feel better.

Time seemed to trickle by as Darren sat in the back of the squad car. He knew it was only minutes but it seemed like hours before another car pulled up and Jamie and Troy climbed out.

The glare Darren sent across to them could have scorched the ground if it had been aimed at anywhere except Jamie and Troy. He couldn't believe that two people he considered friends would have him handcuffed and arrested.

Jamie held up a hand the moment he opened the door. "Darren, I can explain."

"Uncuff me!"

"Are you going to hit me?" Jamie asked as he helped Darren out of the back of the car. "I'm still on medical leave, Darren. I was shot, remember? Sammy would be mighty pissed if something happened to me."

Darren could barely suppress his growl. He couldn't ever remember being this angry. He hadn't done anything to deserve being handcuffed. He broke no laws. Jamie and Troy were using their position as police officers to detain him and he didn't really care why.

"Get these fucking cuffs off of me," Darren spit out through clenched teeth.

The moment the cuffs were off, Darren swung around with his fist. He had the satisfaction of hearing Jamie grunt under the impact and fall on his ass. He turned to deliver the same to Troy but the man quickly backed away, holding his hands up in front of him.

"This wasn't my idea, Darren."

Darren walked past Troy and went to the minivan. He opened the sliding door. Denny was still asleep but Aaron was starting to stir. He didn't like it much when the car stopped moving.

Darren unbuckled Aaron and pulled him out, grabbing a blanket to cover the small infant. He put Aaron up on his chest and started patting his back as he turned back to face Troy and Jamie.

"Would either of you like to explain to me why in the hell I was pulled over and handcuffed before I file a complaint with your captain?"

"What is that?" Jamie asked as he pointed to the baby.

Darren rolled his eyes as he continued to pat Aaron's back. "It's called a baby, Jamie."

"I know what it is but why in the hell do you have one?"

"Actually, I have two," Darren said as he looked back into the van where Denny slept peacefully, unaware of the chaos happening outside the vehicle. "Denny is four and Aaron here is just nine days old."

"When did you get kids?" Troy asked.

"No, wait, *how* did you get kids?" Jamie asked.

Darren snorted. "Well, when two people get married –"

"Married!" Jamie shouted.

Darren glared at him when the baby began to whimper. He started making soft murmuring noises and bounced Aaron a little as he patted him.

"When did you get married?" Troy asked, a whole lot softer than Jamie.

"Erin and I got married a month ago."

"So," Troy said as he gestured to the baby, "these aren't your kids?"

"They are now. I adopted them the same day Erin and I got married."

"Oh man, this makes things so much more complicated," Troy said as he pushed a hand through his hair then looked at Jamie. "Look, you explain it to him. I'm going to go get rid of the officer. There's no sense in him watching us have our asses handed to us."

Something in the way Jamie looked at him told Darren he wasn't going to like the man's explanation. Something serious was up and Darren knew he'd just been pulled into the middle of it.

"What in the hell is going on?" Darren asked. "Why was I pulled over?"

Jamie's face paled. He looked sick to his stomach. Darren knew what he was going to say before Jamie even opened his mouth and it made his stomach clench.

"It's about Graham."

Darren turned away without a word and stepped back to the van. He gently strapped Aaron into his car seat and covered him with the blanket. Quietly closing the door, Darren reached for the driver's door handle.

"Darren, please," Jamie said. "It's important."

Darren shook his head. "Graham made his position more than clear. There's nothing to say."

"Someone's trying to kill everyone on the drug task force."

Darren's heart slammed in his chest. He felt his knees weaken and he gripped the car door to keep from falling to the ground. He glanced at Jamie. "Is-is he okay?"

"For now." Jamie nodded. "He's in protective custody at the moment along with his mother and father, Paul and Jay, and us. We've had to move a couple of times and that's been pretty stressful but I think he's going to be okay in the long run. We just need to find whoever is trying to kill us."

"Why would someone try to kill you?" Darren asked. "And if you're supposed to be in protective custody, what in the hell are you doing out running the streets?"

"Trying to find your ass," Jamie snapped. He blew out a deep breath. "At first, we thought my shooting might have had something to do with it but, now we believe it

actually was that guy Frank. We just can't find him at the moment. Other than that, we don't know. The chief thinks it has to do with the drug task force, though."

Darren was in shock. He knew he was. His brain couldn't seem to settle on any one thought. His heart pounded. His hands felt cold and clammy. And all he wanted at that moment was to hold Graham in his arms, despite knowing the man didn't want him.

Darren was slow to come to terms with that. His heart still ached for Graham and it was an ache he knew would never be assuaged. Graham didn't love him and Darren needed to accept that.

He didn't hate Graham. He never would. He just couldn't be around him when he knew his feelings for the man wouldn't go away and they certainly would never be returned. Graham made that more than clear.

"So, he's in protective custody?"

"I thought you knew?" Jamie asked. "I thought that was why you left, because you didn't want to go into protective custody with him."

"I left because Graham lied to me. He never loved me. He told me people say all sorts of things in the heat of the moment that they don't really mean. That's why I left."

"That fucking bonehead," Jamie groaned quietly.

"Are you saying he didn't mean it?" Darren gasped. "It was all a lie?"

Darren wasn't sure if knowing this made him feel better or worse. If Graham had lied, then he really didn't care for him. Not one bit. The fact he'd lie about something so important only served to reinforce what Darren already knew; Graham didn't love him.

Darren swallowed past the lump of tears in his throat and tried to smile. "Well, I guess Graham had his reasons for what he did."

Darren knew from the ache in his chest that up until now, he still held out a sliver of hope that Graham had a good reason for what he did, that the man might still love him. Darren knew differently now. That hope was totally gone.

He turned to climb into the van.

Jamie grabbed him by the arm. "Darren, I know Graham. He cares about you, I swear he does. If he said what he did then he must have thought he had a good reason."

Darren shook his head. He wanted to believe Jamie, he really did, but he'd given Graham two chances and both times he'd had his heart stomped on. He couldn't do a third. Besides, his priorities were different now.

"Darren, please," Jamie said. "Graham is losing his mind. He's not eating. He's not sleeping. He snaps at everyone. Hell, he's even barking at his mother. The man is close to going crazy."

"What do you want me to do about it?" Darren asked. "He doesn't want me; don't you get that? He won't even acknowledge to our friends that we're involved." Darren grimaced. "That we *were* involved."

"Look, Darren, I don't know exactly what went on between the two of you," Jamie said. "I don't know why Graham wouldn't acknowledge you. You're going to have to ask him that. But I do know the man cares for you and being away from you is tearing him apart."

Even though Darren wanted to believe Jamie's words he knew he couldn't afford to, not this time. "I'm sorry that Graham's having such a hard time but I have my own problems to deal with."

Darren shook his head again and started to climb into the van, but Jamie refused to relinquish his hold.

"Jamie, what the fu – ?" Before Darren could even finish speaking, he was pushed back against the side of the minivan and handcuffed once again. "Jamie, I swear to god, if you don't uncuff me right now I will make sure that you lose your badge over this."

"Sorry, man, but you'll thank me when this is over," Jamie said as he led Darren over to his car and put him in the back seat.

"Jamie, damn it, I can't leave my kids."

"Not to worry," Jamie said right before he closed the door. "Troy is going to follow us in your van. He'll make sure nothing happens to your kids."

"Jamie, damn it, you have no — " Darren snapped his mouth shut and rolled his eyes as Jamie slammed the door. Darren fumed and promised himself the moment he got free he was going to hit Jamie again, and then Troy.

When Jamie climbed into the driver seat, Darren turned his head toward the window and refused to speak to the man. He couldn't believe Jamie had handcuffed him not once, but twice. The man must be out of his mind.

"I'm doing this for your own good, Darren," Jamie said from the front seat.

Darren ignored him. He had no doubt Jamie only did what he thought was best. Jamie was like that. He'd get an idea in his brain and no one could dig it out, not even with a crow bar.

Darren glanced out the back window several times to make sure Troy followed them. His relief each time he saw the minivan was the only thing that kept Darren from screaming in frustration.

That didn't mean he wasn't going to tear into both his fiends the moment he was free, because he was. Darren had no desire to see Graham again. Well, that wasn't exactly true. He ached to see the man. He just didn't want to see Graham turn away from him again and he had no doubt that's exactly what would happen.

Darren's heart started to pound frantically when Jamie pulled into the driveway of a small house. He could see lights on inside, although he couldn't see any movement through the closed curtains.

"Jamie, this isn't a good idea," he whispered.

Jamie turned in his seat and faced Darren. He looked pensive, his brows drawn together in a frown. "Look, just talk to the guy, okay? After that, if you want to go home I'll escort you myself. I'll even turn on the siren for you."

Darren frowned. "Yeah right, and wake the baby? Do you know how long it takes to get him to sleep?"

Jamie chuckled and climbed out of the car. Darren looked back to the house. His stomach felt upset knowing that Graham was just inside beyond the thick wooden door.

When Jamie opened the door and helped him out, Darren turned around and held his hands out to the man, waiting to be uncuffed. When nothing happened, he looked over his shoulder at Jamie.

"Well, aren't you going to uncuff me?"

"No, I don't think so." Jamie shook his head. "I'm not stupid, Darren. The minute those cuffs come off you're going to try and punch me again."

Darren smirked. What else could he do? Jamie was right. He didn't care what happened with Graham. He was still going to punch both Jamie and Troy the moment his hands were free.

Darren dug in his heels as Jamie grabbed him by the arm and escorted him toward the front door. "Wait, what about my kids?"

"Not to worry," Jamie said. "Once I get you inside, Troy and I will bring the kids in."

"Damn, Denny's going to freak." Darren closed his eyes for a moment then took a deep breath and opened them again. "Just take me to the van for a minute, let me talk to Denny. You really don't want to hear that girl scream. She'll make your ear drums bleed."

Jamie chuckled and changed direction, taking Darren to the van. He stopped by the side door and slid it open. Darren leaned forward and placed a small kiss on the youngster's forehead.

"Denny, wake up, sweetheart." Darren watched as Denny's eyelids fluttered for a moment then opened slowly.

A tired smile covered her lips as she looked up at him.

"Hey, sweetie," Darren said. "Daddy has to go talk with someone. I want you to stay here with Troy and Jamie, okay? They're friends of Daddy's, policemen. They'll make sure nothing happens to you or your brother."

Denny looked at Jamie then Troy before looking back to Darren. "Where's Mommy? I want to see Mommy."

Darren's heart nearly broke at the fear he could see in Denny's eyes. "I know, sweetie. We'll go see Mommy real soon but I've got to go talk with someone first. It won't take very long, promise."

"Can I go with you?" she asked in a small voice.

"Not this time, sweetie, but soon." Darren nodded toward the house. "See that house right there? I'm going to be right inside. Troy and Jamie are going to bring you and Aaron inside in just a few minutes."

"Daddy, I don't wanna —"

"Denny, this is the way it's going to be." Darren hated being strict with Denny. She was just scarred. Darren could see her lower lip quiver and felt like the world's biggest monster. The strict side of parenting was one Darren had yet to become used to. He wondered if he ever would. "You just be a good girl and go with Troy and Jamie. I'll see you in a few minutes. I promise."

Darren kissed Denny on the forehead once more then stepped back. Troy took his place, reaching for the little girl. As Jamie pulled him toward the front door, Darren watched over his shoulder. Denny seemed to be accepting Troy easily enough but Darren knew that could just be a facade. She was a four year old with a two year old temperament. It changed on a dime.

Darren's throat seemed to close up when Jamie stopped suddenly. He turned around and found the front door right in front of him. Darren shook his head and tried to take a step back, stopping when he bumped into Jamie.

"Everything is going to be fine, Darren," Jamie replied as he reached for the door handle. "Just you wait and see. Now go inside and talk to Graham."

"This is a really bad idea."

Chapter Nine

Graham heard the front door open but didn't bother getting up from the bed he lay on. What would be the point? He didn't care who was taking over the next shift of officers or who had what food delivered.

He wasn't hungry and he didn't want to visit with anyone, not even his parents. He hated protective custody and not just because he didn't like not being in control of his own fate.

Two weeks into his protective custody detail and he knew he'd made the biggest mistake of his life. By then, it was too late. Once he was at the safe house, no one would let him leave. It was for his own good, they told him.

Graham had snuck out twice, both times trying to find Darren, and both times he'd been tracked down by some unknown assailant and shot at. He knew if he tried for a third time, Jamie would probably shoot him himself.

The intense and dangerous situation he was in took his mind off thoughts of Darren a lot of the time, but did nothing to heal the hole in his heart created by the man's absence. Graham felt it every day. Darren dominated his thoughts, his every waking moment.

Graham was desperate to find Darren before he lost what was left of his sanity. It wouldn't be too much longer either. He'd stared down the barrel of his service revolver on more than one occasion.

Jamie said he'd tried to track Darren down but so far he'd had no luck finding even a trace of the man. It was like Darren fell off the face of the earth. He just disappeared, leaving no forwarding address or anything. One day he was there, the next day Darren Sanford simply ceased to exist.

Except in Graham's heart. Darren would always live there. Graham took a deep breath when someone knocked on the bedroom door. He knew he needed to put on a brave face for his friends and family. They were worried about him.

Graham didn't socialize with them much when they came to visit or Jamie and Troy switched shifts with other officers so Graham might see a friendly face. It hurt too much to be around them, knowing they were friends with Darren as well.

He could have shared his anguish with them, they were his friends too, but that would mean sharing his shame with them as well. Darren waited forever for Graham to acknowledge him, to give him some sign that Graham cared for him.

Fear and maybe uncertainty kept Graham from grabbing on to the best thing that ever happened to him and never letting go. By the time he figured out that Darren was the love of his life, it was too late.

Graham knew now that he should have shouted it from the rooftops. He didn't even care what his mother thought anymore. Having her approval meant a lot less when compared to the anguish Graham felt at not having Darren in his life.

The sound of the door opening behind him caught Graham's attention. He plastered a smile on his face that he didn't really feel and turned to face whoever opened the door.

Graham felt like the very air was sucked from his lungs when Darren stepped into the room. His moss green gaze quickly scanned the room, settling on Graham for a brief moment before falling to the floor.

"Hello, Graham."

"Darren," Graham said as he slowly sat up. He couldn't believe after all of this time that Darren stood before him. "What are you doing here?"

Darren smirked and turned around to show Graham his handcuffed wrists. "Jamie asked nicely."

"Oh Christ!" Graham swung his legs over the side of the bed and dropped his head in his hands. He was going to strangle Jamie when he got his hands on the man. "I'm so sorry, Darren. I swear I didn't ask him to bring you here."

"You wouldn't have keys to these damn things, would you?" Darren asked. "My arms are starting to cramp."

Graham jumped to his feet and ran to the door. His lips twisted into a small snarl when he pulled it open and found Jamie standing there swinging a small set of keys on his finger.

"Are you sure you want these?" Jamie asked as he held out the keys.

"We'll talk later," Graham growled as he grabbed the keys and slammed the door shut. He walked back over to Darren and stood behind him. He just couldn't believe Darren was here, in the flesh, so to speak.

Instead of unlocking the handcuffs on Darren's wrists, Graham wrapped one hand in the man's hair, tilting his head back. He cupped his other hand around Darren's jaw then leaned in to kiss him.

Graham knew this would probably be the only time in his life he'd be able to kiss Darren again. The man was clearly angry at him, and Graham couldn't blame him. He'd fucked up and Darren already said he never wanted to see Graham again.

So, if this was going to be his last taste of Darren's lips, he intended to make it a kiss the man would never forget. Graham put everything into it, running his tongue over Darren's lips until he opened his mouth.

Graham delved inside, exploring, caressing. His hand moved down from the nape of Darren's neck, over his back to cup his tight ass. He could hear Darren's reaction in the slight hitch in his breathing.

When Darren started trembling, Graham regretfully broke contact. He rigidly held his tears back and raised his head to look down at Darren. He looked dazed, his eyes not quite focused. His lips were reddened and swollen.

Anyone looking at him would have no doubt that the man had just been ravished. Graham liked that look on Darren. He liked knowing he put it there. He just wished he could do it over and over again until Darren never looked different.

Graham moved behind Darren and reached for the man's wrists. His hands shook as he put the key in and turned the lock, the handcuffs making a soft clicking noise as they unlocked and fell from around Darren's wrists.

"Why did you kiss me?"

Darren's words were softly spoken, almost a whisper, but they echoed inside of Graham. Swallowing the sob that rose in his throat, Graham buried his face in the back of Darren's head.

He inhaled softly, taking in the strong, masculine scent that was unique to Darren before speaking. "I just wanted one last kiss," he whispered, despair clawing at his insides. "I knew once you were free you'd never let me touch you again."

Before he could move, Darren swung around and grabbed Graham by the fabric of his cotton shirt. Graham was so stunned by the lips that hungrily claimed his, he didn't even think to resist as Darren pushed him back to the bed.

Graham fell down on the mattress, Darren landing on top of him. His entire world centered on the mouth ravishing him, the body pressing him down. And then he heard the click of the handcuffs and realized he couldn't move his hands from the top of the bed.

Graham pulled his lips from Darren's and looked back to find his hands cuffed to the wrought iron bars at the headboard. Apprehension coursed through him until he looked down and saw the wicked, sensual grin on Darren's lips.

"You may not be able to touch," Darren said as he whipped his shirt off over his head and tossed it onto the floor, "but I can."

Graham couldn't do anything but stare at Darren in shock as his cotton shirt was pushed up to his armpits and Darren's lips latched onto his nipples. Graham's hands clenched into fists as he tried not to cry out in need.

He sucked in his stomach as Darren's soft lips trailed down his chest to his abdomen. He could feel his cock throbbing against his zipper the closer Darren got to the waistline of his pants. Darren's movements were torturous, agonizing, and Graham loved it.

When Darren sat up and stared down at him, Graham thought he would lose his mind. The look was intense, scorching, almost too much for Graham to bear but he couldn't look away.

The sound of his zipper lowering was the only noise in the room beyond heavy breathing. It was almost an erotic sound. Graham knew what Darren was doing when the man scooted to the end of the bed and pulled on his pant legs. He even lifted his hips to help Darren pull his pants off.

But he couldn't look away from the moss green eyes staring at him. He couldn't even look away when he heard Darren's zipper lower. It was as if he was hypnotized by the strength in them, the intense desire Darren had for Graham. It was a look he never thought to see again and it made his heart ache.

Graham didn't know what Darren planned for him, for them, but he'd take anything he could get. Even if Darren left him in the middle of all of this, Graham would savor every touch he received.

He turned his head and watched as Darren walked over to his nightstand and opened the drawer. He rummaged round and lifted a bottle of lube, holding it up to Graham as he arched an eyebrow at him.

"No condoms?"

Graham could feel his face heat up as he finally tore his gaze away from the beautiful man and shrugged. "You weren't here," Graham whispered. "I didn't need them."

Darren's lips started to lift as if he were going to smile but then he seemed to catch himself and his lips thinned. He walked over to his pants and grabbed a thin foil package out of his wallet then dropped the pants on the floor again.

"Lucky for you, I come prepared."

Graham didn't know how he felt about that statement. It either meant that Darren was pretty much a boy scout or he wanted to be prepared in case the chance to get laid came up. Just the thought made Graham's cock start to deflate.

He hated the idea of Darren being with anyone but him. After everything he did to the man, Graham knew he didn't have a right to feel that way but feel it he did. The idea of anyone except him touching Darren made him want to hurt someone, preferably anyone who even *considered* touching Darren.

When Darren climbed back onto the bed, Graham watched him carefully. His cock started taking an interest again when Darren opened the lube and squirted some out on his fingers.

Graham could just barely lift his head and see Darren reach behind himself. He pictured what Darren was doing and the erotic image stole his breath. He desperately wanted to ask if he could see Darren stretching himself. But breaking the silence in the room might remind Darren where he was or who he was with and Graham wasn't taking any chances.

When Darren grabbed the foil packet and ripped it open, Graham's breath caught in his throat. He could barely keep himself from moving as the condom was slowly rolled down his hard shaft.

He bit his lower lip when Darren dribbled lube on the condom and spread it over his cock. It felt so incredibly good to have Darren's hands on his body again, Graham didn't think he would last very long. He might not even last long enough for Darren to climb on.

At least, that's what Graham assumed Darren would do when the man moved over top of him, straddling his hips. Graham's cock was trapped beneath Darren's body, pressed up tight between Darren's thighs. He could feel Darren's hard shaft and silky balls rubbing against him. That in itself was a kind of aching torture.

Darren lifted his hips. Graham grabbed the headboard with his handcuffed hands and held on for dear life as Darren slowly lowered his body over Graham's cock, impaling himself inch by glorious inch.

When Darren's body rested fully against Graham's, he froze in place and just sat there, his head tilted back, his hands clenched in fists against his thighs. Graham didn't know whether to move or stay still but the agony of waiting almost killed him.

By the time Darren finally lifted his head and planted his hands on Graham's chest, Graham thought he'd pass out. Darren started out slow, barely moving his hips up and down. Graham gripped the headboard tighter and tried not to thrust up into Darren's tight ass.

He wanted to let Darren be in control of the action but he wasn't sure if he could. The pleasure soaring through Graham's body as Darren fucked himself on his cock was mind blowing.

Then Darren started moving faster and faster, his body coming down harder and harder on Graham's. Graham felt sure he could hold off long enough to watch Darren come but then Darren grabbed his cock and started stroking himself.

The site of Darren's flushed skin, his hand rapidly stroking his cock as he impaled himself on Graham's cock, threw him right over the edge.

Just as Graham heard Darren cry out and drops of liquid splattered on his chest, the heat building in his body ignited. Graham dug the heels of his feet into the mattress and thrust up into Darren as he came, filling the man with his scorching release.

The haze surrounding his mind hadn't even cleared when Graham felt the handcuffs open then Darren collapsed on top of his body. Graham wrapped one arm around Darren's shoulders. He grabbed Darren's hand with the other, holding it against his heart, the one place the man truly belonged.

Then he started hoping.

Chapter Ten

Darren's breathing slowly returned to normal. He could feel the warmth of Graham's body against his from beneath him, the man's arms wrapped around him. His hand tingled where Graham absently caressed him with his thumb.

Darren knew he had to be out of his mind to have sex with Graham again. This would lead to nothing but heartache. But he'd needed just one more time with Graham; at least, that's what he tried to tell himself.

"What's this?"

Darren glanced down and watched Graham's thumb trace the gold band on the ring finger of his left hand. He sighed deeply. So, this was it. That period in time when Darren knew everything came to an end.

"I'm married."

"Married?" Graham's body stiffened beneath Darren. "When in the hell did you get married?"

"A month ago," Darren said then waited for the fallout.

"A month ago?" Graham shouted as he pushed away from Darren and sat up. "You got married a month ago? Boy, you didn't wait long, did you? I was barely gone two weeks and you fucking got married?"

Darren snapped. He slid to the side of the bed and reached for his clothes. Anger tore through him like a fist to his gut as he quickly got dressed. Once he had his clothes on and his shoes tied, he turned to glare at Graham.

"You know what? You don't get the right to be angry with me for getting married. You didn't want me, remember?" he shouted. "You said, and I quote, '*people say all kinds of things in the heat of the moment that they don't really mean*'. " Darren pointed his finger at Graham's pale face. "So, you don't get to be angry with me because someone else wanted me."

"Darren, you don't under — "

"No, you don't understand. I waited a year for you to get your head out of your ass and acknowledge that I meant something to you," Darren said. "When you wouldn't, I knew it was over and I let you go, but you came back. *You* came back, not me. You said you loved me and then you said you lied. So, fuck you, Graham."

"How's your husband going to feel about you sleeping around on him?"

Darren rolled his eyes. If only "My *wife* will understand."

"Your wife?" Graham yelled, his eyebrows shooting up to his hairline. "You married a woman?"

"Why does everyone keep asking that?"

"Because you were gay."

"I'm still gay."

Graham crawled off the bed and got to his feet. He snickered and it wasn't a pleasant sound. "I'll bet that goes over real well with your wife."

"Actually, Erin knew I was gay when she married me."

"Trying to *fix* you, is she? Does she think once you get a taste of her pussy you'll give up dick?"

Darren seethed. He drew his arm back and punched Graham square in the face. Graham stumbled back and fell against the bed, his hand coming up to cover his split, bleeding lip. Darren leaned over until he was nearly nose to nose with Graham.

"No matter how you feel or what you think, you have no right to speak one word against Erin," Darren said slowly, quietly. "She's the only thing that kept me alive when you pushed me to the curb like a piece of trash to be thrown away. She gave me a reason not to put a bullet in my head."

Graham's eyes widened. He looked shocked and strangely anguished. He dropped his gaze as if he couldn't look Darren in the face anymore. Darren stood up and took several steps back. He pushed his hand through his hair and growled loudly before crossing his arms over his chest.

"I'm not going to do this with you anymore, Graham," he finally said. "I can't be your dirty little secret anymore and you've made it more than clear that you will never love me. I think it would just be best if we didn't see each other again."

"Then what was this?" Graham asked as he gestured to the rumpled bed.

"A goodbye fuck?" Darren asked. "Look, sex has never been a problem for either of us. It's outside of bed that things get complicated. As long as we kept our relationship between the sheets we were fine, but I can't do that anymore and you won't agree to anything else. I need more."

"And you think you'll find it with a woman?"

"No." Darren chuckled sadly. "No, my relationship with Erin isn't about sex. Hell, I've never even seen the woman naked. I doubt I ever will. I'm not her type and she certainly isn't mine."

"Then why in the hell did you marry her?"

"That's the million dollar question, I guess," Darren said as he walked over to stare out the window through the slats in the mini blinds. "We needed each other. She needed someone to be there for her and I needed a reason to live besides you."

"Jeez, Darren!"

"Yeah, I know, I sound pathetic as all hell." Darren cast Graham a wry grin and shrugged. "You never made any promises. You even told me time and time again that what we had was temporary. I was still stupid enough to fall in love with you. None of this is your fault."

"Yes, it is."

Darren shook his head. "No, I just looked for something that wasn't there —"

"I lied, Darren," Graham said quietly as he looked down at his hands and twisted them together.

"What?"

Graham took a deep breath and looked up. If Darren didn't know better, he would have thought Graham was nervous but what reason would he have to feel that way?

"I lied to you, Darren," Graham said again.

Darren moved over to sit down in the chair against the wall. He took a deep breath then let it out slowly. He gripped the arms of the chair, anchoring himself to something solid before looking across at Graham's grim face.

"What did you lie about?"

Graham snorted. "Pretty much everything."

"Could you be more specific?"

Graham didn't say anything. He just reached down and grabbed his pants and pulled them on. Some perverted part of Darren's mind noted that Graham only buttoned the top two buttons of his jeans, leaving a tantalizing glimpse of hair trailing down beneath the denim.

Graham walked over to a small cabinet and pulled out a bottle of some amber colored liquid. He poured some into two Styrofoam cups, handed one to Darren and carried the other back over to sit on the side of the bed.

Darren wasn't sure what to make of Graham's defeated posture as the man leaned his elbows on his thighs and cradled the white cup between his hands, staring down at it if he couldn't bring himself to look Darren in the face.

"Graham?"

"I wanted you from the very first moment I saw you. You were the hottest fucking thing I ever saw. I didn't even think about how things were going to go between us at the time. All I could think about was getting you into my bed any way I could."

Darren knew the feeling. Graham fascinated Darren from the first glance. He knew even now that he still would have been with Graham at the time, knowing it would lead to heartache. He just didn't have it in him to deny the guy.

"As time went by and things became more complicated between us, I tried to pretend you didn't mean anything to me, that I could just break things off with you and go on with my life like nothing changed." Graham swallowed so hard, his Adam's apple moved up and down his entire throat. "I was wrong."

Graham finally looked up and Darren inhaled sharply at the pain he could see shining in Graham's blue eyes. "Being without you was hell."

"Then why –?" Darren snapped his mouth closed.

"Why did I say what I did?"

Darren nodded.

"The chief told me that someone put a hit out on me and my family. He warned me anyone I cared for could be in danger. Since no one knew about you I thought –" Graham's eyes dropped again. "I thought that I could keep you safe if no one knew we were together."

Darren stared at Graham as he tried to comprehend the man's words. The silence that hung between them became almost unbearable. Darren just didn't know how to reply to what Graham told him.

Graham waved his hands around the sparsely decorated room. "As you can see, I'm still in hell."

"Graham, why didn't you just tell me?" Darren asked. "I would have gone with you."

Graham jumped to his feet and started pacing. His hands clenched and unclenched. "Because it would have put a bull's eye on you just like I had on me. Not to mention, you would have had to walk away from your whole life. I couldn't do that to you."

"And leaving me out there alone was better?" Darren asked. "Graham, I sold my house. I got rid of all my possessions. I quit my job. I was ready to end it all. If Erin hadn't stepped in, putting a bull's eye on me wouldn't have mattered. I'd still be dead."

"Don't say that!" Graham shouted.

"Why not?" Darren shouted right back. "It's the truth."

Graham sat down on the bed then slid to the floor. He pulled his knees up to his chest and pushed the heels of his hands against his eyes. The shock of seeing Graham look so defeated held Darren immobile for half a second before he got up and crossed the room to sit on the floor at his feet.

"Did you ever care for me?" Darren asked softly. He knew he was reaching but he had to know how Graham felt. "Even just a little?"

"Yes." Graham laughed nervously and sniffled as he wiped his eyes. "But I guess it doesn't really matter now. You're married and I'm—I'm still in protective custody with a bull's eye on my back."

"Did you love me?"

It was only as Graham fingered the necklace around his neck that Darren recognized the delicate chain as the one the man had given to him. He felt his eyes water as a spark of hope ignited in his heart.

"I loved you enough to let you go," Graham whispered.

Darren pushed himself between Graham's legs and gently cupped his face. He wiped the tears in Graham's eyes away with his thumbs. "Do you love me enough to keep me?"

"Dar, I—"

"Don't lie to me, Graham, not now, please," Darren murmured softly. "This is your last chance. I won't give you another one. I can't survive it. Either you love me or you don't."

"It doesn't change anything, Darren," Graham cried out. "You're still married and I'm still —"

"It does matter."

Darren held his breath as Graham's head dropped back against the edge of the bed. Graham seemed to look anywhere but at him but finally, bright blue eyes settled on his.

"I love you, I just —"

Darren quickly covered Graham's lips with his fingers as his heart thudded happily in his chest. "No, don't say anything else. I don't want to hear anything you have to say unless it has to do with how you feel about me."

Graham's eyes sparkled and Darren could feel the man's chuckle rumble through his chest. Darren smiled. He moved his fingers from Graham's mouth long enough to lean down and cover his lips with his own.

Graham groaned, his fingers digging into Darren's hips. The kiss was slow, thoughtful, and sent shivers of delight racing down Darren's spine. He could feel the same response in the rapid beating of Graham's heart, in his heavy breathing.

Regretfully, Darren needed air and had to eventually lift his head. He quickly covered Graham's lips with his fingers again. He cocked an eyebrow at Graham, daring him to say anything but what he wanted to hear as he slowly raised his fingers.

"I love you, Graham," Darren said. "I will always love you."

Graham's breathing hitched. "Oh, Dar, I . . . Why? I've done nothing but push you away and treat you like shit. How could you possibly feel anything for me except hatred?"

Darren brushed the back of his hand down the side of Graham's face. "We don't choose who we love, Graham. It just is."

"I don't deserve you."

Darren chuckled. "No, you don't, but you have me anyway if you want me."

"I do, more than I've ever wanted anything on earth, but you're still married and I'm still knee deep in shit. I can't bring you into this with me. What if someone tries to hurt you to get to me?"

"So, we go into hiding together," Darren said vehemently. "We find out who's trying to kill you and we catch them before they can do anything. We fight. We don't give up."

"And you being married?" Graham asked. "What do we do about that?"

Darren grimaced and sat back on his heels. "Yeah, about that"

A sudden knock at the door interrupted their conversation. Darren released a sigh. Probably just as well How did he explain to Graham the situation he was in? Would Graham freak and leave?

"Darren, I need you," Jamie said through the door.

Darren could hear Aaron whimpering through the doorway and knew his time with Graham had come to an end. He stood and walked to the door, knowing the moment he opened it, all of his secrets would be out in the open.

Jamie frowned as he silently handed Aaron over. Darren shrugged, knowing Jamie wouldn't have interrupted him and Graham unless it was important. A crying baby would be important to anyone not prepared for it.

Darren cradled the baby to his chest, the boy's cries quieting the moment Darren took him. Darren smiled down at the small, delicate face. He took a deep breath and turned around to face the music.

"What is that?"

Darren chuckled as he walked across the room to kneel at Graham's feet again. "You all keep asking that. Haven't you ever seen a baby before?" he asked as he held the baby out to Graham.

Chapter Eleven

Graham's hands shook as Darren laid the small newborn in his arms. He had no idea what he was doing or even how to hold a baby. He wasn't even sure he'd ever seen anyone so small.

"This is Aaron," Darren said. "My son."

"Y-your son?" Graham choked out as he looked down at the baby. He tried to find some sign of Darren in the child but couldn't. Darren's skin was pale, creamy. This baby looked more darkly tanned, like Graham. He even had blue eyes instead of moss green.

"You have a son?"

"And a four year old daughter named Denny."

Graham was shocked. He felt a jealous streak a mile wide race through him. Had Darren been fooling around on him all this time? Was everything the man said about loving him just a lie?

Even as that thought flew across his mind, Graham dismissed it. No, Darren would never do that to him, not if he truly loved Graham as he said he did. Darren wasn't built like that.

"Is this why you married Erin?"

Darren nodded. "Erin's dying."

"What about their father?"

"I'm their father."

Graham nodded. "I understand that but you know what I mean. These are not your biological children."

"They could be," Darren insisted with a small smile.

"No, they couldn't," Graham said as he gently brushed his hand over the top of Aaron's head. "If you loved me you never would have been with someone else."

"You think so, huh?"

Graham glanced up at Darren, his face stern. "I know so."

Darren chuckled. "Well, you're right. Erin was tired of trying to find Mr. Right as her biological clock ticked away. She was artificially inseminated. After Denny was

born she decided she wanted her to have a brother and did it again. A couple of months into her pregnancy she was diagnosed with cancer. The treatment would have killed the baby so she opted out of it."

"And now she's dying?"

Darren nodded, looking sad. "By the time this little guy was born there had been a lot of damage to her system. We're still trying everything but she'll be lucky to make it to Christmas."

"So, I guess we should do everything in our power to make her last couple of months good ones, huh?"

Darren inhaled sharply. "You're okay with all of this?"

"Darren, I don't know what all of *this* is," Graham replied. "I just know you said this was my last chance and I refuse to fuck it up. If that means you come with a couple of kids and a wife, then that's what it means."

Graham wasn't sure of anything except that he would do anything not to lose Darren again. He knew next to nothing about children, but he could learn. Just like he learned that he couldn't live without Darren.

Graham opened his mouth to protest when Darren reached for the baby. He kind of liked holding the little guy. But when Darren laid the baby on the bed and put pillows around him, Graham's curiosity grew.

Darren moved back over and straddled Graham's thighs. His arms wrapped around Graham's neck. Graham's eyes fell closed as Darren placed small kisses against his lips.

"Tell me you love me."

"I love you." Graham seemed to receive a mouth-watering kiss for each right answer he gave. He'd give Darren any damn thing he wanted if it meant more of the same.

"Tell me you'll never push me away again."

"Oh, Dar, I don't want to put you in danger," Graham said as he opened his eyes to look into Darren's face. "What if —?"

"Tell me you'll never push me away again," Darren repeated.

Graham groaned. Darren was such a stubborn shit. "I'll never push you away again."

"Promise me."

Graham grinned. "I promise." He received another one of Darren's world-altering kisses. It made his toes curl.

"You promise what?"

"I promise I will always love you and I will never push you away again."

"Then this," Darren said as he unclasped the necklace around Graham's neck and placed it on his own, "belongs to me."

As Darren started to lower his hand, Graham caught it. He rubbed his thumb back and forth across the simple gold band on Darren's ring finger. "One of these days, when you're ready, I want to put my ring on this finger, Darren."

"I'd like that."

"Yeah?"

'Yeah." Darren leaned in for another kiss, pressing his body tightly to Graham's. The bedroom door suddenly pushed opened.

"Daddy!" shouted a small voice.

Graham whipped his head around to see a little girl with dark brown curls come barreling into the room.

"Denise Lanett!" Darren said sternly. "What have I told you about barging into rooms when the door is closed?"

The little girl's face fell. She clasped her hands together then dropped her head until her chin touched her chest. Graham's jaw fell open when her lower lip thrust out and she pouted. He couldn't remember ever actually seeing that look on someone's face before.

"I is supposed to knock first."

"And did you knock?"

"No," Denny said, "but, Daddy, I was just —"

"There is no excuse, Denny," Darren said. "You always knock first and wait for an answer before you open the door."

"Yes, Daddy."

Darren nodded then opened his arms. "Now, come here, I want you to meet someone."

Denny ran across the room. Both Graham and Darren grunted from the impact of the four-year-old's body as she jumped into Darren's waiting arms. Darren moved back to sit on the floor and settled Denny on his lap.

"Do you remember that story I told you about Prince Charming and the sleeping prince?" Darren asked. "Remember how the sleeping prince waited for his Prince Charming to come and kiss him awake and save the kingdom?"

Denny nodded. "Is that why you were kissing him?" Denny pointed to Graham. "Is he your Prince Charming? Is he going to save the kingdom?"

"Yep, this is Graham," Darren said. "He's going to kiss the sleeping prince and save the kingdom."

Graham chuckled. He was pretty sure he remembered the story of Sleeping Beauty. He certainly wasn't Prince Charming but Darren might pass for a sleeping beauty . . . if he was sleeping.

Denny cupped her hand around her mouth and leaned up to whisper in Darren's ear. In true four-year-old fashion, she spoke loudly enough for everyone in the room to hear her.

"Daddy, he doesn't look like Prince Charming," Denny said. "He looks like Aaron. They both have no hair."

Darren's gaze flew up to Graham's and he knew the man didn't know quite what to say. Graham just grinned and shook his head. He climbed to his feet and reached for the sleeping baby on the bed, settling Aaron against his chest as he'd seen Darren do.

"Why don't we go find something to eat?" he asked as he held his hand out to Darren and Denny.

Darren grabbed his hand and climbed to his feet, giving Graham's body a quick look from head to toe. "Why don't you finish getting dressed first?"

Graham glanced down at his naked chest then winked at Darren. "Why? Don't like me like this?"

"Not when I have to concentrate on two kids," Darren said. "There are just certain times when thinking about you half-dressed is not appropriate."

Graham chuckled and laid the baby back on the bed. "Why don't the two of you head on into the kitchen and find Troy or Jamie? I'll bring Aaron out just as soon as I get dressed."

Darren nodded and led Denny from the room. Graham quickly dressed and put on shoes before picking up the sleeping baby again. He was mildly surprised at how good the little guy smelled.

He thought babies stank of spit up and dirty diapers, but Aaron smelled clean — like baby powder and a hint of Darren's unique fragrance. Graham knew it was a scent he would come to enjoy in the future. It was calming and peaceful.

Graham cradled Aaron to his chest once again and started out of the room. He could hear Denny's chatter coming from the living room and followed the sweet sound. The moment he turned the corner, his heart fell.

Darren stood in the middle of the living room with Graham's parents. Denny was chatting away a mile a minute to Graham's mother. Anita Craig listened, a smile on her face for the small child.

Graham knew that smile wouldn't remain the moment his mother found out exactly who the little girl was and how she would soon be related. Figuring he wasn't going to get out of the scene to come — no way in hell would he deny Darren again — Graham drew in a deep breath and crossed the room to stand beside Darren.

He could hear his mother's sharp inhale as he leaned down and gently kissed Darren on the lips. When he looked up, Graham saw a slight smile on his father's face. Anita's face, however, was pale, which was unusual in itself considering her skin color.

"I see you've met Darren and Denny," Graham said. He laid the baby back in his arm and nodded to him. "This little guy is Aaron."

"What is the meaning of this, Graham?" Anita asked as she pointed to the arm Graham put around Darren's waist.

"The meaning of what, Mother?"

"He's white, Graham."

"I've kind of noticed that, Mother," Graham said. "But you should see him when he's naked. His ass is so lily white it could blind you."

"Hey, it's not that bad," Darren protested.

Graham chuckled. "Yes, it is."

"Graham, you know my rule," Anita said as she crossed her arms over her chest.

Graham was well acquainted with the glare she shot at him. He'd seen it a hundred times growing up. His mother was close to losing her patience.

"I am quite aware of your rule, Mother," Graham replied. "However, it is not my rule and as such, does not apply to me. If you choose to keep your prejudice that is your issue, not mine."

"Graham!" Anita said, her tone reflecting her outrage.

"I love Darren, and I plan to spend the rest of my life with him if he will let me. But, I love him for who he is, not what color he is. I could really care less if he is white, black, or purple. He's the man I love."

"You need to marry a sweet young girl and provide me with grandchildren."

Graham held out the baby cradled in the crook of his arm. "Meet your grandchildren."

Chapter Twelve

Darren smoothed his hand down the side of Graham's sleeping face. The man's head rested on Darren's thigh as he stretched out on the couch, Denny curled into his chest, sleeping right along with him. Aaron lay curled on Darren's chest.

Most of the household slept, Darren and Graham's father, Robert, the only ones awake beside the two officers guarding them. Robert sat only a few feet away but Darren could feel the man watching him. It was actually kind of eerie, as if Robert was trying to figure something out.

After the incident with Graham's mother, Darren really didn't have a lot to say to either of Graham's parents. While no one had outright explained things to him, Darren put two and two together and figured out that Anita Craig had a lot to do with why Graham wouldn't acknowledge him for so long.

Darren would be lying if he said he didn't feel resentful and a tad bit angry. He didn't understand how the color of his skin would make a difference to anyone. He figured the nature of his personality would mean more, but apparently not.

Darren didn't want to tell Graham that he needed to choose between his lover and his parents. But he sure as hell couldn't see them all getting together for family dinners or holidays. He wouldn't stay around people who considered him inferior.

Anita clearly didn't want her son with a white man, and it wasn't like Darren could change the color of his skin. His mother was Irish. Darren was about as white as he could possibly get.

"You really love my son, don't you?"

Darren glanced up in surprise. These were the first words Robert spoke to him since Graham made his announcement regarding his intentions toward Darren. He nodded and glanced back down at the sleeping face turned up toward him.

Graham looked like he was sleeping peacefully, the lines of stress around his face smoothing out for the first time since Darren saw him again. Even the tension in Graham's body seemed to have faded away.

"Yes, I do love him," Darren replied. "Very much, in fact."

"Just so you know, not everyone believes as my wife does."

That information surprised Darren. He looked over at Robert again, one eyebrow raised. "Oh?"

"It actually has nothing to do with your skin color," Robert said as he pointed to himself. "As you can see, she has nothing against white people. A gay son is a different matter."

"Why?"

Robert shrugged. "Who can say? Maybe she dreads what you two will go through from people that don't understand gay relationships. Maybe she really does want biological grandchildren. I don't exactly know." Robert sat forward and clasped his hands together. His gaze was serious as he looked across at Darren. "What I do know is my son has been slowly dying. Little by little, I've watched the light fade from his eyes. Then you arrived and that light came back, brighter than I've ever seen it."

"It's been hard on us."

Robert nodded. "I don't understand this whole gay thing, never have, but I do know you mean something to my son, a big something. And that's enough for me. I just want him to be happy, whether it's with you or a woman or the man on the moon. I don't want to see that light fade from his eyes again so whatever I need to do to help, you can count on me, despite what my wife thinks."

"Won't that cause problem between you and your wife?"

"More than likely, but I can handle it. I haven't been married to the woman for thirty four years without learning a thing or two." Robert chuckled. "You might want to remember that as the years go by for you and Graham."

"Don't let him fool you," Graham said as he opened his eyes and smiled up at Darren. "He has me wrapped around his little finger and he knows it."

Darren grinned. "Hey, how'd you sleep?"

"Well, except for the hot water bottle glued to my side, pretty damn well."

"Yeah, I probably should have warned you about that. Denny tends to run a little on the warm side and once she decides you're good cuddle material, you'll never get away from her."

Darren's heart warmed at the tender glance Graham gave the little girl. "I think I can live with that." Graham picked Denny up in his arms and sat up, sitting so close, Darren felt their arms press against each other.

"Yeah, but can you live with every-two-hour feedings?" Darren chuckled. "Then there are the dirty diapers, the spit up, and walking the floor all hours of the night. And let's not forget the crayons, babe. They are *everywhere*."

Graham gave Darren a peculiar look, his eyebrows drawn together in a frown. Darren quickly went over his words in his head to see if he said anything that might have upset the man. He suddenly realized he called Graham *babe*.

Graham didn't like endearments. He made that clear very early on in their relationship. Darren was never to call him anything but Graham. He thought that might change now that they were coming out to everyone, but maybe not.

"I'm going to go get something to drink. Does anyone need anything?" Darren asked as he got to his feet. He needed a few minutes to compose himself, maybe clear his head.

Graham and Robert shook their heads so Darren started for the kitchen. But as he passed Robert, the older man held out his hands.

"Why don't you let me get better acquainted with my new grandson?"

Darren stared at Robert for a moment in surprise then handed Aaron over before quickly making his escape to the kitchen. He leaned against the counter, resting his head on the cupboard door and closing his eyes.

Not everyone liked terms of endearment. Not everyone had to. Darren always kind of figured the man he fell in love with would crave the little names lovers called each other.

A part of Darren was saddened by the fact Graham seemed displeased, but if not using those little love words meant he got to keep Graham, he'd do what needed to be done. Darren would just have to remember to always call his lover by his given name.

"Why do you love me?"

Darren's eyes snapped open and he swung around to stare at Graham in shock at the softly spoken words. "What?"

"Why do you love me?" Graham asked again. "I've done nothing but hurt you, time and time again. I've given you no reason to not want to push me off the nearest bridge and yet you still love me. Why?"

Darren shrugged. "You make me happy."

Graham gaped. He swung his hand up in the air in an aggravated gesture. "When have I ever made you happy? For almost a year, I refuse to acknowledge you to our friends. I tell you I lied when I said I love you. And I've made you so hesitant with me, you're afraid to call me *babe*. When have I ever done anything that made you the least bit happy?"

Darren jumped up to sit on the counter and gestured for Graham to step over between his legs. Graham frowned but did as Darren wanted, stepping closer until their bodies brushed against each other.

Darren smoothed his hand down Graham's chest. He felt the warmth of the man's skin through the thin cotton of his white shirt. Graham's heartbeat thudded under his hand.

"There's this time, late at night after we've made love," Darren said very softly, "that you hold me in your arms like I'm the most precious thing in the world to you. At those times, I know that everything is right in the universe. I know that no matter what else is going on, I'm important to you. And it makes me happy."

Darren smiled at the soft hitch he heard in Graham's breathing. "Sometimes, even when we're with our friends, you'll smile at me and I know, I just *know*, you're thinking of me. Not as one of your friends out for a pool game and a couple of beers, but as your lover. And *that* makes me happy."

"Dar, I—"

Darren reached up and rubbed his finger over Graham's lips. Graham watched him intently. Darren knew Graham might not understand why he felt the way he did but it didn't matter. It just was.

"There have been a few times that something bad happened at work and you've come over. In the middle of the night, I'll hear you whimper in your sleep and you reach for me as if I'm your solace. Once I'm in your arms, you settle down and sleep without nightmares. And that makes me happy. *You* make me happy."

"I've never met anyone like you," Graham whispered. "You're unbelievable."

"Then you're mighty lucky to get me, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I'll never be able to show you how much."

Darren cupped Graham's face in his hands. "Just keep making me happy and we'll call it even," he said. He groaned and tilted his head back when Graham started peppering his face and neck with little kisses and tiny nips.

"I'm sorry I made you feel you couldn't use pet names for me. I was still fighting my feelings for you," Graham said between kisses. "Call me baby, honey, darling, lover, call me any damn thing you want. I want to hear every little endearment that comes out of your mouth."

"Yeah?"

Graham stopped kissing Darren and stared into his face, smiling. "Yeah."

Darren moaned as Graham went back to kissing on his neck. His skin tingled at the touch. "God, I want five minutes alone with you."

"Just five minutes?"

"That's all I need." Darren chuckled. "At the moment."

Darren let out a bark of laughter when Graham picked him up and carried him into the guest bathroom, shutting the door behind them. He hardly caught his breath by the time Graham set him on his feet and leaned him back against the counter then reached for the buttons of Darren's jeans.

"Graham, wha — ?"

Graham dropped to his knees and looked up at Darren, his eyebrow arched. "Dar, if you don't know what I'm doing then it's been longer than I thought."

"But, we don't have — oh my god, Graham!"

Darren groaned as Graham freed his cock and immediately lowered his lips. He gripped the edge of the counter as Graham began sucking on the bulbous head, running his tongue along the shaft.

Darren locked his knees in place when they trembled, afraid he might collapse on the floor. The pleasure racing through his body at every swipe of Graham's tongue was driving him out of his mind.

The sight of Graham kneeling at his feet and sucking on his cock was even better, and one Darren never thought to see again. He unclenched one hand from the edge of the counter and reached to stroke the side of Graham's smooth head.

Deep blue eyes looked up at him. Darren's breath caught in his throat, not from the exquisite sensations Graham created with his mouth, but from the love he could see shining in the man's eyes. He didn't think he'd ever get tired of seeing it.

"Make me come, baby," Darren growled as he gently pushed his hips toward Graham. "Use that sweet mouth of yours like I know you can and make my brain melt out of my ears."

Darren could see Graham grin around his cock and knew he'd pleased the man with his words, both in using the pet name and in expressing his faith in Graham's ability to shake his world.

He wasn't, however, prepared for the vigor with which Graham renewed his efforts to make Darren's mind melt. Darren groaned loudly and let his head fall back as Graham sucked him right down to the root.

Whoever came up with the idea of calling this a blowjob was out of his mind. There was no blowing involved. It was all about sucking and Graham had it down to an art form.

The suction Graham created with his mouth rivaled a vacuum cleaner. Graham's ability to use his tongue at the same time, running it around the edge of Darren's cock then across the slit in the top, made Darren's balls draw up to his body in a matter of moments.

Darren looked back down at Graham handsome face. He cradled the man's head in his hands and started fucking his mouth. He was beyond the ability not to. He couldn't have stopped if the room caught on fire.

"Fuck, Graham, so close . . . gonna — " Darren tried to do the polite thing and draw away, but Graham grabbed his hips and pulled him forward, anchoring Darren in place as he moved his mouth faster.

"Graham!" Darren wailed as the suction of Graham's mouth seemed to pull his orgasm right out of him. He expected Graham to move out of the way as he'd done in the past but Graham just swallowed, adding to the sensations exploding in Darren's body.

By the time Graham licked Darren clean and tucked him back into his pants, Darren was barely able to stand. Graham stood, and Darren stared up at him in dazed confusion.

"Oh, Graham, I tried to war — "

Graham leaned forward and stopped Darren's words with a kiss. Darren groaned and clutched at the front of Graham's shirt as the man's tongue thrust into his mouth. Graham's unique taste mixed with his own, exploding across Darren's tongue.

"I want everything you have to give me, baby," Graham whispered against Darren's lips. "I want your love and your words and even your pleasure. I want every last fucking thing you have to give me."

Darren blinked. He pushed back a little from Graham, not enough that their bodies were separated but just enough to be able to look at him. He loved the feeling of Graham pressed against him.

"Graham, do you know weird this is for me?" Darren leaned into the hand that Graham pressed against his cheek. He could see the sadness in Graham's eyes and didn't mean to make him feel bad, but Darren couldn't hide his shock at the turn of events.

"I'm sorry and I wish I could take it all back," Graham said, "but I can't. I was stupid and I almost lost the best thing that ever happened to me. I'll never forgive — "

Darren reached up and pressed his finger against Graham's lips. "Okay, stop right there. It happened, it's over, and now it's in the past. While things will continue to be a little strange until we get used to being together, we *are* together and that's all that matters."

"Do you really believe that?" Graham asked. "Can you really forget everything I did to you? To us?"

Darren smiled. He rubbed his thumb over the side of Graham's face. "I love you and you love me and nothing else really matters."

"But how can you trust that I won't do it again?"

Darren smile grew into a full-fledged grin and he chuckled. "Because I won't let you. I gave up too easily all those times before. I just accepted what you said and walked away. I refuse to do that again. You said you loved me and I'm not letting you take it back." Darren jabbed his finger into Graham's chest. "This time, I will fight for you, for me, and for us. And I can be pretty fierce when I need to be."

"You know I love you, right?"

"It's still nice to hear," Darren said, "and often."

"I promise to tell you every day."

Darren grinned. He opened his mouth to tell Graham he'd do the same when he heard a small noise outside the bathroom door. Darren rolled his eyes and glanced over at the door, expecting Denny to come running into the room.

When the door didn't open, he frowned. "Graham, did you hear something?"

"Yeah," Graham said quietly. He held his finger up to his mouth for Darren to be quiet and crept toward the door.

Darren held his breath as he watched Graham press his ear against the flat wooden surface. A moment later, he reached for the handle and opened the door a crack, peering out. Darren's heart pounded when Graham quickly pulled it closed.

Graham pressed his ear to the door again then motioned for Darren to come over. Darren felt like the pounding of his heart could be heard thundering through the small bathroom as he walked over to lean his ear against the door like Graham.

It took him a moment to figure out exactly what he listened to but when he did, Darren's jaw dropped open as fear filled him. Whoever stood outside the door was talking and Darren didn't like what he heard.

"I'm telling you, you need to come now," the voice said. "The old couple is sleeping, the butt fucking faggot is in his room, and everyone else is watching television. No one will see you coming."

Darren reached out for Graham's hand, entwining their fingers. The pause from the speaker told him that whoever it was talked into a phone, most likely a cell phone. There was only one person in the room.

"And I'm going to get my money, right, just like we agreed?" the man asked. "Yeah, but you need to get here fast before someone finds out or they'll move them again No, I don't know where they're holding them but I've seen Sammy and Nicky in action. You take care of Troy and Jamie and nothing will keep those two sick freaks from running to their little butt buddies."

Darren dropped to the floor and pressed his face against the cold tile, looking out under the gap between the floor and the wooden door. He couldn't see whoever was talking but he could see a pair of fancy brown lace-up shoes.

"No, you're the one that fucked this up before. I told you where he was and you missed, twice. It's not my damn fault I don't know how much longer they're going to keep me on this detail so you'd better get it right this time No, Troy and James brought some guy by in handcuffs a little while ago, has a couple of kids with him Fuck no, I don't know him. I don't hang out with queers Yeah, yeah, just get here. I'll unlock the back door for you."

The talking stopped. As the shoes moved away, Darren stood up. He could instantly see the concern in the tension lines etched in Graham's face. They both knew they were in trouble.

"Do you have a gun?" Darren asked.

Graham arched an eyebrow, but reached into the back of his pants, producing a police issue handgun.

"Do you have two?"

Graham rolled his eyes and pulled up his pant leg, producing a second handgun, which he handed over to Darren. "I assume you do know how to shoot a gun?" Graham asked as he checked the magazine.

"You just kind of point and pull the trigger, right?"

Chapter Fourteen

Graham grabbed Darren and yanked him close. He quickly lowered his mouth and kissed him, desperate to feel the man's lips beneath his. The next few minutes could change everything for them.

Graham was terrified something would happen to Darren. He'd be much happier if Darren would just stay in the bathroom until everything was over, but Graham knew from the look on Darren's face that it would never happen.

"You keep yourself safe for me, understand? I'm not going to lose you just when I got you back."

Darren nodded. "That goes both ways."

Graham knew it did. He wished he didn't have to do what he was about to do. He'd much rather stay holed up in the bathroom with Darren until it was over. Graham knew that wasn't going to happen either. No one outside of the bathroom knew they were in eminent danger except whoever betrayed them.

"Ready?" Graham asked.

"Not really," Darren replied, "but what other choice do I have?"

"You can stay here," Graham said. "In fact, I'd much rather you did."

"So not happening."

"Yeah," Graham said, frowning, "I kind of figured as much."

Graham was pleased Darren wanted to stay by his side as they walked into unknown danger, but he also felt concerned for the man's safety. If anything happened to Darren Graham shook his head. He couldn't go there.

"Stay behind me, okay?" he asked. "I know you want to help, and I appreciate that, but I'm a lot better trained at this than you are."

"Well, duh!" Darren snickered, much to Graham's amusement. "I'm not stupid, Graham. I know you are better able to handle this situation than I am. I'm just not going to let you walk into it alone if I can help." Darren patted Graham's cheek. "Don't worry; I'll let you do all the hard work. I just want to be there in case something goes wrong."

"Just stay behind me." Graham leaned over and gave Darren a quick kiss then took a deep breath. He slowly opened the door and peered out again. The small hallway between the guest bathroom and the kitchen was empty.

Graham held his gun at the ready and entered the hallway. He could feel the warmth of Darren's body as the man moved right behind him. Graham quickly looked around the corner into the kitchen then leaned back against the wall, his heart pounding rapidly.

One of the police officers guarding them stood in the kitchen, making a cup of coffee. Other than Troy and Jamie, there were only two other officers in the house with them, and as of the phone call he overheard, Graham didn't trust either of them. He didn't even know them very well. He'd seen them at a scene a time or two, but Chief Russo assigned them the protective custody duty.

Graham stuck his gun into the waistband of his pants and covered it with his shirt. He motioned for Darren to stay where he was then walked out into the kitchen. The officer jumped as if startled. Graham smiled and reached for a glass before getting some water from the tap.

"Thomas, isn't it?"

"Yeah," the man replied, "Jerry Thomas."

Graham watched the man fidget with his coffee over the rim of the water glass. He drained half the glass then set it on the counter, his hand still wrapped around it.

"Sucks to be on babysitter duty, huh?"

Thomas shrugged. "It's okay, I guess."

Graham leaned back against the counter and cradled his glass in his hand. He tried to place the cop's voice as being that of the man he'd heard through the bathroom door, but he just couldn't be sure. "It'll be over soon enough and then you can go back to your beat."

The man grimaced. "Yeah."

"Just what beat do you cover?"

"South side between Watson and 45th Street."

"Oh, rough neighborhood," Graham said. And also infested with gangs, drug running, and just about every kind of criminal activity known to man. It was also a place where a cop could easily go on the take.

Graham could see Thomas eyeing him suspiciously. The tension in the air between them was thick, almost choking. And it was getting thicker. Graham carefully set his glass down on the counter, never taking his eyes off Thomas.

"How do you like it down there?" Graham asked.

Thomas shrugged. "It's okay," he said. "I hope to move up pretty soon, get out of walking a beat. I'm going to take the detective's exam next month."

"Don't think being a detective is any easier than a beat cop, 'cause it not." Graham snickered. "The hours are longer, the pay sucks just as much, and the criminals come with bigger guns."

"Then why do you do it?"

Graham shrugged. "Why do any of us do it? Keep the bad guys off the street."

Thomas snorted, which didn't surprise Graham. He didn't think Thomas wanted to be a police detective for the same reason Graham did. It wasn't about making a difference and keeping the world safe from the bad guys for Thomas.

Graham wasn't quite sure what it was though. The money, maybe? The prestige that many thought went along with being a police detective versus a beat cop? Maybe even the different level of criminals a detective might encounter? Graham figured he might as well ask.

"So, why do you want to be a detective? I remember my time as a street cop and I kind of liked working the same neighborhood day in and day out. I got to know the neighborhood, the people, how things worked."

"Easy for you to say," Thomas said. "You work different cases, see new faces. You get the collar when you solve a case."

Ah! Thomas wanted recognition. Well, he sure as shit was going to get that after Graham was done with him. Everyone would know Thomas' name. He'd be known as the rat fink that betrayed his fellow officers for money.

Graham noticed Thomas glancing at his watch. "Waiting for something?"

"What? No!" Thomas said quickly, his face paling. "What makes you ask that?"

Graham gestured to Thomas's wrist. "You keep looking at your watch." He tapped the side of his head with his finger. "It's those detective skills, you know? We notice things like that."

"Plus you heard me on the phone," Thomas said easily.

"Plus I heard you . . . ," Graham started to say before realizing what he just let on to.

The next instant, Thomas' fist found his face. Grunting as he took the punch, Graham reached out and grabbed the man's other arm. Thomas tried breaking his hold, but couldn't. Graham held on too tight.

He blocked the next punch and landed one of his own in Thomas' gut. Graham kicked at his head, but Thomas was able to roll against the cabinets to dodge it. Thomas grabbed the full coffee mug and launched it at him. While Graham ducked the mug, the man was able to grab one of the bigger kitchen knives on the counter.

The man's actions gave Graham pause. Why use a knife? Apparently, Thomas wasn't willing to tip everyone off by using his gun. But still, shouldn't someone be hearing the noise they were making? Thomas lunged for him, and Graham barely moved out of the way in time by diving to the floor and rolling.

Unfortunately, Thomas was a lot faster than Graham anticipated. When he started to roll up onto his feet, he made a rookie mistake, losing sight of where his

attacker was. Instantly spinning around to see where his opponent had gone, Graham turned to find himself directly in front of Thomas, with a knife in his face.

"Freeze!"

Graham swallowed hard, the knife in Thomas' hand only inches from his throat. The sound of Darren's voice both scared and thrilled him. Thomas was a lot stronger than Graham had anticipated and he didn't know if he could actually beat him.

"I'm having a very bad day, so you don't want to do anything that might make me pull this trigger," Darren said as he stepped into the kitchen. "Why don't you drop the knife?"

Graham could see Thomas' eyes flicker frantically from him to Darren and back again. The man wasn't expecting Darren and didn't know what he might do. If he dropped his knife, he lost his weapon and his edge. If he didn't, Darren might shoot.

"Come on, drop the knife, Officer," Darren said.

Out of the corner of his eye, Graham caught sight of Darren moving closer.

"This butt fucking faggot is having a very bad PMS day, so don't fuck with me. Drop the knife before my finger slips on this trigger. I'm aiming for your head but I'm a pretty damn bad shot. I could hit you anywhere."

Apparently Darren's words got through to Thomas because the knife aimed at Graham's throat slowly started to move away. Graham didn't start breathing again until Thomas took a step back and dropped the knife on the countertop. He held his hands up in surrender.

"Graham, get his gun."

Graham carefully walked around Thomas. He grabbed the man's gun out of the shoulder holster then reached for the knife as well. He had no intention of leaving any weapons within the officer's reach.

"Do you have anything to restrain him with?"

Graham nodded and grabbed the handcuffs off Thomas' belt. He quickly handcuffed Thomas' hands behind his back then arched an eyebrow at Darren.

"Anything else?"

Darren rolled his eyes. "Yes, call the other officer in here. I don't trust either of them."

Graham nodded. He understood exactly where Darren came from. He knew Thomas was dirty. He didn't know about Officer McLarren, but he wasn't going to take any chances, not with Darren and his family in the house.

"Officer McLarren?" Graham called out loudly, "can I see you in the kitchen for a moment?"

Graham had to admit he was a little surprised Officer McLarren hadn't come running in during his struggle with Thomas. Either the man hadn't heard the commotion, or he was in on the whole thing and kept everyone else occupied while Thomas and Graham fought.

Graham was ready when the officer walked in. He pulled the gun out of the waistband of his pants and plastered himself to the wall. The moment the officer walked past him, he pressed the barrel against the man's head.

"Don't move a muscle," Graham warned him. "I'm going to remove your weapon from the holster. Just keep your hands in the air and nothing will happen to you. Nod if you understand."

Officer McLarren held his hands up in the air in front of him and slowly nodded. Graham waited until Darren stood in front of the man, gun pointed at him, then removed the officer's weapon.

He grabbed McLarren's handcuffs and cuffed his hands behind his back. Once he was assured the man was restrained, he finally let out the breath he'd been holding and stepped around in front of the officer.

"Troy, Jamie, can you come in here?" Graham called out as he escorted the officer over to a chair. He could hear several sets of footsteps running toward the kitchen. Graham was surprised when his parents stepped into the room with Troy and Jamie.

"Anita, Robert, would you please take the children with you and go pack your bags?" Darren said as he lowered the gun. "Anything you can't pack in five minutes you leave behind."

Anita and Robert looked confused but did as Darren asked. Darren handed his gun over to Graham and then turned toward Troy and Jamie. Graham could tell from the grim look on Darren's face that he wasn't about to impart good news.

"I don't know what in the hell is going on around here, but I've had just about enough of it. I may not be a great detective but even I can tell you all are being set up as bait."

Graham's jaw dropped. He never thought of that before but it made perfect sense. Graham and his parents had been in protective custody for weeks. During that entire time, not one lead had been discovered. But the bad guys seemed to keep finding them.

"Troy, I don't know if Officer McLarren is involved in any of this. Officer Thomas, however, is neck deep in this shit. Graham and I overheard him talking to someone on the phone and that someone is currently headed here to kill all of us. I suggest we get the flock out of here before they arrive." Darren pointed to Officer McLarren, who now sat on the floor. "You can leave Thomas here or turn him over to the police. I don't care, but he's not going with us. McLarren is up to you."

"Go with us where?" Troy asked.

Darren smirked and Graham knew the man had something planned. Darren walked over to the counter and grabbed a pen and a small yellow pad of paper. He wrote hastily, tore the top sheet off and started to hand it to Troy.

"You can follow us, but if you get lost, this is the address where we're headed. I have a friend down by the docks who has a place; we can stay there for a few days."

Just as Troy started to take the piece of paper, Darren pulled it back. He leaned back over the counter and wrote something else on the torn sheet of paper before handing it to Troy.

"I drew you a map just in case you get lost. It shouldn't be too hard to find. It's an empty mechanics warehouse down by the waterfront."

Troy looked at the note. Graham's curiosity grew when Troy's eyebrow shot up to his forehead. He grabbed the note out of Troy's hand and read it, biting his lip to keep from smiling at what Darren wrote.

2354 First Street . . . simple enough. But under that, Darren had written: This is all bogus. There is no warehouse. I'm sending the creeps on a wild goose chase. Just follow us.

"What do you all want to do with dumbass here?" Darren asked as he pointed to Officer Thomas. "I say leave him for his friends."

"He's an officer of the law, Darren," Jamie said.

"He's also a sleaze ball that sold us out for money. His buddies are on their way here right now to kill all of us, you included. He lost his right to be an officer of the law the second he betrayed us."

"I still can't leave him here, Darren," Jamie said. "That makes us just as bad as him."

"Fine, then stash him somewhere but he's not going with us." Darren tore another piece of paper off the pad and wrote on it. A moment later he handed it to Jamie. "Drop him off somewhere and come to the warehouse. We'll keep an eye out for you."

Graham glanced over to the paper Jamie held in his hand. He wasn't surprised to see an address and a note to go along with it. Darren must have watched a lot of police shows because he was using his head to throw the bad guys off.

3792 Chestnut Street. Get Sammy and Nicky after you drop Thomas off and bring them with you. This is a gated, secured place and we'll all be a lot safer there. If you get lost, call me at 555-3724. Get rid of your cell phones after dropping Thomas off.

"Troy, why don't you go with Jamie," Graham said. "Darren and I will get everyone down to the warehouse."

"What about McLarren?" Jamie asked as he looked over at the officer.

Graham shrugged. "I don't know if he's in on it or not but I can't leave him here in case he's not."

"We could just take him with us," Troy said, "drop him off at the precinct with Thomas."

Graham nodded. "Okay, do that then. Just don't tell anyone where we're all going. And I mean *no one*, not even Russo. The less people who know where we are the less chance we'll be found."

"We can always hope, anyway," Darren said grimly.

Chapter Fifteen

Darren waited until the door closed behind Troy, Jamie, and the two officers then turned toward the people waiting in the living room with their bags packed and sitting on the floor at their feet.

Darren grinned. "I'll go buckle the kids in the car." He grabbed Aaron from Robert, took Denny by the hand and walked toward the front door. "Why don't you get everyone's stuff and toss it in the back. We need to get out of here fast."

"Graham, are you going to just let him tell us what to do?"

"Yes, Mother, I am. Darren is thinking with his head, something none of us have been doing. Now, unless you want to stay here and wait for the killers to arrive, I suggest you get your butt out to that minivan."

Anita gasped.

Darren couldn't keep from smiling at Graham's response. It was nice to know his lover supported him, even against his own mother. He felt better with every step closer to the van he took.

He buckled the kids in and waited for Graham to load everything. Climbing into the driver's seat, Darren started the engine while Graham and his parents climbed inside. Once everyone was buckled in, he started down the road.

He drove them out of the small neighborhood they'd been staying in and onto the highway. He took off ramps and side streets, main roads and on ramps, anything to throw off anyone who might be following them.

After they drove around for about an hour, Darren finally pulled over at a small market. He parked the car and turned to Graham. "Where's a cheap, out-of-the-way motel?"

Graham blinked. "Uh, there's one a couple blocks away, the Lamplighter Motel. Why?"

Darren smiled. "Watch and learn, my love." Darren climbed out of the minivan and walked into the market. He pulled \$200 out of the ATM then walked outside to the pay phone. Dialing the number he knew by heart, Darren spoke to the person who picked up for just a few moments then hung up.

He got back into the van and handed the money to Graham before starting the van. Out of the corner of his eye, Darren could see Graham stare at the money in confusion. He smiled and drove down the street toward the motel.

"I want you to go inside and book a room for the next three nights," Darren said as he pulled into the driveway. "Something happened to your house – a fire, flood, hell, tell him someone drove through your living room – whatever. Just give him some story. Do not tell him you're from out of town."

"Why not?"

"Because he's going to ask for your driver's license and it says you live here locally. It would be pretty strange to live in town and be renting a motel room. Plus, you don't have any luggage. Motels usually like you to have luggage. Saying something happened to your house is a good explanation."

Graham chuckled. "Good point."

"And make sure you give him your real name."

"Why?" Graham gasped. "There's a killer after us. Why in the hell would I want to give this guy my real name? That's like waving a red flag."

"And with any luck, it will lead whoever is trying to kill us right here." Darren heard gasps from the backseat and managed not to roll his eyes. Barely. "Which is not where we will be but we need them to think we are."

Graham simply cocked an eyebrow and stared at him for a moment then climbed out of the van. Darren couldn't help but watch him walk into the small motel office. The man strutted. It was sexy as hell.

"Do you really think this will work, Darren?"

Darren glanced into the rearview mirror at Graham's father. "I hope so. I don't plan on losing Graham to a killer now that I've found him again."

"Again?" Anita asked loudly. "What do you mean again?"

"Anita," Robert began, only to have his wife interrupt him.

"No, I want to know what he meant."

"Graham and I have been seeing each other for nearly a year now."

"A year!" Anita exclaimed. "Why haven't I heard about this? Why has Graham never brought you home to meet us?"

This time, Darren couldn't stop the eye roll. "It might have been something to do with you hating white men."

"You don't know what you're talking about." Anita bristled. "I don't hate white men. I married a white man. My son is half white."

"And yet you told your son he couldn't be with a white man," Darren said. "Now, why was that? If you don't have anything against white men then it must be because Graham is gay. Is that it?"

"It's wrong, don't you understand that?" Anita cried out.

"Why?" Darren asked as he turned around in his seat to glare at the woman. "Give me one damn reason why it's wrong? Who are we hurting? Who?"

Before Anita could answer, the passenger door swung open. Darren glanced over to see Graham climbing into the minivan. He held a large key in his hand. "Room 113. I asked for a ground floor room."

Darren nodded. Good idea. He followed Graham's directions and parked in front of room 113. "Robert, could you get Denny while I grab Aaron? We need to get inside as fast as possible."

Robert nodded and unbuckled Denny while Darren came around and opened the door to get the baby. The six of them hurried into the sparse hotel room, closing and locking the door behind them.

Darren paused just inside the door, grimacing at the dismal room. He was almost afraid to lay the baby down. The place was not only cheap, it was disgusting. Luckily, they didn't have to be there very long.

"Graham, could you make sure everything is brought in from the van," Darren said as he laid the baby on the bed. "Grab the suitcases, the baby bags, everything. We need it all here in the motel room."

"I know you have an answer for this, but why?" Graham asked. "And why your baby bag? You just arrived in this chaos. They're not even looking for you."

"Again, it goes back to not taking any chances. Thomas could have put a tracking device in anything back at the house – our clothes, the baby bag, anything. We're leaving here with just the clothes on our backs."

Graham chuckled as he headed for the door. "You've been watching too many police shows, honey."

While Graham went out to the van, Darren grabbed a pillowcase. He held it out to the group. "Okay, I need everyone's cell phone."

"What? Why?" Anita asked. "I like my cell phone."

"Because someone is tracking you all," Darren said as he dropped his own cell phone in the bag. "I don't know if they have one of you bugged, if they are tracking your cell phone, or what. But I refuse to let anything happen to Graham and my children. Since Graham obviously cares about the two of you, that means you're included in who I protect. Now give me the damn cell phone, Anita."

Graham came back in with the bags and dropped them on the bed, arching an eyebrow at Darren. He didn't even argue when Darren held the bag out to him; he just dropped his cell phone in.

"Now I need shoes, socks, hair pieces, everything else except the basic clothes on your back."

"There is no way I am undressing in front of you," Anita snipped.

"I don't expect you to," Darren said as he rolled his eyes. "Someone is coming, bringing a fresh set of clothes for all of us to change into. And you can get dressed in the bathroom."

Darren tried to be nice, even though Anita was fighting him every step of the way. At least he didn't say what he really wanted to say. *I wouldn't want to see your scrawny ass anyway*, wasn't a good way to make friends with his lover's mother.

"You're out of your mind if you think I'm leaving any of my clothes here," Anita said. "This is ridiculous. Graham, he can't make us do this, can he? He's not even a police officer."

"No, I'm not, and you should be glad of that. The last police officer tried to kill us all," Darren said sternly, finally losing control of his temper. "And if you don't want to change your clothes, leave your cell phone, or any of your other stuff behind, that is your choice. However, Graham will be going with me. You can damn well do what you want."

"Darren"

Darren turned on Graham, his hands landing on his hips. "No, I've had enough of this shit. I've been nothing but nice to your mother and she's been a bitch the entire time. I don't give a fuck if she doesn't like us being together. I refuse to give you up for her or for some psychotic killer. That means we're going to do this my way, which is a whole lot better than you've been doing before now."

Graham grinned. "Damn, I love it when you're fierce," he said and winked. "Very sexy."

Darren's heart thudded and he could feel his face flame from embarrassment, but he couldn't help but be affected by Graham's praise. It made him feel warm inside. Unfortunately, it also made him not as angry. He suddenly felt bad for how he'd talked to Graham's mother.

Darren took a deep breath and turned around to look at Anita. "The men that are searching for you have tried to kill Graham already, at least twice. The cop that was

supposed to be protecting you worked for these men. I don't trust anyone I don't know." He pushed a hand through his hair as he tried to figure out how to get her to understand the danger they were in. "I also don't know how technologically savvy these guys are, but I'm not taking any chances. If that means we ditch everything in a bid to keep ourselves safe, then that's what it means."

"Graham," Anita said, her voice sounding shaking, "they've already tried to kill you twice? Why didn't you tell me?"

Darren yelped as a hand smacked him in the back of the head. He rubbed the spot as he turned around to glare at Graham. "Hey!"

"I didn't tell Mom that on purpose."

"Graham, she's in this shit just as much as you are. That hit was placed on you and everyone you care about. Your mother needs to know what's going on." Darren pointed at Anita. "She's a smart woman. Give her some damn credit. If she doesn't know what is going on, how do you expect her to protect herself?"

"So, what do you want us to do?" Anita asked, much to Darren's surprise.

He turned back to look at Anita and smiled. "A friend of mine will be here in a few minutes. He's bringing us all a change of clothing. We leave everything here for the bad guys to trace if they want, and we go to a safe location that the president couldn't get into without an invitation."

Anita looked like she wanted to argue but then nodded instead. "Can I keep my jewelry? My wedding ring?"

Darren nodded. "I'd like to look your jewelry over but I don't see why not, as long as there are no tracking devices planted in them."

"Do you really think they could plant a tracking device in my wedding ring?" Anita asked. She looked down at her ring like it was a snake about to bite her.

"Probably not, as I doubt you've taken it off," Darren said. "But you'd be surprised what they can put this stuff into now days — buttons, pins, hair clips, all sorts of things. We just have to be cautious." Darren shrugged. "Besides, once this is all over, you'll get everything back. This is just temporary."

Anita nodded and walked over to sit on the bed next to Aaron, gently patting the sleeping baby's back. Robert sat on the floor and played with Denny, who didn't seem fazed by any of this. She was just a small child, after all. She didn't have a clue of the danger they were in. Darren hoped to keep it that way.

Darren glanced over his shoulder when he felt two strong arms hug him from behind, and a hard body pressed up against his. "Hey."

"Hey," Graham replied. He looked worried, his dark eyebrows drawn together in a slight frown. "You didn't sign on for any of this. Are you doing okay?"

Darren smiled and leaned his head against Graham's shoulder. "I'll take you anyway I can get you, psychotic killer included."

"I love you, baby," Graham whispered against Darren's head. "You know that, right?"

"I hope so or I'm going to feel awfully stupid when this is all over."

"I'll never let you forget it, promise."

A sudden knock at the door caught everyone's attention. Darren felt Graham stiffen behind him. Anita gasped and cradled the baby into her arms. Robert grabbed Denny and held her on his lap. All eyes turned toward the door.

Darren held up his hand for everyone to be quiet and walked over to the door. He knocked back twice, paused, and then knocked again. Darren blew out a relieved breath when four knocks came back. He opened the door a crack and looked out.

Seeing the tall, dark-haired man dressed all in black, Darren opened the door and allowed him and another man inside. He reached out and shook the man's hand before turning to face the others in the room.

"I'd like you all to meet Mr. Bertram, my head of security, and one of my security personnel, Jared," Darren said. He pointed to the people in the room, introducing them one by one. "This is Mr. and Mrs. Craig, Graham's parents, and this is Graham Craig." Darren grabbed Graham's hand and pulled him closer. "He's mine."

Bertram's lips twisted into a smirk and he nodded slightly. "Very good, Mr. Sanford." Bertram glanced around the small room. "Have you removed everything not important?"

"Yes, everything except the clothes on our backs and some precious jewelry." Darren gestured to Anita. "I told Mrs. Craig we could take a look at her wedding rings and such, make sure there were no tracking devices. They mean a lot to her."

"I understand perfectly." Bertram nodded and walked over to Anita. "Ma'am, if I may?" he asked, holding out his hand. Anita started to pull her wedding ring off but Bertram stopped her. "I see no reason for that ring to leave your finger unless absolutely necessary. I imagine it's been there for awhile, huh?"

"Yes," Anita whispered, holding out her hand. Darren watched as Bertram took Anita's hand and carefully looked her ring over. He even pulled out a small eye piece and checked the gems.

Finally, he nodded. "Your ring is fine, Mrs. Craig."

"Oh, thank god," Anita said as she held her hand to her chest.

"Would you mind terribly if I checked the rest of you?"

"Oh, no, I guess not." Anita laid Aaron down on the bed and stood.

Bertram snapped his fingers and held out his hand to Jared. Jared quickly opened the small, silver suitcase in his hand and grabbed a long, thin metal wand. He handed it to Bertram.

Bertram ran the wand up and down Anita's body, pausing when it started making loud beeping noises around the edge of her collar. He reached over and carefully withdrew a small, black metal piece that looked like a bobby pin and handed it to Jared, who placed it in a small, metal box.

Bertram did the same with everyone else, including Denny and Aaron. In all, he found five small bobby pin-shaped tracking devices. He even found one tucked into Aaron's baby clothes.

Once all the bugs were placed in the metal box, Bertram turned back to the small group. He handed each of them a set of jogging clothes sealed in clear plastic bags.

"I need each of you to change into these. Mr. Sanford, I'll need you to change Aaron and Denny also."

Darren nodded. He expected that. Darren changed Denny and Aaron while Anita and Robert changed in the bathroom. The moment they were out, he and Graham changed places with them.

Darren jumped when Graham patted him on the butt as he pulled his pants up. He glanced back over his shoulder at the man. "You're not helping here."

"Waving your ass at me isn't helping either."

Darren chuckled and wiggled his ass even more then pulled his pants the rest of the way up. He turned and patted Graham's chest. "You can have my ass later, big boy. Just wait until we get back to my place."

"So, what's with the guy in the other room?" Graham asked. Darren could hear the cautious curiosity – tinged with just a bit of jealousy – in Graham's voice.

"Bertram?" Darren hid his smile by pulling a clean shirt over his head. "He works for Erin. He's in charge of keeping us all safe, guarding Erin's home, and making sure all our ducks are in a row."

"Darren," Graham said suddenly, frowning, "just where did you move to anyway? I went by your old house. It's empty."

Darren nodded. "Yeah, I sold it. I live at Erin's house now. You'll like it and you can meet Erin." Darren glanced down Graham's handsome body. "She's going to love you."

"You think so?" Graham asked. He looked worried. "You don't think she'll feel weird with the whole marriage thing? I am in love with her husband, after all."

Darren chuckled and shook his head. "No, Erin will understand. She knows all about you."

"Really? You told your wife about me?"

Graham looked so astonished Darren couldn't help but laugh.

"I told my dear friend about you, yes. Just because Erin and I have a piece of paper doesn't make us married in the real sense. Like I said, we don't have that type of relationship."

Graham just shook his head. "When we're married, we *will* have that type of relationship. We will be married in the real sense, understand?"

Darren grinned as he reached for the door handle. "Perfectly, and I wouldn't have it any other way."

Chapter Sixteen

As the black SUV they rode in pulled up to a guarded gate, Graham felt so nervous he could have puked. His stomach was in knots. He was about to meet Darren's wife, a woman who he couldn't simply wish away.

Darren would be connected to Erin for the rest of their lives, whether she died or not. Graham would never ask Darren to give up Denny and Aaron, even if he had no idea how to be a parent.

He wasn't even sure if Darren wanted him to parent the children. They hadn't gotten that far into discussing things. They weren't exactly in a situation that loaned itself to planning for the future. But Graham knew they would have to discuss it at some point.

Feeling suddenly bereft, Graham reached over and grabbed Darren's hand. The answering smile Darren sent in his direction helped settle Graham's stomach until the SUV passed through the gate and headed up a long driveway.

When Graham got a look at the mansion Erin and Darren lived in, his jaw dropped. "You live here?"

Darren chuckled. "I kind of said the same thing the first time Erin showed it to me. She's done pretty well for herself."

"Apparently, so have you."

Darren shook his head. "No, it's all left in trust for the children. It belongs to them. I oversee their trust fund until they reach the age of twenty five but I don't want any of it. I didn't marry Erin for her money."

"Then why did you marry her?"

"I told you," Darren said. "I married her because I needed something in my life after you left, and Erin needed someone to care for her children after she was gone."

Graham frowned. "You're not going to give the children up now that I'm here, are you?"

"Of course not," Darren snapped. "How can you even think such a thing?"

Graham yanked on Darren's arm until the man fell against him. He leaned down and kissed the top of his head. "I didn't, Dar. I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page. I have no issue with the children being in our lives. I just didn't want you to think I did."

"I guess that's something we haven't discussed yet, huh?"

Graham chuckled, remembering his thoughts of a moment ago. "No, we haven't, but now really isn't the time."

Darren leaned his head back and looked up at Graham. "Are you sure you don't have a problem with the children? I'd be willing to bet you never even thought about having kids."

"Not necessarily true, Darren. I thought about settling down with you all the time." Graham shrugged at Darren's shock look. "I was just never in a place in my head where I could realize it, much less talk to you about it."

"And you are now?"

"Oh yeah, I definitely want to settle down and plan a future with you."

"And Denny and Aaron?"

"Yes, and Denny and Aaron too," Graham said, "and Erin too, if we can pull her through this health issue of hers. You do know my father's a doctor, right? Maybe he can take a look at her?"

Darren's face seemed to switch between happy and sad for a moment. "Do you really think he could do something for Erin? She's in so much pain. It's hard to watch her withering away like she is. There's so much life in her."

"All we can do is ask."

Darren nodded. He opened his mouth to say something when the door was opened, Bertram standing there. "Mr. Sanford, Mr. Craig, if you will please come inside, I have a room set up to discuss your little problem."

Their little problem? Graham wanted to reach over and grab Bertram by the throat and shake the man. Being singled out by a psychotic hit man wasn't a little problem. It was a huge problem, one that might cost them all their lives.

Darren unbuckled Aaron and pulled him from the car seat. Graham grabbed Denny, surprised when she didn't even wake up. He followed Darren toward the house, feeling a tad strange being surrounded suddenly by several armed men.

"Uh, Darren?"

Darren reached over and patted one of the arms Graham had wrapped around Denny. "Don't worry, Graham, they work for Erin and me."

"All of them?" Graham glanced around. He counted at least ten men dressed in dark suits.

"Yep," Darren replied. "Remember what I said, Erin is mega rich. She practically has her own police force."

Graham was still a little stunned as they walked into the mansion's large entryway. His stunned amazement instantly shifted to awe as he glanced around the large marble-floored entrance.

A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling directly in the middle of the room. Winding and rounded staircases were on each side of the wall leading to a balcony at the top. Several servants dressed in uniform stood at attention at the bottom of the stairs.

"Mary, good," Darren said as he walked over to an older woman. "Aaron and Denny have had a very eventful night. Could you take them both upstairs and get them

ready for bed. I know Denny will want to see Mommy before she goes to sleep. I'll be up in a few minutes to tuck them in."

"Very good, Mr. Sanford," Mary replied as she took Aaron.

Another woman stepped forward and took Denny, and both of them walking up the stairs with the children.

"Terence," Darren said as he looked at a man Graham could only assume was the butler and gestured to Robert and Anita, "please have a room made up for Mr. and Mrs. Craig. I'll also need a room for three other couples."

"Very good, sir," the man replied. "Shall I have cook prepare a light supper in the dining room?"

"Oh, Terence, that would be wonderful," Darren said. "Finger foods, though, and lots of coffee. We have business to discuss and I imagine we will be coming and going a lot. I think it's going to be a long night."

"Very good, sir."

Graham watched with a bit of astonishment as Terence gave out several orders to the other servants standing there and the place became a flurry of activity, with servants going in every direction.

Graham just stood there, not sure what to do until Darren grabbed his hand.

"Come on, I want you to meet Erin." Darren motioned up the stairs as he looked at Bertram. "We'll be down in just a few moments. Our other guests should be here soon, Bertram."

Bertram nodded and walked to a large set of double doors off to one side of the entrance. Graham swallowed hard and followed Darren up the stairs. He was terrified of meeting the woman Darren married.

What if Erin didn't like him? What would Darren do? Graham didn't feel like he was competition with Erin for Darren's affections but he knew the woman was very important to his lover.

"What if she doesn't like me, Darren?"

Darren shrugged. "It's a big house. We'll put you in one wing and Erin in the other. You'd never even have to see each other." Darren smiled at Graham over his shoulder. "But I don't think it will be a problem. Erin knows I love you."

Graham wasn't so sure, but he'd never met the woman either. He just hoped Darren knew what he was talking about. It would really suck if Erin hated him, especially knowing how connected Darren was to her and her family.

Darren stopped outside a large wooden door. Graham leaned into the hand Darren cupped around his cheek.

"It's going to be fine, Graham, you just wait and see. Erin's a good woman. She'll want me to be happy."

Graham wasn't so sure, not after the things he'd done to drive Darren away from him. He knew he wouldn't be in support of his friend being with someone who treated Darren the way he had. He was an ass.

Graham took a deep breath and followed Darren into the room. He was instantly assailed with the smells of medicine and sickness. Monitors beeped, heavy breathing filled the room. A woman dressed as a nurse sat off to one side, reading a magazine. The moment the door opened, she jumped up and came over.

"Good evening, Mr. Sanford."

"Hey, Brenda, how's she doing tonight?" Darren asked.

"She seems to be comfortable at the moment," the nurse said. "The doctor upped her morphine so she would sleep better but she refused to go to sleep until you and the children came home."

Darren nodded. Graham felt bereft when Darren dropped his hand and walked over to sit on the edge of the bed. He followed after Darren, not wanting to be separated from the man, and stood silently behind him.

Graham wasn't sure what he expected but it wasn't the small, pale woman who lay in the bed. She barely looked sick. If it wasn't the delicacy of her bones and the IV's attached to her hand, Graham never would have known she was ill.

"Hey, honey," Darren said, "I brought someone to meet you."

Graham stepped forward when Darren reached for his hand. He smiled down at the woman, which was hard to do when he felt like her brown eyes could see right through him.

"Hello."

"You must be Graham," Erin said.

Her voice sounded low but rock hard. Graham had no problem seeing this woman as the owner of a multi-million dollar company. She had a backbone made of pure steel.

"Yes, I'm Graham."

Graham tried not to show his nervousness as Erin looked him over. He wouldn't want to be on the end of her temper if she got riled. As it was, he felt like he was about to be raked over the coals.

"Darren, darling," Erin said as she turned to look at Darren, "I need a moment alone with Graham."

Graham didn't trust that sweet little voice. He'd seen the look she'd given him and knew he was in for an ass chewing.

"Oh, but —"

"Darren, please," Erin said, "it's not like I can hurt the man in my condition. He'll be fine. I just want to talk with him for a moment. Why don't you go get Denny and bring her in to say goodnight to me?"

"I'll be fine." Graham squeezed Darren's hand.

He looked worried as he stood and left the room. Graham waited until the door closed before turning back to Erin. "So, should I remove all sharp objects from your reach?"

Erin snickered for a moment then started coughing. The nurse raced over and patted her on the back then gave Erin some water to drink. Once Erin was settled back against her pillows, she stared up at Graham again.

"Why are you here?"

"Right to the point, I see," Graham said. He gestured to a chair sitting off to one side. "Mind if I sit down?"

Erin waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. "Just answer my question."

Graham grabbed the chair and pulled it over to sit down next to Erin's bed. He clasped his hands together and rested his elbows on his thighs. "I love Darren. That's the only reason I'm here."

"You really expect me to believe that after what you put him through?" Erin scoffed. "If you love him like you say you do, you never would have hurt him the way you did."

Graham looked down at his hands. "I know and I really have no excuse for my behavior. I did what I thought was best at the time but I was wrong." Graham glanced back up to Erin's face. "I'm just glad Darren has consented to give me another chance."

"Has he?" Erin asked. Her head cocked to one side as a curious smirk crossed her lips. "And what happens to Darren the next time you leave him high and dry? I stopped him once but I don't know if I can keep him alive if you leave again. My children will only give him a reason to go on living for so long."

Graham squeezed his eyes tight as he swallowed past the lump of pain lodged in his throat. The agony of knowing he'd driven Darren so close to the edge was almost more than Graham could bear.

When he opened his eyes again, Erin was staring right at him. Graham gave her a slight shake of his head.

"I never meant for Darren to be hurt, Erin. I hope you know that. I made some mistakes, big ones, but they were the best I could do at the time."

"Well, you need to do better if you expect to stick around."

Graham chuckled nervously. "Well, at least you seem to be willing to give me a chance. I was pretty sure you were going to kick me out when you said you wanted to talk to me alone."

"If Darren didn't love you so much, I would. But he does, so I won't." Erin shook a thin finger at Graham. "But you fuck him over again and I will haunt your ass all the way to hell."

"Erin, you do understand that — "

"Graham, I don't really give a fuck. There is no reason you can give me that would explain why you were stupid enough to give up a man as wonderful as Darren. He seems to think you have some redeeming qualities, but I'll reserve judgment until I know you better."

"Fair enough." Graham chuckled.

"You better do everything in your power to make Darren the happiest man on earth or I will use all of my power and money to take him away from you. Are we clear here? Or do I have to keep talking with what little breath I have left?"

Graham finally nodded. "I like you, Erin. You're a fucking trip."

"Just remember what I said and we'll get along fine."

"How do you feel about me being here in your house?" Graham asked, voicing one of his biggest fears. "I want to be where Darren is."

Erin waved her hand at him again, dismissing his words. "It's a big house. I'm sure we can all fit."

"I really do love him, Erin. I want only the best for him."

"And if *you're* not the best thing for him?"

Graham grimaced and stared down at his hands. "I seriously doubt I am the best thing for him but no one will ever love him more." Graham glanced up in surprise when Erin chuckled.

"That knowledge is probably the only thing saving your ass from being tossed out of here."

Graham was even more shocked when Erin reached over and patted his hand.

"You're not good enough for Darren and we both know this. I doubt anyone is. But he wants you so you'd better shape up before I have to climb out of this bed and whip your ass."

"Yes, ma'am." Graham grinned.

Chapter Seventeen

Darren paced nervously back and forth in front of Erin's door. He jiggled Denny in his arms as he waited for Graham to come. He wasn't positive what Erin talked to Graham about but he could guess.

Erin, bless her, was giving Graham the third degree. Darren knew he should have expected it when he brought Graham into the house. Erin was very protective of those she cared about.

Still, Darren hoped it wasn't too bad. He desperately wanted Erin and Graham to get along. He cared about both of them and the thought that he might have to choose between them made his stomach clench.

When Erin's bedroom door opened and Graham stepped out, Darren quickly scanned his body for signs of wounds. He wouldn't put it past Erin to rough Graham up of she thought he needed it. Despite recently giving birth and being ill, Erin was still a woman to be reckoned with.

"Are you okay?"

Graham chuckled. "And somehow it isn't strange that you ask that." He pointed back to the room behind him. "You weren't kidding about the spirit in that woman. She's hell on wheels."

"You look like you survived."

"By the skin of my teeth," Graham said. "The law was just laid down to me and I have to tell you, that woman scares the crap out of me."

"Erin can be a little intense when she cares about someone." Darren gestured to the armed guards that roamed the hallways. "Hence, the security around this place. Told you the president couldn't get in here without an invitation."

"I did kind of wonder about that."

"Erin is worth a lot of money. There's a lot of people who might try to take it from her by any means possible. She needs the protection, as do the children. I have no doubt Erin would give up every last cent she had to keep her children safe."

"Or you," Graham replied. "She threatened to use her very last penny to make me pay if I didn't make you the happiest man on earth."

Darren grinned. "Then you'd better do what she said. Erin never says anything she doesn't mean." Darren leaned against Graham as the man's arms wrapped around him and the small child he held against his chest.

"I guess I have my work cut out for me then, huh?"

"You do."

"I think I'm man enough for the job."

"I'll decide that later tonight. Right now we need to get Denny in to see her mother then go downstairs to talk with Bertram about this crazy man trying to kill you." Darren smirked as he looked Graham up and down. "I have to figure out how to get your sexy ass out of this mess before it gets shot off."

* * * * *

Darren was surprised to see the room full of people when he and Graham walked in. He wasn't surprised by the loud cries that filled the air moment they were spotted.

"Darren!"

Moments later, Darren grunted as two men encircled him, nearly hugging him to death. It had been quite a while since he'd seen Nicky or Sammy. It was always just too hard to be around them without Graham.

Just thinking about Graham made Darren remember that this was their first time being together in front of their friends. He didn't know what to say or how to act. He didn't want to do anything that might make Graham uncomfortable. How *out* did the man want to be?

"Alright, hands off the goodies," Graham said as he pulled Darren away from Sammy and Nicky.

Darren's jaw dropped open in shock as Graham wrapped him in his arms.

He could see the surprise on everyone else's face as he glanced around the room to see their friends' reactions. He was met with everything from astonished looks to wide grins.

"Well, it's about damn time," Paul said as he walked over to shake their hands. "We were all getting pretty tired of pretending we didn't know the two of you were getting it on."

"You knew?" Darren asked. "All of you?"

"Oh, please." Sammy snickered, waving a hand at Darren and Graham. "The two of you can't be in the same room together without starting a fire."

Darren felt Graham's chest rumble against his back as the man chuckled silently. He turned and glared at Graham. "And what exactly do you find so funny about all of this?"

"We didn't fool anyone."

Darren rolled his eyes and turned back to face their friends. "So, you all know."

"Yeah, pretty much," Nicky said as he sat back down next to Troy. "You just never said anything so we didn't either. We talked about it and decided you would tell us you two were together when you were ready."

"Surprise!" Graham said as he hugged Darren.

Darren snickered. He couldn't help it. The situation was just too weird. "Okay, so yeah, we're together. We've been together for ages." Darren gestured behind him to Graham. "Dumbass here just wouldn't admit it."

"Hey!"

"What?" Darren asked. "It was dumb and you know it."

"Okay, I'll give you that; it was dumb." Graham chuckled.

"Gentlemen, if I may have your attention," said a voice from behind them.

Darren turned to see Bertram standing in the doorway. "Bertram, thanks for getting everything arranged. Excellent work, as always."

"Thank you, sir," Bertram said. "I have a command center set up in the study, if you would be so kind as to follow me. The more information I have, the better I am able to protect you all. I have been assured by my men that all the bugs have been removed so we are free to talk."

"Just how many did you find?" Graham asked.

"Besides the ones at the motel, we were able to locate three more bugs. One on Mr. Troy, one on Mr. Nicky, and one on Mr. Sammy Dane. But not to worry, sir, my men have dealt with them appropriately. All of the bugs have been deactivated."

Darren grabbed Graham's hand and followed after Bertram. He could hear their friends walking behind them. They all walked down the hallway and filed into the study, closing the door behind them.

Graham sat in one of the many chairs in the room. Darren yelped a little when Graham yanked on his arm and pulled him down. Darren rolled his eyes as he settled himself on Graham's lap. He bet they looked ridiculous, but he did like having Graham's arms around him.

"I understand from Mr. Sanford that someone has put a hit out on all of you?" Bertram asked after everyone sat down. "I've done some investigating into the tracking devices we found, and added in everything Mr. Sanford told me about your situation on the phone, which was admittedly not much."

"Have you found anything?" Darren asked, holding his breath while he waited for Bertram to answer. Graham and the rest of their friends might not understand what Bertram could do but Darren did. The man was a genius in the private security field.

"To put it lightly, you pissed off the wrong people." Bertram folded his hands together and rested them on the top of the desk he sat behind. "And now they want you all dead."

"Who the fuck did we piss off?" Jamie asked.

"The people Bruce Garren worked for."

"So, it is about the drug task force then?" Graham asked.

"Yes, to a point. It's mostly about the laptop Bruce had. From what I understand, there is all sorts of information on the laptop, information these guys don't want made public."

"Then why go after us?" Graham asked. "Why not just have someone steal the laptop back? They already had one police officer in their pocket. He could have done it for them."

"Too risky," Bertram replied. "These people have no way of knowing if the information on that laptop has been copied anywhere else. If they put a hit out on everyone on the task force, the cops have something else to worry about besides the laptop, and I imagine, in the meantime, their mole is tracking down every last copy that might have been made."

"Mole?"

Bertram chuckled lightly. "You really didn't think all they had on the payroll was one low-level beat cop to be causing you all this trouble."

"What about the other cop, McLarren?" Darren asked. "The one Troy dropped off. Is he in on it?"

"Uh, Darren, we didn't drop him off," Troy said. "He's kind of being held in the kitchen at the moment. Bertram's boys are currently giving him a bug overhaul."

"What?" Darren jumped to his feet. "He's here? In this house?"

"Calm down, Darren," Troy said. "We have good reason to believe he's innocent."

"What reason?"

"Whoever is doing this tried to kill Officer McLarren when we went to drop him off at his precinct." Troy glanced around the room, grimacing. "We figured he'd be safer here with us until we could figure out what was what."

Darren sat back down on Graham's lap as shock rocked through him. "They tried to kill McLarren too? Are you sure it wasn't a setup to get him in with us?"

"Um, yeah," Troy said. "They were definitely out to kill him too. If Jamie hadn't gone in his car to get Sammy and Nicky, they would have tried to kill him as well. As it is, I wouldn't be here if McLarren hadn't taken a bullet for me."

"Is he okay? Does he need a doctor?"

"It's just a flesh wound but Graham's father is looking at him now," Bertram said. "Mr. McLarren is under armed guard until we decide otherwise."

Darren leaned back in Graham's arms. The man's presence was the only thing helping Darren keep it together. "I'm really starting to hate this." Darren felt Graham tense behind him and rolled his eyes. "And no, you're not going anywhere so get that thought out of your head right now before I beat it out of you."

Graham chuckled. "Whatever you say, baby."

Darren glanced around the room when several people laughed. It was going to be a little hard for Darren to get used to their friends knowing about him and Graham being lovers. Graham, on the other hand, seemed to be embracing it with both arms.

"So, how would you like to handle this, gentlemen?" Bertram asked. "I can make some more inquiries and hand the information over to you, or I can take care of the situation for you. Your choice."

"Uh, we can't agree to anything illegal, Bertram," Graham said.

Bertram tapped his fingers together for a moment. "Very well, gentlemen." He stood and walked around the desk. "I will make some inquiries and turn the information over to you when I have it. In the meantime, I ask that none of you leave the estate without letting me or one of my men know."

He gestured to the door. "I have armed guards throughout the estate. Any one of them can reach me at a moment's notice if you have any questions."

"What are we going to do about Officer McLarren?" Troy asked.

"Officer McLarren will remain under guard until such time as he has been thoroughly checked out by my security team. I do not take any chances with Ms. Erin and the children's safety."

Darren smirked as everyone else in the room gapped at Bertram. He'd been on the receiving end of one of Bertram's security checks before when he agreed to marry Erin. He knew how thorough the man could be.

"Don't worry about it, guys," Darren said. "Bertram is very good at what he does. I'm pretty sure he knows what I had for breakfast on May 5th the year I turned five."

"Waffles," Bertram said as he walked out of the room. He paused in the doorway to glance over his shoulder, winking. "With blueberry syrup, of course."

The man was gone before anyone else could say anything. Darren chuckled softly to himself. He had no idea what he had for breakfast all those years ago. He doubted Bertram really did either, but he sure knew how to shock a room full of people.

"Who in the hell is that dude?" Sammy whispered into the quite of the room.

"That would be Dalton Bertram, head of Erin's security," Darren said. "Believe me when I say the man knows his stuff. I don't know what he did in his previous life but it's not on the record books . . . anywhere."

"So," Jamie said as he clapped his hands, getting everyone's attention, "Bertram will gather the information we need and then what? Do we turn it over to Chief Russo or what?"

"We could always go after these guys ourselves," Troy said.

Darren stiffened, hating that idea right off that bat. He didn't want his lover in danger. He reached down and grabbed the hand that wrapped around his waist, holding it tightly.

He didn't want to tell Graham what he could and couldn't do. The man was a police detective, but the thought of Graham going after these guys scared Darren right down to his toes.

"Maybe we should wait and see what Bertram comes up with before we make any plans," Graham said, and Darren could have kissed him right there and then in front of everyone. Instead, he squeezed Graham's hand.

Graham squeezed back.

* * * * *

Darren watched Graham carefully as they climbed the stairs. Tonight had been filled with a lot of surprises and a lot of shock. They were both tired, both worn out from the revelations of the night.

"That's the kids' room there," Darren said as they passed the door right before his. "I'm here."

"Directly across the hallway?"

Darren shrugged. "I like knowing I can be close to them if they need me. Erin's just down the hallway, but she can't get to them if they cry out in the middle of the night or anything. At least one parent should be close by, don't you think?"

Graham held up a couple of fingers. "Two parents close by, remember?"

Darren grinned. "Yeah."

Graham suddenly swung Darren around and pressed him back against his bedroom door. "And if said two parents were up together . . ."

"Yeah?" Darren breathed out heavily.

Graham leaned down and swiped his tongue across Darren's lips. Darren groaned and opened his mouth, allowing Graham inside. He felt Graham's hand fumble behind him for a moment then the door at his back gave way, opening up.

Darren would have tumbled to the floor if Graham hadn't wrapped his arms around Darren's waist, pulling him close. Darren could feel every dip and ridge of Graham's body pressed against him and it made his knees weak.

He grabbed the edge of Graham's shirt and pulled. "Off!" he demanded. He didn't even wait to see if Graham complied, just took a step back and started stripping off his own clothes.

It felt like days, weeks even, since he'd felt Graham's arms around him, felt their bodies pressed together. He realized it had just been a few hours but he ached. He needed to feel Graham take him again.

Darren was naked so fast, he still had time to pull the covers down the bed and grab the lube and condoms before Graham undressed. He climbed up into his big bed and laid down right in the middle.

Darren started stroking his hard cock as he watched Graham take off the last of his clothes. The man truly was a beautiful specimen of pure masculinity. Sonnets should have been written about how perfectly he was formed.

Tight muscles, rippled abdomen, broad shoulders, long legs. Graham had it all. And Darren couldn't have been more thrilled when that gorgeous body turned in his direction.

He crooked his finger at Graham. "Come here, baby."

One corner of Graham's mouth perked up as he grinned. "I don't know. You might do things to my poor, innocent body."

"Oh, I have every intention of corrupting you, Graham Craig. By the time I'm done with you, you'll never look at another man's ass again."

Graham crawled up from the bottom of the bed until his face was right above Darren's straining cock. He glanced down for a moment and licked his lips then looked up at Darren.

"There's only one ass I'm interested in."

Darren inhaled sharply when Graham pushed his hand between Darren's ass and the mattress. Graham's thumb moved over Darren's puckered hole. "And it's this one right here."

"Okay," Darren panted heavily, "you can have it."

"I intend to."

Graham's hands were suddenly on Darren's thighs right where they met the curve of his ass. He pushed Darren's legs up to his chest until his entire ass was on display.

Darren couldn't keep a low moan from escaping as Graham dragged his tongue down the crack of his ass. He felt like an electrical shock had just run through his body

when Graham continued to lick his ass from one end to the other, paying special attention to his sensitive hole.

"Fuck, Graham, you've never — "

"There are a lot of things we've never done but that's all in the past." Graham sat up, reached over and grabbed the box of condoms, holding them up to Darren. "So are these. I know you're clean and you know I'm clean. We got tested together at the hospital. We're in a monogamous, committed relationship now. No more condoms. Agreed?"

"Graham, I've never not used a condom."

"Neither have I, but I've never loved someone like I love you either. I don't plan on ever being with anyone else for the rest of my life. Do you?"

"No, but — "

"If you're uncomfortable with it, we'll still use them. I don't want to pressure you in any way or make you feel like you have to go against anything that you feel strongly about."

Darren stared at Graham for several moments. He could see the seriousness in his face but he could also see the love. He knew if he was going to commit to this relationship, he had to commit fully. It was all or nothing.

"Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Positive." Quick, simple, and right to the point, that was his Graham.

Darren grabbed the box and tossed it across the room. He grabbed the lube and held it up instead. "We can go without condoms, fine, but I know exactly how big your dick is. We are not going without this."

Graham grinned and grabbed the bottle. He popped the top and squirted some out on his fingers then closed the bottle and tossed it onto the bed. Darren took a deep breath and waited for Graham to start stretching him. When nothing happened, he raised his head off the bed and looked down at Graham.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "I thought you were going to fuck me."

"Honey, we bypassed fucking a long time ago. What happens between us now has officially moved in to the *making love* stage."

"Fine, then make love to me."

"Uh uh, not this time."

Darren frowned and lifted himself up onto his elbows. "Then what – " Darren's eyes grew wide when he saw Graham's hand pushed behind him. "Damn, are you – ?"

Darren sat up when Graham nodded. He climbed to his hands and knees and crawled around to sit behind Graham. "Fuck me!" he whispered when he found Graham had three fingers pressed deep inside his own ass.

Darren would be the first person to admit that he was a bottom boy. He loved the feeling of a big man with a big dick pounding into his ass. There was nothing like it on earth.

But every once in awhile, he liked to top. It had nothing to do with feeling manly and macho, and everything to do with the feeling he had knowing he could give his lover a lot of pleasure.

"Are you sure about this, Graham? We can still do it the other way." Graham was as much a top man as Darren was a bottom man. They'd never switched before.

Graham pulled his fingers out of his ass and turned to look at Darren. "No one's ever had my ass before because I never trusted anyone enough to let them do something like that. If I can trust you with my heart, I can trust you with my ass."

Darren suddenly realized the trust Graham was giving him and vowed that even if they didn't do it often, he'd make being the bottom the best experience he possibly could for his lover.

He reached over and grabbed the lube Graham had discarded, popping the top and pouring a good amount onto the palm of his hand. Holding the bottle in one hand, he lubed his cock up with the other.

He dribbled a little more lube on his fingers and pressed them into Graham's ass. He needed to make sure Graham was fully stretched before he fucked him. Darren would never forgive himself if he hurt Graham.

He also wanted to locate —

"Oh fucking hell!" Graham shouted, his body stiffening up for a moment before he pushed back against the fingers Darren had in his ass.

Darren grinned. Found it! He started pushing his fingers in and out of Graham's ass, making sure he raked them across the small, walnut-shaped gland with each pass. He continued stroking until Graham's small cries became one continuous moan.

"Hands and knees or on your back?" Darren asked as he pulled his fingers free.

Graham instantly rolled onto his back and pulled his knees up to his chest. Darren looked down and hoped drool wasn't running down his chin. As asses went, Graham's was perfect. Tight, round, and begging for a cock.

Darren moved up between Graham's thighs and pressed the head of his cock against the pink puckered hole that begged for his attention. His body shook as he watched his cock slowly disappear into Graham's ass.

"Fuck, that's pretty," Darren groaned. "You're ass is perfect, baby."

"All yours," Graham panted.

"Yeah." Once he felt his balls push up against Graham's body, Darren froze, closing his eyes as he tried to fight for control. "Let me know when I can move."

"Move, damn it," Graham growled. "Fuck me like you mean it."

Darren grinned and slowly pulled back until just the head of his cock remained inside Graham's tight grip. He wrapped his hands around Graham's thighs for leverage then gave the man everything he had to give.

"Oh, fuck me, Dar," Graham cried out as Darren pounded into his ass. "Harder."

The sight before Darren was one he wouldn't forget if he lived to be a hundred. Graham's head was arched back, his hands pushed against the headboard as Darren rode his ass. A light sheen of perspiration made Graham's body glow in the soft lamplight. Graham's mouth was slightly open as he emitted small moans. He was a gay man's wet dream.

Darren kept up a steady rhythm of thrusting as he reached down with one hand and grabbed Graham's cock, stroking him. Graham's body started to tremble. His muscles tightened under Darren.

The man was close; Darren knew it.

"Look at me, baby," he demanded. "I want to see your face when you come."

Graham lifted his head. His blue eyes sparkled. His face was flushed and strained. Darren brushed his thumb over the small slit at the top of Graham's cock and that seemed to be all the man needed.

Graham cried out, his muscles clamped down on Darren so hard, Darren cried out. He gave one more long stroke to Graham's cock, starting at his balls and ending at the head, before Graham blew.

Spruts of cream shot out of Graham's cock and covered his chest and abdomen. The inner muscles cradling Darren's cock gripped him, massaged him until Darren followed Graham over the edge.

Darren roared out his pleasure as he filled Graham's ass. He thrust in again, then again, until his body gave out and he collapsed on top of Graham. He could feel the wetness of Graham's cum squish between them as he settled his body over the man's chest.

Darren reached between them and scooped some of the white cream up with his hand, holding it up for Graham to see. "You made a mess," he said before he licked his hand clean.

Graham chuckled. "I'm pretty sure you had something to do with it."

"Oh, then I guess I should help you clean it up then, huh?" Darren carefully pulled free of Graham and knelt over him. He leaned down and licked the cum off Graham's chest.

"Fuck, that's hot, Dar."

"Just one of the many services we provide at Darren's all night drive through."

"What other services do you provide?"

Darren snickered and grabbed the lube. "Let me show you."

Chapter Eighteen

It took a moment for Graham's sleep-fogged mind to realize the pounding was real and not part of his dream. He frowned and turned to glance over his shoulder at the door, wishing whoever was there would just go the hell away.

Graham had Darren wrapped in his arms, the man's warm, naked body pressed against his. He didn't want to get out of bed unless it was to fetch more lube. He'd spend the next week in bed with Darren if he could. Now that they were *out of the closet*, so to speak, Darren had turned into a dynamo in the sack.

When the knocking became more insistent, Graham growled softly and rolled to the side of the bed. He grabbed his jeans off the floor and pulled them up his legs, buttoning the top two buttons before heading for the door.

He yanked the door open, ready to give the interloper a good piece of his mind, only to find Bertram standing there. The frown on the man's tense face sent a shiver of cold down Graham's back. He gripped the door tighter.

"What?"

"Your Chief Russo has been taken by the men trying to kill you," Bertram said. "I suspect they will try to torture your location out of him."

"But he doesn't know where we are," Graham insisted. "Darren told us not to tell anyone where we were going."

"True, but the cartel doesn't know that."

"Christ!" Graham rubbed his hand down his face as frustration and worry for his boss filled him. He bit into the edge of his fisted hand as he tried to figure out what to do, how to save his friend and mentor.

"Okay, look, let's get everyone together in the study," Graham finally said. "I can't just sit here all safe and sound while they torture Russo for information he doesn't have. The man's been my friend for too many years."

"I'll wake the others and meet you downstairs then."

Graham nodded and shut the door. He walked back across the room and sat down on the side of the bed. Darren had rolled over and was looking up at him. Graham reached over and stroked his finger down the side of Darren's face.

"Hey, baby."

"Hey," Darren whispered.

"I guess you heard?"

Darren nodded. "You're going after him, aren't you?"

"I have to, baby. Russo is a good man. I can't just sit by and let them torture him. He doesn't know where we are and he wouldn't tell them even if he did." Graham shrugged. "I can't leave him out there on his own."

Darren dropped the blanket and sat up, moving over until his body pressed against Graham's. His head tucked into Graham's neck, his arms around Graham's waist. Graham hugged Darren back, savoring the feel of his lover in his arms.

"You'll be careful?"

Graham pressed his face into the soft hair on top of Darren's head. "I'll take every precaution, I swear." Graham kissed Darren's cheek. "I'm not taking any chances now that I have you."

Darren tilted his head back. His eyes were intense, filled with unshed tears. "I love you, Graham."

Graham gently kissed Darren's lips. He cupped the side of Darren's face in his hand and stared into his soft green eyes. He still felt a little stunned that, after everything that happened, he finally held Darren in his arms.

"I love you too, Dar."

Graham claimed Darren's lips again, trying to put everything he felt, everything he promised, into the kiss. He slowly pushed Darren's body back against the mattress, wanting to feel the man's entire length along his.

He moved his hands over Darren's body, his sides, his hips, the curve of his ass cheek. If he could have mapped out Darren's entire body with his hands, he would have.

"Damn, Dar, you skin feels like silk." He grinned when Darren's breathing hitched. He lifted his head to look down at his lover, gently grabbing the side of his jaw. "When I get home, I'm going to lick every inch of your skin, from your toes right up to the top of your head."

Darren's eyes widened.

Graham stroked his hand back down Darren's body to grip the soft curve of his ass. "Then I'm going to tattoo my name on your ass so everyone knows it belongs to me."

Darren's mouth dropped open.

Graham arched an eyebrow when Darren suddenly grinned and grabbed his hard cock through his pants. "Only if I get to tattoo my name on your dick so everyone knows it belongs to me."

Graham grinned. "Deal."

Darren's head fell back against the pillows as he laughed. Darren was one sexy man, but filled with laughter, the love he felt for Graham shining in his eyes, made him the most beautiful sight Graham had ever seen.

"Hell, Dar, you can tattoo your name on my forehead if you want. I belong to you and no one else and I don't care who knows."

"Not even your mother?"

"My mother will come around, Darren."

"And if she doesn't?"

Graham shook his head. "I don't care, but I believe she'll come through in the end. She only wants me to be happy and once she gets over her issues, she'll see that I am very happy with you." Graham shrugged. "If she doesn't like it, too damn bad. I'm not giving you up to make her happy."

"I don't want to come between you and your mother, Graham."

"You won't, not again. I gave you up once to make her happy. I was miserable. I'm not going through that again. My Mom means well but she just needs to get it into

her head that I'm not giving you up. Once she does, she'll come around. She's already starting to. She likes you a lot even if she refuses to tell you."

"You think so?"

"I know so," Graham said. "Plus, you come with built-in grandchildren. That gives you a ton of points."

Darren chuckled. "Yeah, she has that whole grandkid thing going on, doesn't she?"

"She does, but then so does my father. They both already adore Denny and Aaron and they just met them." Graham leaned down and gave Darren one more kiss before rolling to the side of the bed and holding his hand out to the man. "Come on, they're waiting for us downstairs."

"You want me there?"

"I wouldn't want you anywhere else."

Darren grinned and rolled to the side of the bed.

Graham took his hand and pulled him to his feet. He rubbed his hand down the soft curve of Darren's back. "It's really too bad we have to cover all this up."

Darren groaned and leaned into Graham. "Do we have to?"

"Yep." Graham chuckled. "I don't share."

Graham was fascinated by the lower lip Darren stuck out as he reached for his pants. It was just pouty enough to give Graham visions of what it would look like wrapped around his cock.

Once Darren was fully dressed, Graham reached over and rubbed his thumb across that lip for a moment before tugging on it gently. "I want to see that lip again the moment we get back to this room."

The soft flush that filled Darren's face told Graham the man knew exactly what he wanted with that lip. Darren didn't look like he had too much of an issue with the idea either.

Graham grabbed his shirt off the floor and pulled it over his head. He made quick work of putting his shoes on and getting his guns tucked away. He stood and reached for Darren's hand.

"Ready, baby?"

"Do you know how weird it is for me to hear you call me *baby*?" Darren asked as he took Graham's hand.

"Do you not want me to call you that?"

"No, it's not that," Darren said. "I kind of like it. It's just, you said you didn't want me to call you things like that and —"

"And, I was being an asshole," Graham said. "I was afraid if I got used to you calling me baby or whatever, that I wouldn't be able to give you up when the time came. It made what we had too emotionally intimate." Graham pulled Darren against his side and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "But, as I told you back at the safe house, call me any damn thing you want. I'm in this for the long haul, baby."

"Yeah, okay."

"Yeah, okay, what?"

Darren grinned. "Yeah, okay, baby."

"That's better."

Graham was still grinning as he walked with Darren down the stairs to the study, holding his lover's hand the entire way. He hoped Darren became comfortable enough in their relationship that he would give Graham all sorts of pet names.

Walking into the study, Graham found their friends sitting and standing around the room. Most of them looked disheveled, as if they too had been abruptly awakened. Graham headed for the closest chair and pulled Darren down onto his lap. He wanted the man as close as he could get him for as long as he could.

"So, what do we know?" Graham asked, looking at Bertram.

"Chief Russo was taken on his way out to his car outside of the precinct. Witnesses saw a black van pull up. Two men got out and grabbed the chief and tossed him in the van."

"How do we know it's the same people?" Troy asked.

Bertram smirked. "I hacked into the parking lot video. I was able to identify the two men and connect them to the cartel that put the hit out on all of you. It's the same people, trust me."

"All this over a fucking laptop?" Graham asked.

"I was able to find out a little about what was on that laptop, Graham," Bertram said. "Your boy Bruce was very naughty. He not only kept schedules of all their drug trades, he listed names, addresses, and money involved. There's enough evidence on that laptop to put away a lot of people for a very long time, more than enough to warrant the kidnapping and torture of a police chief, if you know what I mean."

"You mean enough of a reason to silence all of us, no matter the cost?" Graham asked.

"Pretty much short of blowing up the whole city to get at you all," Bertram replied. "Yeah, I'd say they're willing to go way further than we can imagine."

"Shit!" Troy exclaimed.

Graham silently echoed the sentiment. This situation wasn't good for any of them.

"Do you have any ideas, Bertram?" Graham asked. "We just can't let Russo take the hit for us. We have to do something to get him out of there. I wouldn't mind getting these guys off our backs at the same time."

"How many laws can I break?"

Graham snickered. "How many do you *need* to break?"

"It's better that you don't know."

Graham shook his head. "Fine, just do whatever needs to be done to get us out of this fucking mess and I'll forget we ever had this conversation."

One of Bertram's eyebrows arched. "I'll make some phone calls," he said as he reached for the phone. "How much of this do you want to be let in on?"

"Hell, you'd better let us in on everything," Graham said. "At least that way we can say it was a police strategy and not just some crazy scheme hashed up by a security guard."

Bertram rolled his eyes and dialed the phone. He talked for a moment then hung up. A few minutes later, the door opened and four men came in. They were dressed head to toe in black fatigues. Even their guns were black.

"Oh, can Troy get some of those?" Nicky crooned. "He looks hot in black."

Chapter Nineteen

Graham sat in the back of one of the bulletproof SUVs as they drove to the docks. He had really wanted to ask why the hell Erin had bulletproof SUVs, but then thought better of it. Some things he really didn't have to know. At least this way he had plausible deniability.

Bertram drove their SUV, with Graham, Troy, Jamie, and Officer Jack McLarren. Graham had been surprised when he saw Bertram walking out of the kitchen with Jack right before they left. Before any of them could protest or ask questions, Bertram simply held up a hand and said, "He's clean. Believe me, if I couldn't find anything dirty on him, there's none to be found."

He, Troy, and Jamie had exchanged a long look. Graham finally shrugged his consent. Bertram hadn't let them down yet. As far as Graham was concerned, what the man said was good as gold. So here they were, riding to the docks, armed to the teeth.

Apparently, Bertram's intel told him the Chief was being held there. The cartel heads themselves where nowhere around; they didn't like to get their hands dirty. They had out-sourced the dirty work to some local mercs and drug runners. The same local runner's whose names were on the laptop. So if the cartel went down, they were going down too.

The SUV slowed to a stop. Graham looked out the front window; they had arrived. As everyone started to get out of the SUV, Graham checked his weapons.

Bertram had given them the latest in gear, including semi-automatic rifles the military used. Again, how Bertram got them, Graham didn't want to know. He was just glad to have them right now.

"Alright, here's where I found out your Chief is being held," Bertram said, laying out a satellite imaging map of the area on the hood of the car. Graham saw the codes in the bottom right corner of the map. Jesus! He got the images off the Department of Defense satellite.

"I'm not even going to ask how you got that." Jamie snickered, obviously seeing what Graham had. "I'd really like to still be a cop after this is all over."

"It's best you don't know," Bertram replied, the corner of his mouth turning up into a half smile. He pointed to an area on the map. "Now look. This is a small warehouse about three-quarters of a click southwest of here. The local runners own the property and they launch there as well. So you all need to be prepared for the very possible chance of having to get wet."

"What the fuck did you do before you worked for Erin?" Troy asked, his jaw hanging open. "I've been on the force for years and we couldn't ever pin down the exact location of the cartel's local forces."

"Again, it's better if you don't know," Bertram said quickly, dismissing Troy's comment. "Here are the entry points. My team will split into two and handle these two exits. You guys split and handle these two. I've ordered my men to incapacitate, not take kill shots. As you said, you'd like to still be cops when this is over."

"They have permission to kill if it means defending our lives — or the Chief's," Graham said firmly. "I'd rather lose my job than risk any of our lives."

"As long as you all agree?" Bertram asked, looking around as they all nodded. "Fine, they'll shoot to kill, if necessary. Alright, are there any questions?"

"No, it's pretty straight forward," Jack said, finally opening his mouth. "Go in, get the Chief, don't get killed."

"Then let's head out," Bertram ordered as he folded up the map and tucked it into a pocket. He took his semi-automatic back from one of his men who had been holding it.

They headed out, keeping close to cover as they ran along the sides of other buildings on their way toward their goal. Once they reached the target warehouse, they split up to their assigned locations.

Troy went with his partner, Jamie, and Jack was right behind Graham. Moments later, they'd assumed their positions.

"We're set," Graham said, knowing the tiny microphone Bertram had provided would transmit his words to the others. He heard three more voices over the com saying the same.

"We go on three," Bertram said, coming in loud and clear in Graham's ear. "One, two, three."

Jack kicked in their door and Graham raced inside. The sound of men yelling filled the air, and moments later shots rang out in the warehouse. Graham was ready when one man turned toward him and raised his gun. Firing, Graham made sure to hit the man in the shoulder. The man went down and his gun went flying across the floor.

There were a few seconds of silence before Graham heard Troy shout, "Clear!" Seeing no other threats, Graham and a few of the others yelled the same.

"Where the fuck is the chief?" Jamie asked loudly. The gunshots' echoes had done a number on all their hearing for the moment. "Head to the launch!"

Graham followed Jamie and Bertram, who were leading the group, out to the dock. Sure enough, there were several men hopping into two speedboats, dragging a tied up Chief Russo with them.

"Don't hit the chief," Graham said an instant before they started taking on fire.

They immediately dispersed to make several targets instead of standing in a group. Graham fired at the first boat's engine. His biggest fear was them being able to get out to sea. If they got past the eleven mile mark, they'd have a lot bigger mess to deal with.

He managed to take out one boat, but the other started up and pulled away. The others had been able to take out several of the men who were shooting at them. Out of the corner of his eye, Graham saw Jamie start sprinting away. On instinct, Graham followed. Only then did Graham see that Jamie was heading for another boat several yards away.

"Tell me you know how to hotwire a boat," Graham said as they drew closer to the boat.

"Fuck no!" Jamie yelled back.

"I do," Bertram said, appearing out of nowhere. "Get in!"

Graham didn't even hesitate as they hit the boat and climbed aboard. Jamie and Troy landed right beside him. Bertram headed toward the bow. Graham watched in astonishment as the man pulled off a panel, produced a knife and started cutting wires. Seconds later, he twisted a few wires together and the boat roared to life.

"Seriously, Bertram, when this is all over, you and I have got to talk." Graham snickered.

Bertram turned the wheel and cranked on the gas. Graham grabbed the nearest chair quickly to avoid getting thrown overboard. A second later, it became clear their boat had a lot more power than the runners'. Within moments, they were gaining on the smaller boat.

"Fuck!" Jamie yelled. "Can we go faster, Bertram? We're not going to catch them before they hit international water."

"Are you saying if they get that far we stop?" Bertram shouted over his shoulder at the three of them.

"Fuck no," Troy growled, "we get the Chief. Fuck the consequences!"

"Okay," Bertram replied as he turned back to the front of the boat.

"Hey, look at it this way," Graham shouted to Jamie and Troy, "if we get fired, we don't have to wear those stupid ties anymore."

"Oh yeah, we start an international incident, not wearing ties will be the least of our problems," Jamie yelled back over the roar of the motor, rolling his eyes. "I'd really like to grow old with Sammy Dane. Not in jail with you two assholes."

"I call top bunk," Troy shouted calmly.

It took a second for Troy's statement to register with Graham, but then he busted out with laughter. Jamie and Troy joined in a second later.

"What's the plan once we catch up to the boat?" Graham asked as he realized they were getting that much closer. Looking past their target's boat, he saw what had to be the runners' destination. A yacht—at least sixty feet long—floated up ahead. "I'd rather we do something before we get to that other boat."

"Hey, I found the boat, and Bertram started it," Jamie replied. "Your turn to contribute."

"If we shoot at a running, gas-filled engine, it could explode," Troy said.

Graham knew he was right, but what other options did they have? "We're not trying to get the Chief killed."

Before either Graham or Jamie could reply, Bertram veered the boat suddenly. Bullets showered the water where they had just been. Graham aimed and started returning fire, careful not to hit the Chief or the other craft's engine. Jamie and Troy did the same. For now, at least, they could help provide cover fire as Bertram got them closer to the other boat.

Jamie aimed a particularly good shot, and one of the boat's rudders tore to shreds and flew off. Almost instantly, the speedboat started to slow.

Bertram slowed their pursuit. Within moments, they were gliding up to the now stranded boat. Obviously realizing they were out of luck, the two men on the boat with the chief dropped their weapons.

"Secure them," Jamie said as he covered Troy and Graham.

Graham and Troy quickly leaped over to the other boat and patted down its occupants, searching for any hidden weapons. Graham slapped the cuffs on his guy and pushed him toward Jamie.

Slowly the first man, and then the second, climbed onto the boat with Jamie and Bertram. Graham pulled out his knife, walked over to Chief Russo, and cut off his restraints.

"Happy to see us?" Graham asked as he finished cutting and pulled off the Chief's gag. "We thought you could use the help."

"I wouldn't be in this fucking mess if it wasn't for you assholes," the chief barked.

Graham couldn't argue there.

"So much for a thank you and some time off." Troy snickered as they helped the chief onto their boat. "Just don't fire us for saving your ass, okay, Chief?"

"I'm not making any promises," Chief Russo shot back as they all settled back onto the boat. "And who's this guy? You brought a civilian with you!"

"It's better you don't know, Chief," Graham answered. "Believe me, it's been working better for us not knowing for awhile now. We got you back, after all."

The chief shot the three of them a pissed off, but confused look, causing them to burst into peels of hysterical laughter. They'd broken several laws, but at least the chief was safe.

"Can we go home now?" Graham asked. "If I'm lucky, there's a naked man waiting in my bed."

The chief snickered. "Are you finally coming out of the closet with that nurse of yours?"

Graham's eyebrows shot up to his hairline. "You know about Darren?"

"Ah, hell, Graham, everyone knows about Darren."

"Well, shit, Chief, you'd better never send me undercover 'cause apparently I can't keep a secret from anyone."

The chief glanced around at the two restrained men huddled in the back of the boat, the bullet holes littering the craft they sat in, and the guns everyone held. He shook his head.

"You may not be any damn good at undercover work but you aren't half bad at rescue missions. I just might have to offer you a job."

"I was hoping more for a vacation," Graham grumbled.

"Done," the chief said then he pointed at Graham, "but we're going to talk when you get back. You'd better have a good explanation for all of this by then, and it better be all legal like."

Graham chuckled as he leaned back in his chair. "Yes, Chief."

Chapter Twenty

Darren carefully laid the baby down in his crib and pulled the blanket up over him. He took a moment to watch the sleeping child, amazed at how innocent he looked, especially when he knew for a fact that Aaron was hell on wheels.

Shaking his head, he walked to the connecting door and peered through the crack. Denny was in bed but her nightlight was on. She had a book in her hands and was quietly turning the pages.

Darren knew she was supposed to be asleep but reading before bed wasn't that big of a no-no. He decided to let it go and quietly closed the door. With one last look at the baby sleeping in the crib, Darren made his way to the door and walked out.

He closed the door behind him and turned, almost bumping into Erin. He grabbed her arm to steady her then whistled when he noticed the sexy black cocktail dress she wore.

"Wow, and just where are you off to, pretty lady?"

Erin twirled in a circle. "I have a date with Miles."

"Miles?"

Erin's cheeks flushed. "Chief Russo."

Darren arched an eyebrow. "Are you sure you're feeling up to it? You've only been on your feet for a few weeks."

Erin waved a hand at Darren. "I'll be fine, Dad. He's just taking me out to dinner, nothing major. I'll be home before midnight." Erin held up her hand. The corner of her lips turned up in a grin. "Swear."

Darren rolled his eyes. "Just have a good time and don't overdo it, please. I kind of like the idea of you being around a little longer, you know?"

"I'll be fine, Darren, promise."

Darren shook his head as Erin bounced down the stairs. She was happy and alive and that's all that really mattered. Darren was still shocked Robert had determined a treatment that helped Erin get better.

Robert had taken her off half the medication prescribed to her then changes the dosages on the others around. He put Erin on a regimented diet and exercise program, and within a couple of weeks she was back on her feet.

Darren was still amazed that Robert had been able to find anything that worked. Erin had some of the best doctors in the country telling her she was terminal. She'd put all her affairs in order because she thought she was going to die.

She still wasn't totally out of the woods but only time would tell if Robert's plan for her would work. In the meantime, she certainly looked healthier. Robert seemed to think she was responding well and would continue to treat her until he felt she didn't need him anymore.

Darren was happy with that prognosis. He wished Erin only the best. And if that meant going out to dinner with Chief Russo, so be it.

Darren let himself into the room he shared with Graham. He still couldn't believe after all these weeks that it was *their* room. No more spending the night at each other's houses. No more having to leave after sex.

And no more lonely nights wishing Graham was there to hold him. Darren went to sleep every night wrapped in Graham's arms. Graham even switched work shifts so he was home every night to be with Darren and the kids.

Darren had stopped waiting for Graham to turn away from him again and started looking forward to each day they had together. Part of Darren's confidence came from the fact that Graham had embraced their relationship with both arms and practically shouted it from the rooftops that they were a couple.

"Kids down?"

Darren smiled over at the handsome man tucked into their bed. His breath caught in his throat as he got a good look at the sexy man's bare chest. The sheet was tucked around his naked waist. Damn, his man was hot!

"Denny is reading but Aaron is out for the count." Darren kept his eyes on Graham as he started pulling off his clothes, unable to tear his gaze away from all that hot, naked flesh.

"Erin get off okay?"

Darren paused in the process of lowering his pants. "You knew she was going on a date with Chief Russo?"

"Yeah, Erin came and talked to me about it after the chief asked her out. She wanted to make sure I wouldn't have any problems with her dating my boss."

"Do you?" Darren asked as he finished undressing.

"No, the chief is a good guy and he really likes Erin. He could care less about how much money she has and he's probably one of the few straight men I know who would understand our little arrangement."

"He won't be upset that I'm still married to Erin?"

Graham shook his head and flipped back the covers as Darren walked toward the bed. "He gets it. Besides, if they decide to take their relationship to that level you can always get a divorce. Until we know for sure if Erin's treatments are going to work, staying married is in the best interests of the children."

"Will there be any type of conflict when he has to testify against the drug cartel for kidnapping him and trying to kill you and the others?"

Graham shook his head again. "No, the two things don't really have anything to do with one another. Besides, we were friends long before this thing with the drug cartel came up."

"Is the FBI sure that putting the head guys away will stop anyone from coming after you? Can't they like, order a hit from inside or something?"

"Honey, I know I've said this before but you watch too much television." Graham chuckled. "Besides, one of Bertram's friends had a little discussion with the head guy."

We are officially off their radar from now on. Apparently, if anything happens to any of us, Bertram will take it personally, right to this guy's doorstep."

Darren frowned. "Can he do that?"

"I don't think there's much Bertram can't do. Erin paid good money for that man's talents and he's worth every penny."

"I know I'll always have a soft spot for him."

"Not too soft, I hope," Graham grumbled.

"No." Darren laughed. "Last time I looked, Bertram was giving Officer McLaren the eye. I think our head of security has definite plans for that man, whether he likes it or not."

"Is Jack even gay? I know he has some friends who are into some pretty weird shit, but I've never even seen him look at a man cross-eyed."

"I have no idea, but if he's not, he soon will be, especially if Bertram has anything to say about it." Darren passed by his side of the bed and walked around to Graham's. He grinned at Graham's arched eyebrow and climbed onto the bed, straddling Graham's large body.

"So, you understand why I'm staying married to Erin, right."

"I do, baby, and I fully support it. A piece of paper has nothing to do with the commitment between us." Graham grabbed Darren's right hand and pointed to the simple ring he wore on his ring finger. "That does."

Darren closed his hand into a fist. "And I promise not to take it off until you can move it to the other finger."

"Even if I tell you that my mother wants us to come to dinner?" Graham asked.

"You're mother and I have been getting along just fine. If she wants us to come to dinner then we go to dinner. We just have to remember to bring the kids. I'm pretty sure that's the only reason she accepts me. I gave her grandkids."

Graham chuckled and grabbed Darren's hips, pulling on them until Darren fell forward and hovered over the top of him, one hand on either side of Graham's head.

"I think my mother accepts you because she knows you are the most important thing in the world to me and I will love you until the day I die."

"Don't kid yourself. It's the grandchildren." Darren leaned down until his chest settled against Graham's, their faces a mere breath apart. "I, on the other hand, love that I am the most important thing in your world."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I hated being your dirty little secret."

Darren yelped as Graham suddenly turned them over until he was on top. "Oh, there will be plenty of dirty little secrets still. Only this time, those secrets will just be between the two of us."

"Oh yeah?" Darren asked as he watched the sensual grin come across Graham's face. He spread his legs wide enough for Graham's body to fall between them then wrapped them around Graham's waist. "Just what did you have in mind, baby?"

~The End~

About the Author

Stormy Glenn believes the only thing sexier than a man in cowboy boots is two, or three, men in cowboy boots. She also believes in love at first sight, soul mates, true love, and happy endings. Stormy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her web site and email address at www.stormyglenn.com

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