

A young man with dark hair, wearing a white t-shirt, blue jeans, a white belt, and a black backpack, is sitting outdoors. He is looking down at a silver flip phone in his hands. His left hand is in his pocket, and he is wearing a silver bracelet. The background shows a modern building with large windows and a concrete overhang.

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WANTING

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by

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An Amber Quill Press Book

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Chapter 1

Heat. So much heat...

It spread over Jeremy like warm maple syrup, gliding across his skin, creeping through his veins, swirling in a slow, smoldering boil at his core, and taking him someplace sweet and hot and more delicious than he'd ever imagined.

And he'd always thought he had a pretty good imagination.

His hips rose in restless thrusts, begging for more. His fingers, clawing out at his sides, curled into the sheets in a tight grip. He bit his lower lip to keep from making noise and giving away how deeply he was being affected by what was happening, but it did no good. A low, throaty moan that sounded like nothing he'd ever heard coming from himself before--primal and uninhibited--escaped him.

In response, firm but gentle hands squeezed his thighs, then pushed them up and farther apart, exposing him more fully. Jeremy had a fleeting thought that maybe he should be embarrassed or uncomfortable about it, but the sensations at his groin intensified, stealing the thought before it was even fully formed. Fingertips stroked his balls, then beneath them, skating over sensitive skin in a place that had never known a lover's touch until now.

The wet suctioning around his shaft built into an inferno that became almost unbearable. He did bear it, though, would gladly bear it and so much more. He realized he'd never wanted anything more desperately than what was happening right here and now.

Another moan slid from him, a husky, wordless plea that meant, "Oh, God, please don't stop."

In a half-stupor from desire, he lifted his head from the pillow and looked down.

The sight of full lips curved around his dick, and his dick, wet and slick, sliding into the depths of the sensual mouth, stole his breath. He'd never seen anything so erotic.

But it was the blue eyes, the color of a cloudless summer sky, gazing up at him with such intensity that left him reeling. Blue eyes that were aching familiar, yet filled with new and unexpected emotion he'd never seen in them before.

Jeremy felt himself swallowing hard, and something tight caught in his chest.

Is this really happening?

Oh, yeah, his body assured him. It's real. It's definitely real...

"Mr. Reynolds!"

The sharp voice jerked Jeremy back to the here and now with a jolt. He blinked and gazed up to the front of the lecture hall, to find Professor Ivanik glaring at him beneath dark, heavy slashes of eyebrows.

"This is neither the time, nor the place for you to be sexting your girlfriend," the professor said, his voice oozing contempt as it echoed through the hall. "Especially, indeed, when she seems to actually care about paying attention in my class even when you do not."

No one in the room made a sound or even looked in Jeremy's direction for fear of drawing the professor's wrath down on themselves. But Jeremy's face burned in humiliation nonetheless. He glanced down, realizing his cell phone was in his hand and open. How the hell had the professor noticed it? Jeremy was only one student in a class of fifty.

Ivanik had a history of being a hard-assed S.O.B., though, with a whole list of classroom rules, one of which was no cell phones out or on during his lectures. With his snake-like dark eyes that condemned more often than praised, the man didn't miss much. Unfortunately. He'd reamed students a new one for far less than using a phone in class. No one wanted to be on the receiving end of one of his tongue-lashings.

Jeremy quickly snapped the phone shut and cradled it in his palm. "I wasn't se--" At the sight of those thick, accusing brows shooting up another notch, daring him to continue at his own risk, he cut himself off. "Sorry."

"As you should be. There are people in this class who, during this hour, are committed to reviewing the material that will be on the final exam in two days. Unless you are already an expert on international business management, I suggest you make sure you're one of them. That is if you plan to pass this class, Mr. Reynolds."

"Yes, sir," Jeremy mumbled.

Fuck!

As the professor went back to his review, Jeremy tried to concentrate on listening and dutifully following his class notes in front of him. But within seconds his mind was wandering again. He risked a guilty glance at a row of auditorium seats in front and to the right of him.

As if she knew he was looking, Lisa's head slowly turned and she gave him a glare that was a cross between embarrassment and "What the hell is wrong with you?"

He wished he had an easy answer to that question.

"Sorry," he mouthed at her.

Lisa's long dark hair, captured today in a ponytail, swished against her shoulder as she shook her head at him in frustration. Then her forehead crinkled with lines and her eyes flashed with hurt before she turned away.

The bottom dropped out of his stomach. She knows...

A bout of panic gripped him for a few seconds before he slowly managed to rein it in. Get a hold of yourself. How could she possibly know?

She couldn't. The part of his brain that was at least semi-logical and reasonable knew that. But it didn't stop the part that was purely animalistic and all about self-preservation from wind-

ing up for a doozy of a defensive reaction.

What bothered him most though, was why he cared so much what she might think if she did know.

His heart pounding in his chest, and an unsettling knot twisting in his gut, it was all Jeremy could do to sit still through the rest of the lecture.

The moment class was over, he stuffed his books in his backpack, grabbed it up, and made his escape as fast as he could, taking the steps to the top of the hall two at a time.

He heard Lisa call his name, but he couldn't talk to her right now, couldn't face her. He needed to get out, get away, and get some air. Alone.

Once he was through the doors of the building, he set off at a jog.

Running away?

No.

Yes.

Hell, he didn't know.

He just knew he couldn't bring himself to stop until he'd put a good distance between himself and...well, everything he'd left behind. He rounded the corner of Orton Hall, one of the science labs, and, finding the small quad next to it blessedly empty, leaned against the wall of the building to catch his breath.

"What the hell am I doing?" he mumbled.

He closed his eyes. The warmth of the sun felt good, but the afternoon breeze had just enough of a chill to it to make it clear that in spite of the unusually warm temperatures in the fifties they'd had this week, it was still December in Colorado. Jeremy had left his fleece hoodie in the lecture hall in his hurry to get away, and now, wearing only a thin T-shirt, was wishing he'd remembered it.

Opening his eyes, he dragged a hand through his hair, and stared across the quad at the bare, gray branches of the wintery trees reaching toward the endless, cerulean sky. It was so vast, he felt lost in it.

Almost as lost as he felt in his life right now.

School, Lisa, family--which always left a bitter taste in Jeremy's mouth--and most of all the night a week ago that, no matter what he did or where he was, he couldn't stop thinking about, were all a tangled mess in his mind.

Jeremy let out a shaky breath, then banged his head back against the wall once, twice, hoping to knock some sense into himself. Even as he did, though, his hand was reaching into the pocket of his jeans and pulling out his cell.

He opened the phone and, unable to resist the lure, stared down at the picture that had gotten him in trouble in class.

And just like in class, just like it had been for the past week, he couldn't tear his gaze off the buff, beautiful, burnished flesh tangled in the snow-white bedsheets. The sheets were the perfect foil for the display of bare lean hips, firm ass, and broad-shouldered back. The man in the picture lay on his stomach, one leg bent, his dark head resting on his arms, which were wrapped around a pillow. He looked peaceful, yet completely mouth-watering. Even in sleep he made Jeremy's heart skip several beats.

Ben...

Jeremy knew he shouldn't have taken the picture, but he'd figured he'd never have another chance to capture a moment like this. Because what had happened between them...could never happen again. This was it. All he'd ever have of the night that had blown his mind.

So deal with it. It's over. Chalk it up to life experience and move on.

He'd been telling himself those very words, over and over, since he'd awakened in the bed that wasn't his own, sprawled far too comfortably and intimately against a warm, hard, masculine body. What he couldn't understand was why every time he repeated the mantra about moving on, the knot in his stomach only twisted tighter.

You know it could never be anything more. It was a one-night stand that didn't mean anything to you or to him.

Then why did he feel so torn up inside? Why did his heart run a race whenever he remembered the husky sound of Ben's moans and his own, and those eyes gazing at him, so full of promise and something else he couldn't quite define, something that made his knees go weak and that he'd felt echoing inside himself as well?

If it had meant nothing, why had he closed the door on his relationship with Lisa the very next day? Not that things had been smooth sailing between them for a while now anyway. They'd been more like friends than boyfriend and girlfriend since the semester had started, but for the past week he'd been outright avoiding her, arriving at the one class they shared--Ivanik's lecture--at the last second so he didn't have to sit with or talk to her, tearing away as soon as it was done, letting her phone calls go to voice mail. Hell, he knew she was hurt and confused, but he could barely look at her.

Yeah, it's called guilt, asshole.

Jeremy winced. There was no nice way to say it...he'd betrayed her. He'd tried to do the right thing afterward, but it didn't change the fact the damage was done. And it also didn't change the fact he hadn't been brave enough to tell her the truth about why he was putting on the brakes.

The guilt wasn't just about that, though. It had started long before he'd given in to temptation. As much as he liked Lisa as a person, whenever he looked at her he couldn't seem to dredge up any passion about being with her in a romantic way. He'd been feeling that way for

months, but hadn't known how to tell her without hurting her. He'd tried to hint around that he was okay with it if she wanted to see someone else, had even directly suggested it a couple of times, but whether he wasn't clear enough, or she intentionally chose not to hear him, she'd continued to hang on, trying to make things work. Which had only made him feel worse. Especially when every time she'd tried to come onto him since the beginning of the semester he'd made excuses about being too busy or too tired or too stressed about classes...whatever he could think of to cover the fact he just wasn't able to get aroused when he was with her.

What really fucked with his head, though, was that he hadn't had any arousal problems last week...with Ben.

Damn it, what does that mean?

He'd been trying for days to sort it out, and kept coming away more confused and torn than ever. He'd been sleeping like crap, having trouble concentrating, and now it was getting him in trouble in class. He'd fought too hard to get back to school, after having to take a year off for family reasons, to blow it all now so close to the end. He just had one more semester before he could graduate. The last thing he needed was a big upheaval in his life.

He stared down at the man in the picture, his best friend who for one night had been his lover, and knew what he should do. He should delete the picture, forget the sex had ever happened, and get back to his regular life--well, regular minus Lisa because at this point there was no way to make up for his failings as a boyfriend.

Ben seemed to have forgotten their encounter already anyway. He hadn't said a word about it to Jeremy. Maybe... The sick feeling surged again in Jeremy's stomach. Maybe Jeremy had been so pathetic and inexperienced and unmemorable Ben didn't want to think about it.

But even if Ben hadn't forgotten and didn't think he'd been hopeless, Jeremy wondered what he'd been expecting Ben to do, what had he expected would happen between them the morning after?

Romance and happily ever after like in some movie? Be realistic...if he wanted to be with you, really be with you, could you do it? Talk about upheaval in your life. You couldn't face the shit that would come down the pike as a result, and you know it. You can't even bring yourself to tell Lisa the truth. How the hell would you explain it to your family?

Family...that word again.

For a brief second he tried to imagine what he'd say to his father and grandfather...and the thought turned his insides to ice.

Jeremy swallowed hard as the weight of the truth and his own fear settled over him. His thumb hovered over the button that would delete the digital image on his phone.

It's not like you don't get to see him every day anyway.

Yeah, but not like this, he thought wistfully. Not in such an intimate moment, knowing how he got tangled in those sheets, knowing that just minutes before the picture was made his arms had been around Jeremy rather than the pillow.

Longing filled Jeremy with so damned much intensity it hurt.

And that's exactly why it's time to put a stop to it. You can't keep feeling this way. He's your best friend. You've already fucked up one relationship over this. Are you willing to destroy your friendship as well, because you can't control your impulses?

Taking a deep breath and girding his resolve, Jeremy made his decision.

But just as his thumb was about to touch the delete key, his phone rang, startling the shit out of him, and almost causing him to drop it. Juggling the cell in his hand to keep it from falling, he saw the name flashing on the screen: Ben Cross.

And just like that, all his good intentions scattered in the breeze. A rush of heat swarmed over him, and his heart thrummed like a Harley. Damn, he was pathetic.

"Hey," he said, lifting the phone to his ear.

"Hey. This an okay time to talk? I was trying to catch you between classes."

The slow, easy baritone both turned Jeremy on and soothed his frazzled nerves.

Ben had always had a calming effect on him--he radiated a solid, quiet strength. Which was what had drawn Jeremy to him when they'd met four and a half years ago and become friends. After the endless confrontational atmosphere he'd coped with at home growing up, hanging out with Ben had been a balm to Jeremy's ragged and ravaged soul. Just like it was now...except for the added arousal brewing beneath the surface. That hadn't been there when they met.

Or maybe it was and you just never wanted to admit it.

The thought floored him, and it took him a second of fumbling to get his mind back on the conversation.

"Yeah, it's good timing," Jeremy said, remembering what Ben had just asked him. He struggled to keep his voice from giving away his real thoughts and unsettled state. "My econ class isn't meeting formally, just having a study session at the library at four. I've got time. What's up?"

"I hated to bug you, but I thought you'd want to know before you got home...your dad's called here five times today."

"Shit. Just what I need right now." The knot in Jeremy's stomach wrenched tight, sending shooting pains through him. As he bent over to relieve the agony, he wondered if maybe he was getting an ulcer from all the fucking stress of being pulled in fifteen directions at once.

"Yeah, I know." Ben's quiet voice offered support. "The first two times he called I told him you were at class. I didn't answer the next three--I let them roll over to the answering machine. The last one was just now. He sounded pretty intense. He wants your cell phone number so he can call you directly. "

"Yeah, well I'm not giving it to him. I'd never get any peace. I'm sorry you had to deal with him today."

"No worries. He still nagging you about coming home for Christmas?"

"Yeah. Still trying to play the 'holidays are rough without your mother and your family needs you' card"

"You gonna go?"

"After the way he acted last year, the way he treated you? No. Hell no! I'm not letting him use that guilt trip on me again."

"I don't want to be the reason you don't see your family, Jeremy. He wasn't all that bad."

"No. No fuckin' way. He was that bad. I bring my best friend home for moral support because it's only been a few months since my mom died, over what's supposed to be a holiday revolving around love and peace and goodwill toward men, and all he can do is make snarky, passive-aggressive racist remarks the entire time we're there."

"I've dealt with worse."

While his dad's comments and attitude had pissed the hell out of Jeremy to the point he'd barely spoken to his father the entire past year because of it, Ben had been cool about it all, taking the 'tude with far more understanding than Jeremy could conjure. "He's still upset about losing your mom," Ben had said, trying to make excuses for David Reynolds's bad behavior.

But Jeremy couldn't let his dad off the hook that easily. His dad was and always had been a narrow-minded, self-involved asshole who thought he and the car dealership he owned should be the focal point around which the entire universe turned. And that was even without the alcohol he'd poured into his body for so many years. When he drank, he was unbearable. When Jeremy's mom was alive, she'd been able to temper his behavior to some extent, at least keeping him civil in public and around Jeremy's friends, and his senior year of high school she'd drawn a line in the sand, telling Jeremy's dad to choose between the booze and her. He'd chosen her. But with her gone, things had gotten worse again. He seemed to be out of control, fed by vitriol from Jeremy's grandfather who lived with him and was just as bad. Jeremy hadn't expected his dad to be so poorly behaved last Christmas, or he never would have taken Ben with him. He'd so badly wanted Ben's calm presence there as a buffer between himself and his family, but had ended up unwittingly putting Ben in the line of fire.

"You still there?" Ben asked.

"Yeah, sorry. Just stewing. Every time I think about last Christmas it makes me a little crazy."

"Well, it could have been worse...we could have told him that in addition to being black, I'm gay, too. " Ben's voice held a teasing hint of humor.

Normally Jeremy would have appreciated that...Ben had a way of lightening stressful moments and making them more manageable. But the particular topic this time shifted Jeremy off balance.

His family would have freaked if they'd known Ben's sexual orientation. Shit, living in the heart of small town Bible belt U.S.A., Jeremy's dad might actually have kicked Ben out of the house, and Jeremy along with him for being accepting. The thought made his stomach clench again. Liberal thinking wasn't exactly encouraged in the Reynolds's household.

Which hit home now more than ever.

Jeremy'd always known Ben was gay--Ben had told him the first week they'd met, when Jeremy had been a freshman and he was a sophomore, and they'd lived in the same dorm. But now that he'd slept with Ben, even if it was just the once, did it mean Jeremy was gay, too? The question burned a hole in him. He was afraid to even say it out loud because he was terrified what the answer might be and how it might change his life forever.

Upheaval--bad. Status quo--good.

Right?

But before he could over worry it, Ben himself changed the subject. "If he calls again, do you want me to tell him that you have plans to go home with Lisa for Christmas? Then you don't have to talk to him."

Jeremy closed his eyes. Only a good guy like Ben would make an offer like that. But he couldn't allow it. Ben had put up with enough from his dad. Jeremy wasn't going to ask Ben to run interference for him because he was too big a wimp to deal with his father himself.

"Thanks for offering, but no. You don't have to do that. I'll call him."

"Okay. If you change your mind, though, I've got your back."

"Thanks." And he meant it. He appreciated Ben's offer, which he knew was sincere, more than the man could know.

Friendship--status quo--good. Don't do anything to fuck it up.

"Listen," Ben said, "I know you've been really busy lately, but after you get home tonight, I was wondering if, before you get too buried in your books, we could talk." His tone was light, but Jeremy could tell he was making an effort to keep it that way and that underneath he had something serious on his mind.

Oh, crap! He hasn't forgotten. He wants to talk about what happened!

Panic shot through him, the same panic he'd felt in class...the self-protective kind.

"I...um..." he stumbled, feeling trapped and caught off guard. "I might not be home for a long time still. I'll probably be cramming at the library most of the night. Lots of finals coming up over the next few days," he said too fast.

"Okay, sure, I understand," Ben said, his voice quiet.

Jeremy's freak-out turned to guilt. How lame was he? Not only was he avoiding Lisa, but he'd been avoiding Ben all week as well. The one person he'd always been able to talk with about everything going on in his life...except, apparently, this.

"Listen, I'm sorry, man," Jeremy said. "As soon as finals are over, I promise..." Maybe by then he'd know what to say and figure out how he could possibly face Ben.

"It's all right. I think Al's bringing over his latest woman tonight anyway--Gilda or Gidget or whatever her name is--and you know how loud they can be, even with his bedroom door shut." Ben sounded mostly normal again. "It's probably better if you work out of the house anyway--you'll get more done."

Their roommate Al and his never-ending stream of women was a safe topic. Jeremy grabbed onto it like a life raft. He forced out a laugh he didn't quite feel. "Never a dull moment in Al's life. It sounds like it's going to be one of those iPod cranked on high nights for you, though how you can work on your thesis with that metal music crap you play blaring in your ears is beyond me."

"Talent. And lots of practice. That's what we get for having the cowboy porn god as our housemate."

"At least he tells the girls upfront that he wants to video the sex."

"Most of 'em get off on it as much as he does. If he wasn't dead-set on becoming an attorney, he'd make a hell of a porno producer. Hey, good luck with the studying tonight, and maybe I'll see you in the morning?"

"Yeah...maybe." He tried to stay as noncommittal as possible. "Talk to you later."

As he pushed the off button, all Jeremy could think about was what a loser he was for running away.

Again.

Chapter 2

Ben lay in bed, in the dark, with nothing but the sliver of moonlight shining through the half-open window blinds for light, staring up at the glow-in-the-dark moon and stars stuck on his bedroom ceiling. They were left over from a previous tenant in the old, off-campus rental house, and Ben still hadn't bothered to take them down. At this point, he probably wouldn't. They'd become oddly comforting.

Maybe because they reminded him of his childhood, when he and his brothers and sisters had all slept in the same room when they were little because there hadn't been money for a bigger house. They'd each found ways to carve out their own space in the cramped quarters, and Ben, who'd slept on the top bunk with his younger brother Abe, had often put posters and stickers on the ceiling. He smiled at the memory. They hadn't had much, but his parents had always managed to let them know they were loved. And they'd always had fun. Still did, when they were able to get together, though these days the eight kids were scattered all over the world.

Tonight the sparkling moon and stars above him offered a distraction, minimal though it was, from the thoughts chasing through his mind that kept him from sleeping.

At nearly two-thirty in the morning he hadn't even dozed yet, though he'd been lying here for a couple of hours. Al and Giselle--Al had reminded Ben of her name when she'd arrived--had been loud as usual, supplying enough grunts and groans, giggles and squeals, banging of the bed against the wall, and "Oh, yeah, do it to me hard, baby!" shouts to make an awesome porn movie soundtrack. But all had been quiet in Al's bedroom across the hall for the past hour and a half, so they'd obviously exhausted themselves and fallen asleep.

Lucky them, Ben thought, watching a new light chase across his ceiling as a car drove by on the street below.

He knew the noise from Al's frequent sexual conquests should annoy him, but, honestly, it seldom did. He liked Al Baxter--Al short for Albert, but anyone who didn't have a death wish would never dare mention his real name aloud. He was a good roommate, always paid his share of the rent and utilities on time, helped with the chores, was smart as hell underneath a thick dose of Texas charm, could be counted on whenever Ben or Jeremy were in a bind over anything, didn't have a homophobic bone in his body and therefore wasn't threatened by the fact Ben was gay, and he and Ben and Jeremy all got along great. All three of them had their foibles, and Al's just happened to be that he had loud sex in his room a few nights a week. Most of the time Ben and Jeremy blasted music or the TV, or weren't home. And Al was usually respectful of the hour...seldom did the noise last beyond one in the morning or so. Frankly, he was a good fit in the house and Ben had come to count him as a friend

It was too bad their living situation couldn't last. Al and Jeremy both would graduate in the spring. Al had already been accepted to the University of Texas School of Law next fall, so he wouldn't be back. And Jeremy...

Ben didn't know what was going to happen with Jeremy. He'd hoped he might stick around for a while. But now?

He fought back the thick lump that clogged his throat.

Jeremy's situation had always been tenuous. His dad hadn't wanted him to go to college in the first place, but his mom had intervened. When Jeremy's mom died, though, everything had gone downhill. Just before the fall semester of what would have been his junior year, his mom was diagnosed with aggressive, stage four non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. The family had been blindsided by it, and Jeremy, who was close to his mom, had stayed home to spend time with her. After battling the disease all through the fall and most of the winter, she'd passed away in March. Jeremy would have liked to come back to school then, but it was mid-semester and he couldn't get into any classes so late. He'd stayed home to go through his mom's things and tie up some loose ends she'd ask him to handle, with plans to come back to school for the summer session.

When the end of May rolled around, though, his father had dropped the bombshell that he wasn't going to let Jeremy go back to school at all, that he didn't need a degree to be successful, and his dad wasn't going to pay another penny for college. He told Jeremy he already had a job lined up for him at the car dealership the family owned in the small Nebraska town where they lived

They'd had a huge fight that had ended with Jeremy telling his dad to go to hell.

He'd returned to school thanks to a huge dose of financial aid and student loans, a year behind, but determined to finish his degree. Ben, who'd been a year ahead of him already, had graduated by the time Jeremy returned, but was starting grad school, working on his masters in psychology. He'd invited Jeremy to share this off-campus house with him to help them both with expenses, and then they'd found Al, which helped even more. That had been summer before last.

Jeremy didn't talk much about what his plans were after graduation. Ben knew he had no desire to go home--he and his dad were hardly on speaking terms at the best of times. But Jeremy hadn't mentioned whether he planned to stay in Colorado, move somewhere else, work, go to graduate school, or what. Ben had asked a couple of times, but when he wasn't forthcoming with answers, he'd let it drop, not wanting to push. He had a feeling the parental situation and the fact he was already strapped for cash would factor heavily into whatever decision Jeremy made.

And now...after the huge fuck-up Ben had made the night of Al's birthday party a week ago, he was afraid he might have ruined any chances of having his best friend nearby after this spring. Damn it, what had he been thinking?

He hadn't, he admitted. He'd been feeling.

Feeling four and a half years worth of secret, pent-up longing for his best friend, which hadn't merely come to a head that fateful night, but had gushed over the top unchecked. All because he hadn't been able to resist a kiss. One kiss. One innocent, alcohol induced kiss, which had led to another, and another, and eventually here to this very room and bed, where a lot more than kissing had taken place.

If he'd had the strength to put a stop to it after the first kiss, or even the second or third, he and Jeremy wouldn't be in this damned awkward position, with Jeremy dodging him, and Ben feeling guilty as hell for ever letting things get out of control.

The thing was...Ben didn't regret it. Could never regret it. They'd been perfect together, in every way. The way their bodies fit, how they'd seemed to anticipate each other's every move and desire. The way they'd been so hungry for each other once hadn't been enough and they'd ended up going for round two before they'd fallen asleep tangled together in each other's arms.

Ben's groin ached at the memory. He pushed off the covers, slid a hand down his bare chest, his abs, and over his groin to cup his balls, then curl his fingers around his thickening cock.

As he stroked, he remembered how Jeremy's hand had felt doing this very thing. How he'd fondled and rubbed Ben, swirling his thumb over the head of Ben's cock to spread the slick drops of pre-cum. He remembered Jeremy laying his own dick alongside Ben's and wrapping his long-fingered hand around them both, squeezing them together and stroking them until both men had been gasping for air. Their mouths had fused in hot, heady kisses, and they'd swallowed each other's shouts when they climaxed.

That had been the first orgasm. When they'd caught their breath, they'd finished stripping each other out of their clothes, had fallen onto the bed, and gone down on one another. He could still picture Jeremy's tall, lean body stretched out on the bed, his hips thrusting upward in the moonlight, his hands clutched in the sheets, and the sexy way he kept biting his lower lip as if he were trying not to cry out. Ben had made it his mission to get him to break, and Jeremy had, time after time, soft whimpers and impassioned moans sliding past his lips as Ben sucked him off.

The man was like a drug for Ben, and it only made him more appealing that he didn't flaunt his sexiness or even act like he realized it. Jeremy was pure, boy-next-door, hot as hell innocence, and for one glorious night, he'd been all Ben's.

Ben could still feel the lingering echoes of Jeremy's eager mouth on his own dick when they'd switched places. The way he'd tongued him from head to base, seeming to know just how hard or gentle to be and where all Ben's pleasure spots were. And how, when he'd taken Ben fully into his mouth and sucked and swallowed with abandon, everything had gone hazy, and rapture had seared through Ben.

"Unnnh, God!" Ben stiffened as his cock erupted in his hand, spilling warm cum over his fingers and onto his belly. He milked it until he'd released every drop, wishing with every squeeze that he wasn't alone tonight.

Drained, but not really satisfied, and feeling lonelier than ever, he reached over to the night stand, grabbed a handful of tissues, and wiped himself clean. DIY was a piss-poor substitute for the real thing. It could never give him what he really wanted...the small town Nebraska hunk with the gentle soul and innocent, sexy smile.

On a scale from one to ten, the sex the night they'd been together, even though they hadn't gone beyond blow jobs, had been a twenty. Ben couldn't even imagine what full-out fucking--him inside Jeremy, or Jeremy pounding him into the bed, would be like. It'd probably set the whole house on fire. And intimacy-wise...well, in Ben's twenty-four years, nine of those actively being with other guys, he'd never experienced anything that could compare. Not even with the couple of longish-term boyfriends he'd had.

Jeremy was, and always had been, everything he'd ever wanted in a man.

Except for one seemingly insurmountable obstacle...his best friend was straight.

Jeremy believed himself to be straight, anyway, and Ben knew he had no business trying to convince him otherwise. It wasn't his place to tell Jeremy they were meant for one another. Because if he did, and if, somehow, he managed to talk Jeremy into being with him, he'd always worry that he'd forced him to do something he might not have come to naturally. And Jeremy might always feel like he'd been coerced. Ben couldn't do that to him.

When he'd awakened alone the morning after Al's party and Jeremy hadn't even been in the house, nor had he come home until long after he thought Ben was in bed the next night, Ben had realized just how freaked Jeremy must be by what had happened. And, damn it, why wouldn't he be? Ben had taken advantage of the fact his straight best friend had had too much to drink, and had taken him to bed.

He didn't know how Jeremy could ever forgive him for that. Ben didn't even know how he could forgive himself for it.

He'd been trying ever since to get Jeremy alone so they could talk, but there hadn't been a chance. He'd been attempting to play it cool when his and Jeremy's paths had crossed this week--which hadn't been much--and act like everything was normal especially in front of Al, who always seemed to be there when Jeremy was around, as if Jeremy purposely timed it

that way. But inside, nothing was further from the truth. Ben wasn't cool. He wasn't okay. He had a boat-load of guilt sitting on his shoulders, and a conscience that wouldn't quit railing at him. And mixed in with it all, he knew he was, and always had been, hopelessly in love with a man who wasn't his to take.

If he felt this bad, and he wasn't even the injured party, he could only imagine how Jeremy must be faring. He was no doubt confused, and probably angry at Ben and maybe even himself. He'd also be feeling guilty because he'd believe he'd betrayed Lisa by sleeping with Ben, and damn it, that was Ben's fault, too. He hadn't even been thinking about Lisa or the fact Jeremy had someone else in his life. He'd only been thinking about how long and how badly he'd wanted his best friend in a way that went inappropriately far beyond friendship. It wasn't something Ben was proud of, and he suspected he'd be kicking his own ass for a long time over that and more.

Add the load of crap Jeremy was already dealing with--his dad's constant phone calls and haranguing--and the man was probably hanging by a thread emotionally. He'd try not to show it in front of anyone, just like he'd tried on the phone this afternoon, because that was Jeremy's way, but he'd be suffering from it all nonetheless.

"I'm so sorry, my friend," Ben whispered, dragging a hand over his eyes.

The slow creak of the front door downstairs opening, then the soft thump of it closing again pulled Ben from his thoughts.

He glanced at the clock next to the bed.

2:40.

Jeremy was just now getting home, and Ben only had himself to blame for that, too. He didn't care how much cramming for exams Jeremy claimed he needed to do, he'd heard his friend say too many times that after midnight his brain was fried and he couldn't accomplish anything academic. Which meant he'd spent the past two and half hours killing time so he didn't have to come home and risk seeing Ben if he was still up. It had been like this all week.

Damn it, I never wanted this to happen. Never wanted to put this distance between us.

He waited to hear Jeremy's footsteps come up the stairs and pass in front of his door on the way to his room next to Ben's.

When they finally did, Ben's heart stalled when he realized they'd stopped in front of his room.

Barely daring to breath, and trying not to make any noise, he slipped out of bed and padded across the rug that covered the hardwood floor to stand in front of the door.

Knock, he silently willed Jeremy. Talk to me.

Seconds passed and nothing happened.

That's it, I'm going out there. But as he was reaching for the knob to do just that, the footsteps moved away, and he heard the door of Jeremy's room open and close.

I don't care. I'm up, he's up...we need to talk.

Ben pulled on a pair of sweatpants and went out into the hall. He paused in front of Jeremy's room, then taking a deep breath, lifted his hand and knocked lightly.

No response.

He tried again, knocking a little harder, not wanting to wake Al and Giselle, but needing to be sure Jeremy had heard him. He couldn't possibly have missed it this time.

But several seconds later, when all stayed silent in the room, Ben curled his hand into a ball at his side in frustration.

"Jeremy...come on, man, please," he called softly, then deciding he had nothing to lose, grasped the doorknob and turned it. Or tried to.

It was locked.

His chest tightening with a hurt he couldn't explain, Ben stepped back and stared blankly at the door. In all the time they'd lived together, he couldn't remember a single time any of them had locked their doors to keep the others out.

And then it hit him, with all the finesse of a wrecking ball to his gut. Jeremy was sending him a message:

Stay back and don't come near me again.

Chapter 3

Jeremy took the last swallow of bitter, too-sweet coffee from the large paper cup, and grimaced as it went down. Then he tossed the empty cup into the wastebasket--to join the other three empties he'd gone through this evening--beneath the study carrel in the library where he'd been camped out for the past week. The caffeine overload had been the only thing keeping him going after too many nights with next to no sleep, but it was beginning to take its toll on him, and not in a good way. His heart raced, his stomach was on edge, and he had a dull, sick headache, though the pain in his temples could just as easily be from sleep deprivation. Or stress, which the caffeine probably wasn't helping.

God, he was a fucking mess.

Pushing his laptop out of the way, he crossed his arms on the desk in front of him and lowered his head onto them.

What he really needed was to go home, fall into bed, and sleep for about twelve straight hours. But at the thought of home, his stomach gave another lurch.

You can't keep hiding from him. He's your best friend.

Jeremy knew it was the truth, and in fact had come painfully close last night to knocking on Ben's door when he got home and trying to sort through everything.

But as he'd stood there, separated from Ben by only a few feet and a piece of wood, instead of coming up with the right words to say, the only thing going through his mind had been erotic visions of them nude, their skin slick with sweat, and their groins thrusting against each other as they rolled around on Ben's bed in the throes of passion. The images had been so powerful, Jeremy could almost smell Ben's clean musk scent and feel the rough but sensual brush of Ben's closely-trimmed goatee as their mouths clashed and their tongues danced. Within moments, he'd had an erection so stiff pressing against the zipper of his jeans it'd hurt.

It was then Jeremy had finally realized the truth of why he hadn't been able to be in the same room alone with Ben since that fateful night. In spite of all his many reservations and worries, and his admonishments that it could never be anything more, he still wanted Ben. In a big, bad, messy way. And it scared the hell out of him.

He didn't know how to face his friend, not because it would be awkward and he didn't know how they could get back to what they'd had before, but because he was terrified he'd embarrass them both by not being able to keep his hands to himself. He was afraid he'd have absolutely no self-control, just like the night of Al's party, but instead of being receptive to his come-on, Ben would push him away and laugh at him for being too inexperienced to realize the first time had only ever been a meaningless one-night stand between two horny guys seeking relief. Then he'd end up looking like a pathetic jerk for thinking there might have been

some magical "more" to it.

The thought of Ben rejecting him, when Jeremy was already scared enough of what this all meant anyway, had driven him to his room, to wallow in his misery alone. He knew he was only prolonging a bad situation, but was afraid the alternate choice would cause him to lose whatever little bit of pride he had left and, more importantly, his best friend.

What he hadn't been prepared for was to have Ben come knocking on his door a couple of minutes later, then call to him and try to come in. Jeremy had been too embarrassed by the size of his erection and the fact he was already partway through jacking off to answer. He was eternally grateful he'd had the presence of mind to lock his door so he wasn't caught in the act, because otherwise his humiliation would have been complete.

Out of habit, and the need for comfort, he reached for his cell phone lying next to his computer and, without lifting his head, opened it and gazed at the picture of the sleeping blue-eyed black man who'd become the center of all his thoughts and desires. He brushed his thumb over the screen, as if it could somehow bring him closer to Ben.

"You're the one I always go to for advice, but what am I supposed to do when you're the one I need advice about?"

His eyes grew heavy as exhaustion caught up to him.

Wham!

The loud sound reverberated against his eardrum, making it ache. And if that hadn't jarred him awake, the shuddering vibration of the desk would have.

Disoriented, Jeremy lifted his head and blinked, trying to make out what had happened. He still felt like hell, so was pretty sure he hadn't dozed for long.

The stack of heavy books on the corner of the desk, just inches from where his head had been, explained the noise. But as his gaze traveled from them to the petite body dressed in black jeans and a pink sweater standing next to the desk, arms crossed over a feminine chest, lips pursed and eyes glimmering with unshed tears, Jeremy's head gave a particularly brutal throb that cleared the last of the cobwebs and left him face-to-face with...

"Lisa," he said, his voice hoarse from sleep and probably more than a little guilt.

"Yeah, me. I'm clearly the last person you want to see right now, since you've been giving me the cold shoulder lately, but you don't always get to have it your way, Jeremy."

"I'm sorry," he murmured, feeling exactly like dung under her shoes, which, he was sure, was what she wanted.

"First of all..." She reached into her canvas book bag hanging over her shoulder and pulled out a wad of dark blue fleece. "Here's your jacket. You left it in class yesterday, and since you couldn't be bothered to even turn around and answer me when I tried to call out to you and tell you, I'm not really sure why I'm bothering to return it. But here you go." She

tossed it at him.

He caught it, wincing as the zipper hit his cheek.

Before he could even say thanks, she continued. "Second...I invited you to come home with me to Pennsylvania for the holidays. I'm leaving after Professor Ivanik's final tomorrow afternoon and need to know if you're still planning to come."

Shit. He'd never dreamed she'd even consider it at this point.

"I didn't think I'd still be invited," he said cautiously.

She shrugged, as if it didn't matter to her one way or another, but he saw hope shining in her eyes...hope that maybe they still had a chance at something.

Jeremy knew he couldn't lead her on. "Under the circumstances, I don't think it's a good idea, Lisa. I appreciate you asking again, but...I can't go with you."

A soft huff of breath escaped her, and she bit her trembling lower lip.

Oh, God, was she going to cry?

"I'm sorry," he said again, not knowing what else to do.

"You can't just stay here in that drafty old house alone for two weeks."

"I won't be alone. Ben's staying, too. His parents are visiting one of his sisters in California for Christmas, and he wants to get some more work done on his thesis anyway. And Al will be there part of the time also."

She let out another huff, then shook her head and her expression hardened. "Fine. Whatever. Don't say I didn't ask. So, I guess that brings me to number three."

She paused, dragging in a deep breath. Jeremy could see her working herself up to a head of steam, which didn't bode well for him. But he kept his mouth shut and didn't try to put her off because he deserved whatever she wanted to dish out. He'd never meant to hurt her, but he had. He'd treated her like crap, and she was right, he had to give her a chance to have her say, no matter how uncomfortable it was for him.

"I've been broken up with before, but never like you did it," she said through clenched teeth, clearly trying to keep her voice down so no one else heard. At eleven-thirty at night the usual evening crowd at the library had begun to thin out, but there were still a few people seated at the carrels here and there in this section.

"There's always a reason, Jeremy. Always. But you...you didn't bother giving me one. You show up at my dorm at seven o'clock in the morning, looking like death warmed over, and tell me, 'I really do care about you, Lisa, but I can't see you anymore.'" Then, before I can even say a word or ask why or...or anything, you take off. Do you know how shitty that was? You just don't get to do that to somebody!" she said, jabbing a finger into his chest.

Jeremy flinched at the first stab, then grimaced with each consecutive one.

"It took me half the night tonight to track you down and find out where you'd been hiding. So now I'm here and I want to know what happened. You owe me that much."

"I..." He tried to swallow, but his throat felt tight. "Lisa..."

"No more avoidance. I want to know what the hell's going on. Do you think I didn't notice your lack of interest in me since school started this fall? Or the way you kept hinting around about how I could see other people if I wanted? You've barely touched me in months. That's not normal, Jeremy. But I thought...thought..."

Oh, God, here came the tears. They cut a bigger hole in him than her words. He stood and tried to reach for her to comfort her, but she slapped his hand away.

"No! You don't get to do that anymore. You've made it clear you don't give a damn about me."

"That's not true. I do care."

"Oh, bullshit! You know what I think? I think that over the summer you met some other girl and you've been seeing her behind my back all this time. That's why you didn't want to have sex with me, 'cause you were already getting it from somewhere else."

"No. Nothing like that happened."

"Yeah, right. So what happened last week? Did she give you an ultimatum--'Break up with your other girlfriend or I won't give it up anymore?'"

"N--"

She cut him off with a wave of her hand. "Don't play games with me. I know there's someone else. I just can't believe I was stupid enough not to realize it all this time. Cheryl and Terri tried to tell me, but I wouldn't listen. I thought maybe you were just upset about stuff at home, with your family, and that's why you were so distant for so long. God, I was so stupid!"

Her voice was beginning to carry and Jeremy saw a couple of heads shift in their direction, trying to hear what was going on.

Keeping his own volume low, he said, "Lisa, I swear to you, I haven't been seeing another girl. I just..." He tried to touch her again, but she jerked away, and his hands fell hopelessly to his sides. "I just...I needed some space."

"Oh, please. That's got to be the oldest one in the book. It's shorthand for, 'I found someone else to fuck.' Why can't you just be honest with me?"

Jeremy dragged a hand through his hair, feeling sick from the churning lump of hot tar in his gut. "I'm trying," he croaked, feeling backed against a wall and not knowing what to do about it.

"Yeah, well I know a better way to find out." Lisa reached down to the desk next to him.

In the heartbeat it took Jeremy to realize what she was doing, she'd already snatched up the object she'd been going for.

Oh no...

She waved his closed cell phone in front of his eyes. "The great tell-all."

He tried to grab it back, but wasn't fast enough.

"Do you think I, along with everyone else, hasn't noticed how you've been glued to this damn thing recently? So let's find out who you've really been sexting with, Jeremy."

"I haven't been sexting with anyone, I swear. Please, just give it back."

"Tell me who you've been talking to."

"No one! Lisa...please..."

But it was too late. She'd already opened it. And Jeremy knew exactly what she was seeing, what was front and center on the phone's screen.

Her eyes grew wide and her face turned pale. "Oh, my God."

And just like that, everything inside Jeremy turned to ice and shut down.

Lisa's shocked gaze lifted to him, and in a voice that sounded just short of horrified, she whispered, "You and Ben?"

"It's not like that," Jeremy mumbled, having trouble forming words.

"What do you mean it's not like that? According to this picture, it's totally like that. What normal guy keeps a nude picture of his male roommate on his phone and stares at it constantly? Oh, God..."

She let the phone fall from her hand to the carpet and took a step back from him, as if she'd just discovered he had the plague.

Jeremy's chest crushed at the open repulsion in her stare.

"I should have realized...should have known Ben would be a bad influence on you. Ever since you told me he was...was a faggot."

"Don't call him that! And you've always liked Ben," Jeremy protested. "You always got along with him fine."

"Yeah, well I wasn't dating him. I wasn't sleeping with him. But I was sleeping with you. And now you..." She took another step back. "You and he...you're both fags. Oh, God."

"Stop saying that!" Jeremy was close to the snapping point.

"I can't be here anymore. I can't..." Tears slid down her cheeks.

She darted closer just long enough to pick up the library books she'd dropped on the desk earlier, and her book bag, which had fallen to the floor at some point, then she scurried back again like she was afraid he might taint her.

She gave him one final, accusing look. "How could you do this?" she whispered.

Then she turned her back on him and ran.

Chapter 4

Ben had had enough.

Tonight, when Jeremy got home, no matter how late it was, they were going to hash it out for better or worse.

The locked door last night had killed him slowly, and he wasn't going to go through that again. If Jeremy wanted to lock him out, then Ben was going to damn well know why, then do everything he could to change Jeremy's mind.

He cared too much about the man to let this continue any longer. Ben was planning to be downstairs waiting for him when he arrived.

However, Jeremy's earlier than usual return home caught him off guard. Still in his bedroom, Ben was trying to slog through a research book for his thesis, though he was too unsettled to concentrate and had been reading the same page over and over, when he heard the front door open and close downstairs. Surprised, he glanced at the clock and saw it was only one-twenty in the morning. Jeremy hadn't been home a single night the past week before two-thirty or three.

He placed a piece of paper between the pages to mark his spot, closed the book, and set it aside, then moved to the edge of the bed. Should he go downstairs or wait until Jeremy came up and catch him in the hall?

His heart thrummed way too fast in his chest, and Ben realized his palms were sweaty like a kid waiting to be disciplined for something naughty he'd done.

Which wasn't too far from the truth, he thought morosely. He'd done something with Jeremy he never should have, and now it was time to pay the price. He had to apologize and do whatever it took to make things right between them again. Even if it meant reburying his own desires in the tightly locked box he'd kept them in for years, and be Jeremy's friend, and only his friend, from here on out.

He closed his eyes against the memory of the warm weight of Jeremy's body on his, how his mouth felt beneath Ben's, how he tasted, and smelled, and the sound of his soft moans.

Ben sucked in a breath. He didn't know how he could go back to living without that, knowing now what it was like. It would torture him, but damn it, he'd do it if it meant keeping Jeremy in his life.

He glanced at the clock and was startled to realize almost ten minutes had passed but Jeremy had yet to come upstairs.

Worry took over Ben's thoughts.

Had Jeremy decided to sleep on the couch downstairs, maybe because it would make it easier to get away in the morning? Or because--a disturbing thought hit him--because after

last night, he was afraid Ben might try to get in his room again? The thought that Jeremy might be afraid of him hurt worse than anything Ben had experienced yet.

This had to stop. He didn't know what he was going to say to fix things, but he had to try.

He slid off the bed and crept out of his room.

The bedrooms stayed pretty warm in the winter with the doors shut, but the hallway and the rooms downstairs tended toward the chilly side at night. Ben's gym shorts and long-sleeved T-shirt didn't give much protection, nor did his socks against the hardwood floor. But he was too worried about what was going on with Jeremy to bother finding something warmer to put on.

The hallway was dark, as were the stairs. Only the dim glow from the low-watt light burning over the kitchen sink downstairs lit his way, which wasn't much help.

He went straight to the couch in the living room, expecting to find Jeremy on it, but it was empty. As was the recliner.

Where?

Turning, he peered into the kitchen...and his chest tightened at the sight.

Jeremy, who didn't appear to have heard Ben come downstairs, sat with his back to Ben. He was bent over the table, his head resting on his arms. For a split second Ben thought maybe he'd fallen asleep that way, but then he saw the broad shoulders shake and heard a quiet sob that tore at his heart.

Oh, babe...

He hesitated, wondering if maybe he should go back upstairs and let Jeremy have some peace. He'd obviously intruded on a private moment. But the thought was fleeting. His best friend was in pain, and, as it had always been, when Jeremy hurt, so did Ben. He couldn't leave him like this.

Quietly, not wanting to startle Jeremy, but not wanting him to feel like he'd been sneaking up on him either, Ben backtracked to the stairs, then made a point of stepping on the squeaky, loose floorboard at the bottom right of them.

As he entered the kitchen, he saw Jeremy drag the back of a hand over his eyes and sit up.

In spite of his promise to himself to keep things "friends only," Ben's fingers slid over the nape of Jeremy's neck, just beneath the soft brown waves of hair that brushed against it, and began to knead the knotted muscles. For a split second Jeremy stiffened, then his shoulders relaxed and he leaned back into Ben's touch. The simple action, acknowledging the contact and asking for more, filled Ben with relief and another emotion he couldn't think about right now.

"What can I do to help?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

For several seconds, there was no answer. Then Jeremy sniffed and finally shrugged. He didn't look at Ben. "Nothing. I'm okay. Just a really long day."

All his instincts told Ben something far more than a long day had happened. Something had brought Jeremy to the breaking point, and Ben was afraid some, or maybe all, of it was his fault. He'd been there with Jeremy through a lot of crap, and he hadn't seen him this low since his mom died. Ben's heart ached, wanting to hold him and fix everything, but he was afraid if he pushed, he'd scare Jeremy away.

So instead he opted for offering a different kind of comfort. "You've had a lot of really long days lately. Did you eat anything tonight?" His own mom had always said everything felt better after a hot meal and a cup of tea.

Another shrug. Then a sigh. "No," he said quietly.

Ben gave his neck a final, gentle squeeze before he moved around the table to the refrigerator and began pulling out stuff to make sandwiches. It wasn't a hot meal, but he hoped it would help. And they always kept tea bags in the canister on the counter.

They didn't speak while he worked. At least Jeremy wasn't bolting away, which felt like progress.

When he'd finished, Ben set a plate with two ham sandwiches in front of his friend, along with a mug of hot tea laced with honey, lemon and a shot of brandy, then sat opposite him cradling a mug of his own. There wasn't enough liquor in the tea to fog up anyone's thinking--Ben didn't want to risk that again--just enough, he hoped, to take the edge off Jeremy's pain.

"Thanks." Jeremy took a sip of the tea and finally looked up at Ben. His eyes were red and still damp, but there was no anger or accusation in them, as Ben had feared. Instead, he saw exhaustion. And sadness. And a troubled torment that bothered him more than he could say.

They stared at each other a long moment and Ben felt himself drowning in those beautiful, troubled eyes.

"Jeremy..."

The sound of a door upstairs opening and closing, then footsteps on the stairs not even trying to be quiet, silenced him. He looked toward the stairwell, then back at Jeremy, worried how Jeremy would deal with the interruption in his current state.

As Ben watched, his friend took a deep breath, as if resigning himself to something, sat up straight and plastered a neutral, pleasant expression on his face that hid his internal distress. At least it probably hid it from anyone else--not Ben. He wondered how many times Jeremy had stifled his true feelings and troubles behind that facade. He suspected it was a defensive gesture leftover from years of living with his verbally abusive father. It tore at Ben's heart and

made him want to wrap his arms around him, hold him close, and protect him from anymore crap in his life.

Al, a tall, lanky blond reminiscent of a young Matthew McConaughey, stumbled into the kitchen bare-assed naked.

"Howdy, roomies," he said, yawning. "What the hell's everyone doin' up at this hour?"

"Having something to eat," Jeremy said, picking up a sandwich and taking a bite for the first time, as if he'd just remembered the food was there. "Want some? I have a spare." He pushed his plate toward him.

Al waved it off. "Nah, thanks. Not hungry. Thirsty."

He circled the table, headed toward the refrigerator, coming just inches from Ben with a bare hip, and didn't seem the least concerned about his lengthy one-eyed snake dangling free for all to see. Typical Al.

"You do realize, when you walk around like this, that you live with a gay man, right?" Ben said.

Standing in front of the open refrigerator, Al looked over his shoulder and gave Ben the sexy, teasing, wide-ass grin that kept women constantly banging on their door. You just couldn't get irritated at the man when he smiled like that. He wiggled his shapely butt, then slapped it. "Hell, I know I'm hot," he said in his slow Texas drawl. "I don't mind puttin' on a show for whoever wants to ogle me. You can look all you want, baby...just no touching."

Ben and Jeremy shared a familiar look--one that fell somewhere between a silent snicker and an eye roll--and, for a brief moment, Ben almost felt like the awkwardness of the past week had never happened and they were okay again. But then he remembered watching Jeremy put on his "I'm okay" mask minutes before, and knew this was just part of the act.

"Did you ever meet anyone with such a big damn ego?" Jeremy deadpanned.

"Hey, if ya got it, ya might as well flaunt it, I say," Al said, slamming the fridge shut, twisting the top off a beer bottle, and taking several long swigs of the amber liquid. "Ah, much better." He cupped his sac and half-hard dick, giving them a squeeze. "Now I might just have the strength to go back up there, wake up my little darlin' and have another round."

Ben shook his head. "You're incorrigible, man."

"I'd go with lecherous," Jeremy said.

"Maybe lascivious," Ben suggested.

"Promiscuous."

"Salacious."

"Oversexed."

"Him?" Ben snorted. "Never. I don't think it's possible for him to get too much."

"If you boys are done tossin' around words I'm sure you memorized for your SATs so long ago, I prefer just plain 'horny.' There's nothin' wrong with a man havin' his needs met as often as possible. You might try it sometime, you two, before your dicks shrivel up from lack of use."

Ben saw Jeremy wince, as if the mere mention of their dicks was more than he could handle at the moment.

"But I'll share a little secret with you," Al continued, obviously not catching Jeremy's reaction.

"What's that?" Ben asked dryly. He loved Al, but right now he wanted him gone so he could have Jeremy alone again and find out what was going on in that troubled soul of his.

"I do believe the delicious nibble of honey lying in my bed upstairs is the one."

"The one?" Jeremy asked. Then his eyebrows rose and genuine interest seemed to perk him up. "As in 'the one'?"

"That's right. I don't just pick 'em for their looks, ya know? That little gal up there may have the body of a porn siren, but she's got brains to go along with it. She's at the top of our class, will graduate Summa Cum Laude, and has already been admitted to Harvard Law. She's also wrapped her fingers around my heart and I'm pretty sure she's not plannin' to let go. So watch and weep, my friends. A few years from now, that's the girl I'm gonna marry."

He gave them one more jaunty grin, then sauntered out of the kitchen, leaving Ben and Jeremy to stare at his flexing backside.

"I think he might mean it," Jeremy murmured.

"Damn. I think you might be right. Who knew Al had it in him to settle down with one woman?"

The question didn't exactly demand an answer, and silence stretched between them. Jeremy's shoulders had slumped again, and the pain was back in his eyes. He continued to drink the tea, at least.

"Did you talk to your dad?" Ben asked, reaching for something to break the silence and lead back into the conversation they really needed to have. And for all he knew, his dad might have caused him more problems today and be the reason for his low state.

Jeremy took a bite of sandwich, chewed, swallowed, then set it down on the plate as a shoulder-wracking sigh tore through him. "Yeah. I called him yesterday, after I got off the phone with you."

"How'd it go?"

"How it always goes. He pushed, I wouldn't give in, he pushed some more and threatened to come down here and drag my ass home, and I told him to back the fuck off. He called me ungrateful and several other names I don't really want to repeat and then we hung up. I'm pretty sure he's back on the sauce. I wondered last year at Christmas 'cause of how he acted,

but I didn't find any evidence. Now, though..."

"He was sober for several years, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, he dried up my senior year of high school. Mom gave him an ultimatum. But with her gone, who knows."

Unable to bear the distance between them any longer, Ben moved into the chair next to Jeremy. "I'm sorry, Jeremy. And not just about your dad."

He rested his hand atop Jeremy's on the table, not sure if the gesture would be accepted or rejected, but needing to try.

Much to his surprise, Jeremy turned his hand palm up and curled his fingers through Ben's. The action felt so right, Ben's throat clogged.

"Talk to me," Ben urged.

Jeremy stared at their joined hands for several long seconds. "I'm sorry, too," he whispered. "I've been avoiding you."

"It's okay. You've had every right to. I screwed up. I know that."

Jeremy's head lifted and his gaze suddenly burned into Ben's. "How can you say that? I was the one. I..." He swallowed hard. "I came onto you."

His admission surprised Ben. He wasn't sure how much Jeremy had remembered. Wasn't sure how much alcohol he'd had when it happened. But clearly it wasn't so much that Jeremy didn't recall the details of how their encounter had started.

"I know you did. But you'd been drinking, and I should have stopped things before they went any further than kissing."

Jeremy swallowed again, and his shoulders sagged almost as if in defeat. "I was afraid of that...afraid you regretted it. I was bad, wasn't I? I'm sorry."

"What?" Ben stared at him, trying to figure out how Jeremy possibly could think such a thing.

Jeremy wouldn't meet his gaze again. "I'd never done anything like that before. Never been with..." His voice caught. "With a man before."

"I know. Which is why I shouldn't have let it happen. I took advantage of you and the situation. I was the one with all my faculties that night, but instead of standing strong, I let you down, I took you to bed and..." Ben dragged in a shaky breath. "I should have stopped it so I didn't put you in this awkward position. But trust me, it has nothing to do with regret or you not being amazing."

Jeremy shook his head like he didn't believe him. "You haven't said anything to me about it since it happened. I thought..." He sighed. "I thought maybe it was forgettable for you." The last was said in a quiet, uncertain voice.

"Forgettable?" Ben almost choked on the word. "I didn't say anything because you were gone when I woke up and you haven't been around in days. And when we have had face time, Al's been right there as well, and I didn't think you'd appreciate me airing our personal issues in front of him. But forgettable? How in the hell could I forget what ended up being the best night of my life?"

As Jeremy's eyes widened, Ben's heart skipped a beat. He hadn't meant to let that out, didn't want to pressure Jeremy. But now that it was out, he wouldn't take it back. It was the truth.

Ben reached for him with his free hand, tipping Jeremy's face up so Ben could look into his eyes. "Jeremy, you were perfect." Now it was his voice that cracked with emotion. "Everything about you that night was perfect. I wouldn't have changed anything."

"Except you wished I hadn't been drinking because you think that's the only reason I was with you," Jeremy whispered, lines creasing his forehead.

Ben winced. "I--"

"Two."

The strange change of topic threw Ben. "Two?"

"You said you were the one who had a clear head, like you thought I was sloshed. But I wasn't. Two beers. That's all I'd had all night. I wasn't drunk, Ben. I wasn't even buzzed. I knew exactly what I was doing when I kissed you. I wanted it, and whatever it might lead to."

Jeremy's revelation shocked Ben into silence. He'd wanted it? He wasn't drunk or even tipsy? The implications of what he was saying shook Ben to the core. "For how long?" he finally managed to get out. "How long did you...want it."

"I don't know," Jeremy whispered. "A while, I think. You were always on my mind. I just didn't realize it, wasn't willing to admit it to myself, until the night of Al's party. Then there was a moment and, I don't know, I didn't really plan it, I just...I just acted on it, followed my heart. It seemed like the right thing to do...at the time."

Ben had been about to tell him just how long he'd wanted it, too, but Jeremy's last words stopped him cold and had his chest tightening all over again. "At the time? But not now?"

"I'm not sure. I'm not sure about anything anymore, Ben." He rubbed his eyes. "I feel like I'm going crazy and being pulled apart and I don't know how to make it stop."

Chapter 5

Jeremy hated this. Hated the guilty look on Ben's face that shouldn't be there. This wasn't Ben's fault. It was his own. He'd been the aggressor. He'd been the one who wanted to see where the kiss would lead.

And when it was over, he'd been the one who couldn't face it and had run.

Just like fucking always. The story of his life. He'd gone to college out of state so he could run away from his issues at home. He'd run from Lisa, and even with her words and reaction tonight still eating like a cancer at his insides, he knew she'd deserved better than what he'd done to her. And now he'd started something with Ben that scared the hell out of him, and so he'd run again.

That seemed to be what he did best, pushing everyone away, shutting them out because he was too scared to make the hard decisions and be honest with the people in his life and himself.

"I never wanted to cause you any pain," Ben said, his blue eyes radiating a sadness that made Jeremy feel like curling into a ball and crying, like he had as a kid when his dad had gone off on a particularly cruel rant and everything in his life had seemed so unfair.

"I know that. I told you, none of this is your fault. I'm...I..."

Jeremy pulled his hand free from Ben's, stood and paced across the kitchen to stand in front of the sink. "I feel like a bad person."

"How can you say that?"

"Because I was selfish and wanted something so much I started a chain of events without thinking about the consequences. And now, not only have I fucked up other people's lives because of it, I'm too damned scared to move forward. And I can't move back either because it's too late. So I'm stuck in this godforsaken limbo that feels an awful lot like hell, and I don't know what to do to get out of it."

Ben moved up behind him, and just having him close again caused a warm tingle to spread through Jeremy's body. It wasn't sexual, or at least not wholly. More like...intimate and comforting and arousing all at the same time. Missing the physical connection of holding his hand, Jeremy ached to have Ben touch him again. But he didn't. And Jeremy didn't trust himself to be the one to reach out, afraid of crossing a line he shouldn't cross, or asking for more than he should. He didn't know what the rules were, or even where he and Ben stood right now.

God, he wished he knew what to do, what was expected of him. He was so fucking lost.

"Can I ask you a question?" Ben asked softly.

"Yeah." He had nothing left to hide. He was raw from all the hiding.

"Do you love Lisa?"

Pain flared in his gut at the vision of her face tonight, staring at him like he was an abomination. "No. I cared about her, but our relationship was never that deep. I broke up with her the morning after you and I were together."

"You did?" He heard the surprise in Ben's voice.

"That's where I went when I left you. It was the only fair thing to do for her."

"What did you tell her?"

Jeremy grimaced. "Nothing. I just said it was over." His fingers clutched the cabinet at the edge of the sink, squeezing so tight his knuckles turned white.

His voice dropped to a whisper. "I was scared to tell her the truth, Ben. Not that I'd cheated on her with someone else, but with who. Except..." He tried to swallow, and found he couldn't. "Except...that decision came back to bite me in the ass tonight."

Exhaustion washed over him and suddenly became unbearable. He rubbed his eyes, fighting the damp burn behind his lids, and, unbidden, a sob shook him. Embarrassed that he hadn't been strong enough to keep his emotions from surfacing again, he tried to move away.

But the warm heat of Ben's body pressed against him from behind. He turned Jeremy and wordlessly pulled him into his arms. Tired of fighting it, Jeremy gave in, wrapped his arms around Ben's waist, and buried his face in his neck. For the first time all night, he felt like he was being offered a lifeline...and he clung to it for all he was worth.

"It's going to be okay, babe. It's going to be okay." Ben kissed Jeremy's temple, his hair. His hand stroked up and down Jeremy's back, the motion soothing and so much more.

Eventually, Jeremy lifted his head, and when he did, Ben cupped his cheek in one splayed hand and pressed a kiss, warm and gentle, to his lips. And then another. It felt like the most natural thing in the world for Jeremy to lean in for a third, his lips parted, asking, and Ben's responding without hesitation. When they finally separated, and Jeremy opened his eyes, it was to discover Ben gazing at him with the same enigmatic and breath-stealing emotion Jeremy remembered from the night they'd spent together.

"What happened tonight?" Ben asked, lines of concern etching his face.

Jeremy squeezed his eyes closed. "Lisa tracked me down at the library and confronted me. I've been avoiding her, too, and she was upset because I didn't give her a reason for breaking up. She got it into her mind that I'd been seeing another girl for the past several months."

"Why would she think that?"

"Because we hadn't slept together since before she left to go home for the summer."

That news seemed to surprise Ben. "Why?"

Crap. This was so fucking hard. How was he supposed to talk about this? But Jeremy decided that if he couldn't talk to Ben honestly, then he didn't deserve him as a friend or anything else. "I...I couldn't really..." He struggled for the words.

Ben gave him a knowing and sympathetic look. "You couldn't get turned on by her?"

Jeremy nodded, feeling heat slide up his cheeks. "I didn't know how to tell her that, so I just started making excuses. Then when I broke up with her, she decided the reason I'd been holding her at arm's length was because of another woman. I told her that wasn't the case, but she just kept getting angrier and more insistent. And then she took my phone 'cause she thought I was sexting with someone, but when she opened it she saw..."

Jeremy closed his eyes again.

"Saw what?"

Jeremy opened his eyes, slid his hand down into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out his cell. Without saying a word, he handed it Ben.

Ben looked at him, silently questioning, then at the phone. Finally, he opened it.

Jeremy braced himself for Ben's reaction.

He wasn't sure what he'd expected, but the low, soft huff of breath that slid from Ben's mouth was the only indicator he'd even seen the picture. And it didn't tell Jeremy anything, good or bad, one way or the other.

"I'm sorry," he said, feeling another rush of heat flaming his cheeks. "I know I shouldn't have taken it without you knowing. I just...I wanted something to keep. From that night. Because I didn't think we'd ever be together like that again."

"And you've looked at it, since you took it?"

"All the time," Jeremy admitted in a whisper.

Could this be any more humiliating? He felt like some kind of opportunistic voyeur. What could Ben possibly think of him now?

Ben finally lifted his head and met Jeremy's gaze. Were his eyes...twinkling?

"I think I'm flattered," Ben said, his voice sounding strangely breathless.

Before Jeremy could respond, Ben grasped the back of his head and pulled him into a kiss. Not a mere whisper of lips this time, but a kiss that was deep and sensual and groin-tingling. By the time Ben broke the contact, Jeremy was weak-kneed, hard as granite, and having trouble pulling air into his lungs.

"That's not the way Lisa reacted," Jeremy said, stunned.

Ben smiled. "I bet not." Then his expression turned sympathetic again. "Did she totally freak?"

Somehow, just talking to Ben about it, listening to his calm, deep voice, and having him treat it like a regular subject, without making it into a big drama, was already taking away some of the sick pain Jeremy had felt at the library with Lisa.

"Yeah. Big time freaked. I know I hurt her, I know part of her reaction was probably defensive, but she said some things, and looked at me like..." He shuddered and dragged a hand through his hair, still tortured by the way she'd reacted. "Like I..."

"Like you were a pervert? A deviant?"

Jeremy nodded, grimacing as the dull ache in his stomach flared up again, and a weight settled on his chest.

But once again Ben was there, stroking his back and offering himself as a solid anchor for Jeremy's storm tossed ship. "You're not," he said matter-of-factly. "Not either of those things or anything else anyone might try to label you. You're Jeremy Reynolds, a man and an amazing human being. You don't need anyone's labels, good, bad or otherwise, to define you. You define yourself. And that's all that matters."

Jeremy swallowed hard. "She was so angry, though. She called you and me faggots. I was pissed when she said that, but also appalled. And all I could think of was, 'Is this how it is for Ben all the time? For anyone who...who doesn't fit into the perfect box of what society thinks is an acceptable relationship?' It scared me, Ben. It scared me a lot."

Ben brushed his thumb across Jeremy's lower lip. "There are always going to be people who don't understand. Who don't want to understand. But you can't live your life in fear because of them. All you can do is live the life you know is right for yourself."

His heart in his throat, Jeremy asked, "But I always feel so torn inside over the right thing to do. How do I know for sure what's right for me?"

"You have to ask yourself what you want, and be brutally honest when you answer." Ben's voice was husky. "What do you want, Jeremy? Right here." He pressed a palm against Jeremy's chest, directly over his heart, and the warmth of it seared into him. "Everyone else and all the other stuff be damned. What do you really want?"

"Right now?"

"Right now. Tomorrow. Ten years from now."

There was only one answer. One thing that burned inside him with desperation. "You," Jeremy whispered. "I want you."

Ben's gaze churned with emotion.

"But it doesn't matter...unless you want me, too." The words felt like broken glass scraping over his throat. He hoped...but he didn't know for sure. Couldn't assume.

"Haven't you figured it out yet?" Ben said quietly. "Jeremy, I've wanted you since the very first day I met you, beginning of fall semester, in the dorm laundry room, four and a half years

ago."

At Jeremy's sharp intake of surprised breath and widened eyes, Ben smiled. "You were barefoot, and wearing faded blue jeans that clung to your ass, and a white T-shirt that showed off your summer tan."

"You remember that?"

"Oh, yeah. I thought you were one of the hottest guys I'd ever seen. But then I looked into your eyes, and you smiled that sweet, sexy smile, and I knew."

"Knew?"

"To borrow a line from Al, I knew you were the one."

"But I was straight."

"I know. But I told you, it wasn't just physical. I liked you as a person. I liked how we could talk for hours about anything. How no matter where we were, we always had fun together. So we became friends. And I've never, ever regretted that. I would have gladly have lived out my life as your friend, if that's all it could ever be. But I never stopped wanting more. I never stopped...wishing. Why do you think I had no will to resist you that night at Al's party?"

"Because I was offering exactly what you'd always hoped for?"

Ben nodded. His eyes, now darkened almost to indigo, smoldered with unmistakable need, but also held a hint of vulnerability. It was the vulnerability that slammed Jeremy in the solar plexus as he realized this shift in their relationship was as scary for Ben as it was for him. Ben had guarded his secret for years to protect their friendship, and it was as hard for him to bare his soul to Jeremy as it had been for Jeremy to open up and confess the truth to him. They both had so much to lose.

But then, with the rush of clarity he'd sought all week, he suddenly knew they had even more to gain. They had everything to gain. If only they were willing to take the chance.

He knew what he wanted. And so did Ben.

Throwing aside the last of his fear, Jeremy opened the door to everything he'd been holding inside, and let it pour free.

Grasping Ben's face between his hands, he captured his mouth in a deep, demanding kiss. The impetus pushed Ben back against the refrigerator.

The appliance shook from the impact and something on top of it fell over with a thunk.

Ben's eyes widened at Jeremy's sudden assault, but then his expression flooded with a hungry need that matched Jeremy's own. His hands came up to burrow in Jeremy's hair, pulling him closer. Their tongues dueled, sliding and thrusting, each learning the other's mouth all over again. Their groins did the same, matching the rhythm with sensual abandon.

Jeremy raked his hands beneath Ben's shirt, touching firm, warm skin over ripped muscle. Not satisfied with just that, wanting to see and feel the body he hadn't been able to stop think-

ing about, he shoved up the soft fabric, and their mouths tore apart only long enough for him to drag the shirt over Ben's head and throw it aside. They slammed back together...until Ben was ripping Jeremy's shirt over his head as well.

Finally, bare skin pressed against bare skin, and Jeremy grew almost dizzy at the contact.

"Jesus, you feel so good," Ben said. His lips left Jeremy's mouth and kissed a hot, wet path down his neck to his shoulder.

Jeremy tipped his head back to give him better access, then moaned as Ben sucked the sensitive spot until it stung, leaving what Jeremy knew would be a hickey. The thought of being marked by Ben caused a new aching tightness in his groin.

When Ben's mouth moved lower, to suck one of Jeremy's nipples, and his hands quickly unbuckled Jeremy's belt, popped the snap on his jeans, slid down the zipper, and palmed his cock through his briefs, the tightness became a blaze, spreading through his balls and up his spine.

"Oh, God!" Jeremy groaned as the multitude of sensations sent him spiraling deeper into the fire sweeping over him.

He almost lost his footing and clung to Ben's shoulders when, this time, it was Ben pushing him backward with determination. Jeremy's butt hit the kitchen table, causing the heavy oak to shudder. The salt and pepper shakers slid off the end and crashed to the floor. The tea in the half-full mugs sloshed over the top. Ben pushed down Jeremy's underwear and jeans just enough for his dick to spring free. It bounced up and hit Jeremy's lower abdomen with a soft, damp smack.

Still clutching Ben's shoulders, he groaned again in bliss when Ben's mouth, hot and suctioning, closed over his cockhead, then slowly swallowed him deeper and deeper into its depths.

Like déjà vu, or a vivid recurring dream, he peered down to see his dick buried to the hilt in the sexiest mouth alive, and find Ben gazing up at him with a look that promised nights just like this one for as long as Jeremy wanted them.

In a sensual daze, he lifted a hand to Ben's face, letting his fingertips graze along Ben's cheek. "Do you know," he moaned softly, "that every time I've closed my eyes all week, all I've been able to see is you, just like this?"

Ben let Jeremy's cock slide free, then he kissed his way up Jeremy's belly, licking up the droplets of pre-cum that had splashed on him when his cock slapped his skin, delving into his navel until Jeremy squirmed, following the faint triangle of dark hair up his sternum, laving a strip along the line of his throat, then capturing Jeremy's mouth again, letting Jeremy taste himself on Ben's tongue.

It was so fucking erotic he almost came. Only a tight squeeze of his hand prevented it.

"Damn that's hot," Ben murmured, pulling away far enough to look down and watch Jeremy manhandle himself back into submission. He gave Jeremy a come-hither smile. "Let's go upstairs and I'll give you a place to set that big boy free and let it do what it really wants."

Jeremy's mouth went dry. His dick spasmed. "Fuck," he whispered.

Ben's smile turned even hotter and full of mischief. "That's what I'm saying. And the sooner we get there, the faster you can make it happen." He crooked a finger at Jeremy, then took off at a run toward the stairs.

His heart pounding, Jeremy stood, yanked his jeans back up over his ass, and started to go after him. But he caught his foot on one of the chairs and stumbled, causing the chair to slam against the wall with a bang, and himself to fall. He barely managed to catch himself on one outstretched hand and a knee to keep from doing a full face-plant on the ceramic tile. "Shit!"

They were being as loud as Al usually was--hell, maybe worse. He was surprised their roommate hadn't already come to investigate. There was no way they'd be hiding this new chapter in their relationship from Al after tonight. And oddly enough, the idea of Al knowing he and Ben were lovers didn't bother Jeremy. It almost...excited him. Because having someone else know about them made it feel... Real? And not a dream any longer?

Real. This was real. A shit-eating smile curved Jeremy's lip.

Ben's head poked around the doorframe. He grinned when he saw Jeremy. "Do you think you and the floor might be finishing up your love-in anytime soon? 'Cause I was under the impression you and I had a date."

"Fuck you." The grin wouldn't go away as Jeremy pushed himself upright off the floor.

"I thought we already determined that. Maybe you just need some more enticement." Ben pushed down his gym shorts and stepped out of them. In an Al-like move, except far, far more erotic to Jeremy, Ben wrapped a hand around his cock with one hand, and gave it several slow strokes, and with the other, rolled and tugged on his balls.

"Fucking hell," Jeremy breathed.

But Ben wasn't done. With a steamy look, he turned around and bent over to pick up his shorts. His round, muscular ass was pointed right at Jeremy, the cheeks slightly spread, giving Jeremy a view of what he had to look forward to.

His mind hazed over with lust, and by the time Ben was straightening up, giving him a "Come and get me if you dare," look over his shoulder and starting toward the stairs, Jeremy was already in motion again himself.

They reached Ben's room at the same time. Once they were inside and the door was shut, their mouths crashed together. Then Jeremy kicked off his shoes and Ben finished stripping

him out of his jeans and briefs.

They fell on the bed in a tangle of hot kisses, warm bodies, fondling hands, and thrusting groins. There was too much sexual tension between them to go slow. Ben rolled onto his back and pulled Jeremy on top of him.

Without needing to be asked, Jeremy yanked open the drawer of the nightstand next to the bed and, as he'd suspected he would, found condoms and lube. He sheathed and slicked himself, and then guessing more was better in this situation, squirted extra lube onto his fingers.

Ben, his eyes burning, raised his knees.

His heart throbbing so hard it was difficult to breathe, Jeremy found the tight pucker beneath Ben's scrotum and, with a nod from Ben, pushed a slippery finger into his lover.

Ben's hips lifted off the bed and his lips parted in a half-moan, half-sigh.

Encouraged, Jeremy worked his finger in and out in slow motion, amazed at how tight and hot the passage was, and wondering how he'd ever get his cock inside. But as he stroked and swirled his finger, then discovered he could slip a second one in as well, he found the tight rings of muscle were far more pliable than he'd thought.

Between the way Ben's hips thrashed on the bed, his muscles fluttered around Jeremy's fingers, and the low moans coming from him, Jeremy felt a flash of deep-seated arousal inside himself, causing his own ass to clench. He began to wonder how it would feel to be on the receiving end like Ben was. He imagined how Ben's fingers would feel inside him, stretching and probing. What it would be like to have his cock, slick with lube, and throbbing, buried in the depths of Jeremy's body. He shuddered, and squeezed his eyes closed as his own dick once again threatened to misbehave.

"You want this, too?" Ben asked, a knowing smile curving his full lips.

"How does it feel?"

"Incredible."

"Is it okay...to want...both?"

"It's definitely okay. Whatever you want, babe. All you ever have to do is ask."

Jeremy suddenly leaned forward and kissed Ben. "I need you to know something."

One of Ben's hands came up to comb through his hair. "What's that?"

"I love you. Is that okay, too?"

Ben's pupils dilated and for a moment it felt like he stopped breathing. Then he let out a long, shaky exhale and Jeremy swore he saw a glint of dampness in Ben's eyes. "It's more than okay."

"You aren't going to tell me it's crazy and I haven't been with you long enough to feel that way?"

"We've been together in every way except physically for over four years. And how can I tell you it's crazy when I feel the same way about you?"

Jeremy bit his lip and wondered if his heart was supposed to feel like it was going to explode out of his chest. "Yeah?" he whispered.

"Oh, yeah. I love you, Jeremy." Ben's voice, so deep and husky, slid like liquid heat over Jeremy's skin and along his veins.

"I want to be in you now."

"Do it. I'm all yours."

Jeremy rose between to his knees and re-lubed his erection. Then he lifted Ben's legs to his shoulders, and staring into Ben's luminous blue eyes, he filled him.

Holy mother.

Jeremy's eyelids fluttered closed in ecstasy.

"Again," he heard Ben say, his voice breathless.

Jeremy slid out partway, already missing the closeness, then ploughed in again, harder, farther, feeling the squeezing pressure and insane heat envelope his cock all the way to the root this time. "Oh, God," he moaned.

"Again," came the ragged whisper.

Jeremy complied, wondering how he'd ever survived without this.

"Again. Please."

He pushed in again, rocking Ben back a little farther, seeking... Seeking... He didn't know what. All he knew was that nothing had ever felt so good, and he wanted more and more and more. "I can't get deep enough in you. I need... I want..."

"I know, babe. I know exactly what you mean." Hot hands clutched his ass and pulled him closer, nudging him infinitesimally deeper still.

They both groaned.

"I never knew..." Jeremy murmured, giving himself up to the powerful need to drive into Ben like a jackhammer.

Ben met him thrust for thrust, until they were both moaning and clutching at each other. Sweat coated their bodies, making them slicker each time Jeremy's balls slapped against Ben's. The smell of musk and arousal swirled around them.

"Can't last much longer," Jeremy gasped. He wanted to so badly, but the heat and pressure were too much. The contact was too electric. And knowing it was Ben, his best friend and the person he trusted most in the world, he was inside only intensified everything.

"Don't hold back," Ben commanded.

"Want you to come, too."

Ben groaned. "Trust me, I will. Too good..." His hand moved like lightning on his shaft.

Jeremy leaned down and pressed his mouth to Ben's. "Love you."

And then, with white heat licking through him, he was coming.

At the same time, Ben shuddered, losing it as well. Jeremy felt Ben's cock pulsing between their abdomens, and with each of Ben's spasms, his anal muscles tightened in a vise around Jeremy's dick, urging load after load of spunk from him. It was a provocative circle of give and take and synchronicity like nothing Jeremy had ever known or been a part of it. And it felt right. Like he'd finally come home.

Sated, exhausted, they clung together kissing in the aftermath.

"Love you, too," Ben whispered against Jeremy lips. "So damned much."

"I never knew it could be this good," Jeremy said, lifting his head off Ben's chest to look into his eyes.

"Neither did I, babe. Until last week, neither did I."

Chapter 6

A thud from somewhere nearby pulled Jeremy up out of the depths of sleep.

For a moment he was lost, trying to place where he was. He felt the heat of another body spooning against his backside, and realized his head rested on a muscular arm not his own.

In the faint light seeping through the window blinds, he took in the sight of the white sheet pulled up to his hips, and another masculine arm draped possessively over his waist, the darker skin standing out in contrast against his pale flesh. A semi-hard bulge pressed into his ass.

And then it all came back to him. Where he was. Who he was with. How'd he'd spent the night.

Joy rippled through Jeremy, followed by a heady wave of something warmer and deeper.

He heard low voices out in the hall--one masculine, one feminine. Probably Al and his girlfriend getting ready for class.

Class!

He lifted his hand and peered at his watch. 8:10 A.M. For a moment he panicked. Crap. What time was his final for Ivanik's class? Oh, right. It wasn't until eleven-thirty. They lived only a few blocks from campus, any easy ten minute walk, which meant he didn't need to get up just yet.

Realizing he didn't have to rush, he felt sleep calling him back into its comforting embrace. He yawned and stretched, then rolled over to face Ben, who was still sound asleep.

For a moment he simply gazed at Ben, soaking up the sight of him with no little amount of wonder. The real, live version was so far superior to a picture. He loved the way his face was totally relaxed in sleep yet a faint hint of a smile still curved his lips.

Funny how he'd looked at Ben for over four years and had thought he knew all the details. But now, it was like seeing him with a whole new set of eyes, and discovering that while all those good things he'd seen and known before were still there, there was so much more underneath he'd missed. He was finally beginning to realize just how important Ben had always been to him, realize how in love with him he'd been all these years. For so long he'd been too blinded by what he thought he should be seeing and feeling that he'd been oblivious to what was really going on.

I love the man.

And he loves me.

That brought a smile to Jeremy's face.

He snuggled in closer to Ben, wrapping an arm around him, and savoring the clean musky scent of soap lingering on Ben's skin from the quick shower they'd taken last night before

they'd finally fallen asleep.

Ben's arms automatically curved around him as if it were the most natural thing in the world and even in sleep he knew Jeremy was there.

For the first time in longer than he could remember, Jeremy felt content. At peace. And it was damned nice. Within seconds he was already starting to drift off.

But another noise, this one sounding like a dull banging, startled him back to wakefulness. It startled Ben as well, who stirred and his eyes fluttered open, barely.

"What is it?" Ben asked, groggy.

"Probably nothing. Go back to sleep, babe." The endearment felt new on his tongue, but good. He liked it. A lot. Liked it when Ben used it for him, too. He traced a hand along Ben's side, trying to soothe him back to sleep.

But a smile tugged at Ben's mouth and his eyes opened more fully. "Morning," he murmured.

His sleepy, sexy voice rolled through Jeremy like something warm and delicious, making him suddenly question if he really wanted more sleep, or more of something else. All it took was one look, one smile, and that rumbling voice, and all his senses came alive in eager anticipation. "Morning, yourself."

As if he knew exactly what Jeremy had been thinking, Ben slid a hand between them under the covers, and took possession of Jeremy's morning wood, stroking it lightly with warm fingertips.

Jeremy gave a little grunt of pleasure.

"Feel good?"

"You know it does."

"You don't have to get up yet, do you?"

"No. Not for a while."

"Good. I think I'm going to keep you right here in bed for as long as possible."

"Is that a promise."

"Oh, yeah."

Smiling, Jeremy draped a leg over Ben's thighs, bringing them closer, and putting his erection in easier reach. It also put Ben's in reach for him as well, which he took advantage of. He closed his eyes, basking in the intimacy.

Their unhurried, sleepy fondling soon turned to kisses and fondling. Heat built between them, but because it happened so slowly, Jeremy didn't realize just how intense it had become. Until Ben brought his other hand down to join the first.

As one hand stroked his cock, the other focused on his ass, moving over it in fluttering touches. It was like erotic butterfly wings, and turned Jeremy on something fierce. Especially

when the flutters started creeping ever closer to the crease between his butt cheeks.

With his leg over Ben's like it was, he was already spread open. When the occasional stray finger dipped into the seam itself, though, Jeremy hiked his leg higher, up onto Ben's hip, silently begging for more.

Each time a fingertip grazed over his sensitive ring of flesh, Jeremy's breath would catch. He quickly found himself trembling, his groin thrusting into Ben's other hand, and living in anticipation of those moments. Please...touch me...yeah, right there. No, don't stop! Please...again...

He realized he still had his eyes closed, squeezed tightly now in concentration. He opened them, and found Ben watching him. Embarrassed heat crept over Jeremy's face at how he must look to Ben, wantonly begging for his touch.

But when he started to close his eyes again so he didn't have to see Ben seeing him, Ben said, "No, keep them open. I love watching you like this. Do you have any idea how damned sexy you are?"

Jeremy swallowed hard and bit his lip.

"God, see, even that. That innocent modesty. You don't realize just how incredibly hot that is."

One of Ben's fingers now slid purposely along Jeremy's crack, making a beeline directly to the spot his whole existence had become focused on.

Jeremy held his breath...waiting. And waiting. And waiting. But no amount of squirming would bring that touch to where he needed it.

He knew Ben knew what he wanted, and was teasing him mercilessly. "Please," he finally said, his voice sliding into a groan.

Ben smiled. "Is this what you want?" The lightest brush of a finger teased his opening.

Jeremy's legs began to tremble from the raw need. "God, Ben..."

"Tell me. Is this what you want?" The finger paused, then probed at the entrance.

Jeremy gasped. "Yes!"

Ben sat up and grabbed the lube off the nightstand. He popped the lid open and poured a generous dollop in the palm of his hand. "Will you let me make you feel good?"

The words, and the look on Ben's face, ignited a full-on firestorm in Jeremy. "God yes. Whatever you want to do."

"Be careful what you ask for," Ben teased. He pulled the covers away, exposing Jeremy fully. "Roll over onto your stomach, babe, and spread your legs."

Trembling with barely suppressed need, he did as he was told, wiggling around to find a comfortable position for his aching dick.

Ben knelt between his legs and gently kneaded his ass with one hand. Then Jeremy felt his cheeks being spread apart, and a lubed finger probing at his entry.

"Take a deep breath," Ben urged.

Jeremy tried, but found himself trembling even harder.

"It's okay. Just breathe."

This time Jeremy concentrated and pulled air into his legs.

"Now let it out."

As he did, he felt the finger slide in.

"Oh, fuck!" His hips bucked, but Ben didn't remove his finger, just held it in place.

"Breathe, baby. Keep breathing and relax. Remember how it felt last night when you were fingering me? The more you relax, the more your muscles will, too. It's going to feel so good, Jeremy."

Ben's voice had a magic effect on him, and the more he talked, the easier it was to breathe. And the easier it was to breathe, the more turned out he got. And the more turned on he got, the more he wanted Ben to move the finger inside him before he went crazy.

Just when he thought he couldn't take it anymore, Ben eased it out, then slid it in again, taking his time, turning it and stretching Jeremy a little more with each insertion. Jeremy moaned and pushed himself back on it, once more finding himself in the position of shamelessly begging for Ben's attention.

Ben chuckled. "I told you you'd like it."

He pulled out, but before Jeremy had time protest, it was back, newly slippery with the cool lube.

Ben seemed as unhurried about this as he'd been about their fondling earlier, working from one finger to two, then pressing his thumb into Jeremy instead and fucking him with it, then back to the fingers, curling them up to stroke his prostate and causing Jeremy to see stars, then back to the thumb. And all the while, he kept talking, and rubbing Jeremy's back, and kissing whatever exposed skin he could reach. Jeremy had long since raised himself up to his hands and knees, and he found himself moaning and panting and so on edge he thought he might implode.

"Ben...please...need you."

"You've got me."

"You know what I mean."

"Tell me." The sensual torture continued.

"Need...need you...in me," Jeremy gasped.

"I am in you."

"God...damn it! Please, fuck me!"

Ben's laugh, low and sexy, curled around him, only bringing his arousal to a more fevered pitch. "Is this what you want, baby?" Ben's fingers slid free, and in their place Jeremy felt the bulbous head of Ben's cock pressing at his entrance.

He shuddered with anticipation. "Yes. God...need it. Need you."

"Take another deep breath."

Jeremy did. And then Ben was pushing into him.

The burn was almost pain, making him realize just how grateful he was for Ben's devotion to stretching him. But mostly it was aching pleasure as Ben slowly, slowly filled him. By the time he was in to the root and his balls were snuggled up against Jeremy's ass, Jeremy was trembling all over again.

Ben's palm stroked his back. "You okay?"

Jeremy nodded, too overwhelmed and keyed up to speak. He felt...full. And stretched. And too hot, like he had a lightning rod up his ass. But he was also aroused as hell in a way he'd never been in his life. Everything tingled, and a low throbbing ache built deep inside him.

"Tell me when you're ready for me to move," Ben said.

"Now."

"You sure?"

"Ben...now!" He couldn't believe how strung out and desperate he sounded. Ben did this to him, took him to places he'd never imagined, and made him feel things he never would have believed. And he didn't want it to ever stop.

Ben moved cautiously, but Jeremy didn't want caution. He wanted...everything. It didn't take Ben long to figure that out, and once he did, it was if all barriers of any kind between them dropped. They surged together with a frenzy, Ben sometimes stroking into him with long deep thrusts, and others short and fast, while Jeremy slammed back to meet each one. It was unbridled. And uninhibited.

Ben suddenly pulled out of him. He urged Jeremy down onto the bed, and had him roll to his back. Then he pushed Jeremy's knees back and re-entered him in a swift, deep movement, causing them both to cry out.

"Need to see you," he said.

Jeremy stared up at him, overwhelmed with emotion as the frantic fucking turned slow and sensual. He hadn't thought it could get any better. He was wrong.

Ben took him to edge, then pulled back. Took him to the edge again, and pulled back. Then, finally, both of them clinging tightly to one another, and Ben jacking Jeremy's cock as he buried himself deep one final time, Jeremy shattered. Ben pulled out of him, stripped off the condom, and shot on Jeremy's groin, the milky threads of his seed mixing with Jeremy's.

When it was over, they stared at each other for the longest time. Then without speaking--because, honestly, Jeremy didn't think he could find words right now--he pulled Ben down on top of him. Their lips fused in a soul-deep kiss that said everything.

They were so intent on each other, at first neither of them heard the bedroom open. And by the time they realized it...it was too late.

"What kind of perversion is this? What in the name of hell is going on in this room?" a gritty, accusing man's voice shouted.

Jeremy and Ben froze.

Oh, fuck. Jeremy's heart began to pound like a base drum battering his chest, and all his old panic returned full-force.

He turned to look at the gaunt, graying, red-faced man who stood in the doorway.

"Dad?"

Ben immediately rolled off him and pulled the sheet up to at least cover their groins from David Reynolds's furious, bug-eyed glare.

Then, under the sheet, his fingers wound through Jeremy's and squeezed.

Jeremy risked a glance at him, and Ben's gaze met his. He looked as shaken as Jeremy felt that they'd been caught like this in a clench, bare-ass naked, smelling like cum and sweat, by Jeremy's dad. He knew Jeremy so well he probably suspected it was Jeremy's worst nightmare come to life.

"What the fuck are you doing, boy? I come here to see my son, and instead I find a nest of queers."

Ben wouldn't let Jeremy pull his gaze free. He couldn't explain it...he just wouldn't. And as he looked into Ben's steady strength, something fundamental in Jeremy shifted. His heart continued to race, but the panic slid away.

"Get out of that bed! No son of mine is going to be whoring out his body to another man!"

Jeremy steadfastly ignored his father's rage. This was his life, and he was happy, damn it. Finally. And just like Ben had said last night, he couldn't keep letting his fear win.

Slowly, he turned to look at his dad again. "Get out," he told him.

David's face purpled. "You don't tell me what to do."

Al came tearing through the doorway just then, dressed only in a towel, and still wet from a shower. "I'm so sorry. Giselle was leaving and when she opened the front door he was there. I guess he'd been banging on the door for a while but none of us heard him. He told her he was your dad, Jeremy, so she let him in. She asked him to wait while she got you, but he pushed past her and came up here."

"It's all right, Al," Jeremy said, feeling surreally calm. "It's not her fault. And, Dad, I asked you to leave. Get out of our bedroom. You have no right to come barging in here."

"I have every right. I'm your father."

"Get...out," Jeremy commanded.

"I came to have a word with you and I'm not leaving until I do."

"Fine. Wait downstairs. I'll be down in a few minutes."

"I'll talk to you now, goddamnit, you little queer."

Al stepped in front of the man. In spite of wearing only a towel, he commanded surprising power. He towered over Jeremy's dad by several inches and packed a fair amount of muscle on his wiry body. "I believe he just told you to leave the room and go downstairs. I suggest you do as he says before I have to dirty my hands and make you. Or maybe I'll just call the police and have them escort you away."

Jeremy's eyebrows shot up at Al's intervention. It was fascinating to see a hint of the potentially lethal attorney Al would one day make--so different from the sex-obsessed, good-natured cowboy they usually saw.

David Reynolds's eyes narrowed as he appeared to weigh Al's threat.

"Ben, toss me your phone," Al said, never taking his eyes off David, and holding his hand out to Ben.

Ben reached over to the nightstand and picked up the cordless house phone. He tossed it underhand to Al, who caught it without even looking.

David shot Al a searing glare, then another at Jeremy and Ben in the bed. "Downstairs. You've got one minute." He turned on his heel and marched away.

"I'll keep an eye on him," Al said. He left and shut the door behind him.

Jeremy threw off the sheet and stood. He dragged a hand restlessly through his hair as he paced around, trying to find his clothes. Where the hell were they? "I can't believe he fucking showed up here. I never took his threat to come here seriously. He says shit like that all the time and never goes through with it."

Ben got out of bed, pulled on a pair of sweats, grabbed another pair out of one of his dresser drawers, and handed them to Jeremy.

"You don't have to go down there," Ben said. "You won't be less of a person in any way if you walk away from this confrontation. It would just take one word to Al and he'll kick him out."

"No." Jeremy gritted his teeth and shook his head. "I can't live this way anymore, Ben. It's time to put an end to this bullshit once and for all. I'm done letting him walk all over me. This was the final straw. I can't believe he fucking barged into the bedroom like that." He sucked in a shaking breath.

Ben's arms slid around his waist from behind. "However you want to handle it, I've got your back and I'm going down there with you."

Jeremy leaned back into the embrace, letting Ben's steady strength flow into him. Then he turned in Ben's arms and kissed him. "Do you have any idea how grateful I am for you?"

The words seemed to take Ben by surprise. Then he smiled. "I'd do anything for you. Haven't you realized that yet?"

Jeremy's heart squeezed. "I'm starting to. And you know I'd do anything for you, too, right?"

Ben's hand rubbed over his chest, coming to rest over his heart. "I know."

"Let's go take a shower. We're sticky, and I'm not going down there to face him under duress, looking like we just rolled out of bed. That'll only feed his attitude. I'm doing this on my terms."

"What about him?"

"He'll wait. Or leave. I'm fine with either."

Though they shared a shower, unlike the one the night before where there'd been plenty of touching and kissing, this one was quick and utilitarian. They arrived downstairs ten minutes later.

Jeremy's dad paced in front of the fireplace in the small living room.

Al, still shirtless but now wearing a pair of jeans, kept a wary eye on him from the kitchen.

The moment David Reynolds saw them, his lip curled in a sneer. "Nice of you to bother coming down. Didn't your mother ever teach you it's rude to make people wait."

Jeremy studied his father, looking for the telltale signs of an alcoholic off the wagon. He didn't have slurred speech or smell like booze. But then he never had much when Jeremy was growing up either. He'd hidden his drinking from most everyone, and managed to work full-time, run the car dealership, direct over fifty employees, play golf with his friends, and go to church every Sunday all while loaded. But his mood swings when he was boozing had been foul, and his words deadly.

"What do you want, Dad? Why'd you come here?"

"I drove down to bring you home."

"I told you on the phone, I'm not interested."

"And I'm not asking. You will get your ass home, boy. In spite of your clearly deviant nature, it's the holidays and you will be there with your family. Your grandfather deserves to see his only grandson. And it's clear you need us now more than ever--we need to beat some sense into you and get you off this dangerous path you're on. If only your mother could see you now. You'd break her heart."

"Mom's gone, Dad. Deal with it and quit using her as your excuse. And just so we're clear, I'm not going back to Nebraska. Not for Christmas. Not ever. I don't expect you to understand, but my life is here now."

He snorted, loudly. "Your life is here. What life is that? Rolling around in your birthday suit like some demon of sin with your black fairy boyfriend?"

Jeremy could feel Ben's hand tighten around his arm. He just didn't know if Ben was trying to keep Jeremy from going for his dad's jugular, or to keep himself from doing it.

"It must really chap your ass to know I've not only chosen this life over you and found happiness, but that I've done it in spite of you after all those years of listening to your bullshit and having you beat me down with your words. But guess what? Your words? They don't have any power over me anymore. And that's what pisses you off most of all."

"Fuckin' little wiseass. You can talk big all you want, but you know you're just putting on a show. You can't afford to stay here. You're going to have to come crawling home eventually because you haven't had a pot to piss in since I cut you off from your college funds."

"On the contrary, I don't need your money. I've paid for college myself since I've been back. And I've already applied for scholarships and another student loan for grad school--I'm going to start working on my MBA next fall. I've also got a TA position lined up for next year."

Jeremy felt Ben looking at him in surprise. This wasn't exactly the way he'd planned to tell Ben about it.

David's eyes burned with anger. "You little perverted whelp. How dare you turn your back on your family after all we've done for you, and choose this...this den of sin," he spat. "We brought you into this world, fed you, clothed you, took care of your needs, and this is how you repay us? What would your mother say?"

"I'll tell you what she'd say." Jeremy still felt remarkably calm. Calmer than he'd ever felt in his life. "She'd tell me to go for it. Just like she did about coming here for college when I was eighteen. You know what she told me the day she died, Dad? The day you and Grandad couldn't be bothered to come by the hospital because you had an oh-so-important meeting at the dealership that was more important than family, so I was the one there for her when she breathed her last breath?"

He took a step closer to his father, who, oddly, flinched. "She told me that I should always follow my heart, even if it meant leaving everything I once knew behind and walking an unconventional path." He looked at Ben, addressing his next words to him. "I think she knew me better than I knew myself until recently. If she were here, she would have given us her blessing."

Ben smiled. "I think I would've liked your mom if I'd ever had a chance to meet her."

"She would have liked you, too."

Jeremy's dad made a rude noise in his throat. "Utter nonsense. Your mother would never have condoned any such thing."

"She would have," Jeremy said with certainty, turning his attention back to his father. "But you know what? Even if she hadn't, it wouldn't change how I feel. Because this is my life. I'm not a child any longer, and you don't have any say-so over me. You'll always be the man who fathered me, but I don't owe you anything. And unless you choose to treat me and the people I care about with respect, you're not welcome in this house."

"You're a disgrace to your family!"

Al, who'd been listening in the kitchen but staying out of the way, entered the room with a determined stride. He crossed over to stand by Jeremy and Ben.

"I know this probably isn't any of my business," he drawled, addressing Jeremy's dad, "but I've got a piece to say, so you're just gonna to have to listen. From what I've seen and heard this mornin', I'm thinkin' you don't have a clue what it is you're spoutin' off about. You wield the word 'family' like it's a weapon to be used for bludgeoning. I don't presume to know what's made you so jaded, but, frankly, I find your attitude offensive. Family isn't about blood or obligation. It's about love and respect and trust."

He stepped between Ben and Jeremy and draped an arm around each of their shoulders. "This, right here, is our family. And we don't let anyone walk over the people we love."

Jeremy's chest filled with so much emotion he almost couldn't breathe.

Family.

For the first time ever he could think the word without a hint of bitterness attached.

This was his family.

David glared at them all, standing together in solidarity, and spouted off a sailor's list of curses and epithets that bounced right off them without leaving a single dent.

"It's time for you to go," Ben said, his voice cold.

"You stay and live this faggot life, boy," David said to Jeremy, "and there's no coming home again. Ever."

Jeremy walked across the living room, opened the front door and held it. He gave his dad a pointed look.

"You hear me?" his dad shouted.

"Loud and clear. Goodbye, Dad."

He didn't go quietly. It took another threat from Al about calling the authorities before he finally stormed off.

When the door was shut behind his retreating father, Jeremy turned and found Ben there, standing strong and comforting, as always.

"You okay?"

Jeremy sucked in a deep breath, then let it out.

Purged. That's how he felt. Purged of everything crappy and ugly and full of anxiety in his life. And it had been replaced with fresh, pure air. He breathed again, amazed at how easy it was.

"I am," he answered. "I think I really am."

"You were pretty magnificent," Ben said, pride shining in his eyes. He pulled Jeremy into a kiss.

Al grinned. "Fucking brilliant, I'd say."

Jeremy cracked a smile of his own. "You guys were pretty awesome, too. Thank you. So much."

"Anytime," Al said. "It's kinda fun bein' a bouncer."

Leave it to Al. If his law career didn't work out, at least he had options--either a porn producer, as Ben predicted, or a bouncer.

"So you're okay then?" Jeremy asked him. "About us?" He pointed between himself and Ben. He wondered if Al had been as shocked as his dad to find Ben and Jeremy in bed together. If he had been, he hadn't shown it.

"Okay? Shit, I love you guys. I'm happy for you. Hell, I'm even a little proud to have come down and found the mess in the kitchen this morning from your sport last night." He leered at them, and Jeremy found himself blushing while Ben chuckled softly.

"It took you long enough to figure it out, though," Al said. "You'd been making moon eyes at each for months."

Jeremy and Ben stared at him.

"What? Oh, for God's sake, please tell me you realized it? You couldn't both be that oblivious to each other, could you?" Then he laughed. "Jesus Jehosephat, you really were clueless. Even I was starting to get turned on a little from all the steamy glances shooting between you two. Hell, I'm surprised you made it all the way to my birthday party before the fireworks started--"

His eyebrows shot up. "What?" he said even more defensively. "You didn't think I knew about that either? Give me a break! The way you've been avoiding each other since then, and your late night masturbation sessions, hiding away in your own rooms...it was a dead giveaway."

Jeremy shot a glance at Ben, whom he found looking back. So Ben had been whacking off, too? Fuck, they'd both been a mess, hadn't they?

Al rolled his eyes at them. "I'm goin' to get dressed."

When he was gone, Ben pulled Jeremy into a steamy kiss, then grinned. "Late night masturbation, huh?"

"Don't take that tone with me. Sounds like you're just as guilty as I am." Jeremy reached down and squeezed the bulge at Ben's groin.

Ben's eyes flickered to half-mast and he shuddered. "Crap, we were up half the night having 'sport' as Al would say, and just got out of bed a half-hour ago. How can I want you again so badly?"

"Because you love me?" Jeremy squeezed again.

"Because I love you. And because you're hot as hell when you look at me with those big hazel boy-next-door eyes."

"Want me to show you how much I love you?" Jeremy's kept his voice low and continued to knead Ben's crotch, which was getting hard as stone from the attention.

"Fuck yes," Ben groaned.

But Al chose that exact moment to return, charging down the steps like a bull on a rampage. "What's for breakfast?" he called.

Jeremy unhanded Ben and gave him an apologetic look. "Later."

"I'm holding you to that. Unless I get to you first."

Jeremy grinned.

Ben made coffee while Jeremy stuck bread in the toaster and Al put dishes away out of the drainer from the night before.

"Been needin' to talk to you guys about somethin'," Al said, "but hadn't been able to catch you both at home at the same time except for the dead of night."

"What's up?"

"Well, you know my early admission to UT School of Law?"

"Did something happen?" Jeremy asked.

"No, nothin' 'bout my acceptance. I'm still in. But the full-ride I was countin' on didn't come through. They already 'met their quota for the year' or some shit. I could probably cobble together some other scholarships and aid and come up with the money if I had to, but it wouldn't be pretty. And even with student loans, I'd be strapped tighter than a corset on the fat lady at the circus. So I've decided to cut my losses and go to law school here. The program's almost as good, and the price is more reasonable. I'll still need the loans, but at least I might have a prayer of payin' 'em off in this lifetime."

"I take it that means you're going to continue needing a place to live?" Ben asked.

"I'd be much obliged. If you think you can put up with me and my devilishly charming ways for a while longer."

"I don't know. What do you think?" Ben asked Jeremy with a smile.

"I think family is always there for each other."

Al looked genuinely choked up. "Thank you."

Jeremy suddenly realized Al hadn't just been talking earlier. He appreciated and needed them as much as they did him.

"Ah, hell, now look what you've made me do." Al pressed his thumb and forefinger against his eyes and they came away suspiciously damp.

Al was larger than life and full of piss and vinegar, but he had a heart of gold. Jeremy put a hand on Al's shoulder and squeezed, and Ben ruffled Al's hair.

A moment later, Al sniffed, then smiled his thousand-watt Texas shit-eating grin. "All right, before this turns into some kind of sappy love fest--I got my macho reputation to protect, after all--I'm out of here to get in a last minute cram session before my poli-sci final this afternoon. Then I'm gonna meet my honey for beer and hot wings and even hotter lovin' to celebrate the end of another fun-filled semester."

"I guess that means Jeremy and I'll be blasting Metallica tonight so we don't intrude," Ben teased, wrapping his fingers around a mug of coffee he'd just poured, and handing a second to Jeremy.

Jeremy snorted. "Speak for yourself. I'm not listening to that headbanger crap. Somebody in this house has to exhibit a little bit of musical taste."

Ben snatched up an apple from the fruit bowl and threw at Jeremy's head.

Jeremy caught it neatly and, with a grin, said, "Is that your best shot?" Then he took a bite of it.

Ben shot him a look that promised sweet retribution. Later. After Al was gone.

"Ah, but that's just it," Al said, shrugging into his leather bomber jacket, then grabbing a piece of buttered toast off the plate on the counter. "You might be interested in knowin' we'll be shacking up at Giselle's tonight 'cause her roommate's already gone home. Which means you two"--he wiggled his eyebrows and his grin turned to a sexy leer--"will have the house all to your little selves."

Jeremy and Ben's gazes locked and a ripple of heat passed between them.

"Just try not to break any furniture or tear things up too much worse this time when the kitchen sex gods get you all riled up," Al said with a smirk as he passed through the kitchen and into the living room. "It is Christmas ya know and Santy Claus won't leave you any treats if you're naughty. On the other hand, there's somethin' to be said for naughty, especially if you want to borrow one of my video cameras and film it. I hear not only gay men, but straight women get all hot and bothered watching hunky men get it on. Hell, I might make enough on it to put myself through law school."

"Go!" Ben and Jeremy said at the same time, pointing at the door.

"Just sayin'!" Al's laughter lingered even after he'd shut the front door behind him.

"He's such a perv," Jeremy said with a grin.

But Al's words had stirred something undeniable to life, and sexual tension practically crackled in the air.

One second they were standing there holding their coffee, and the next they were tearing at each other's clothes, banging against the cabinet and almost upsetting the toast plate as they did. Maybe there was something about this kitchen.

"What time's your final with Professor Ivanik?" Ben demanded.

"In an hour--eleven-thirty," Jeremy said breathlessly as Ben yanked his jeans down to his ankles, dropped to his knees in front of him, and grabbed hold of his balls in a vise-grip that sent tingling fire of the best kind up Jeremy's spine.

"Holy shit," Jeremy gasped.

Blue eyes looked up at him, burning with love and lust. And a smile, so hot it singed the hair at the base of Jeremy's dick, turned up Ben's lips.

"Mr. Reynolds, it's your lucky day. Not only is Christmas coming early for you, I'm going to send you off to see your favorite professor with a big-ass smile on your face."

Jeremy had never realized life could be so spectacular.

M. L. Rhodes

Award-winning and bestselling author M. L. Rhodes lives in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains with her physicist husband, two teenage boys, and a menagerie of animals. She's been writing professionally for fifteen years. Her characterization and emotional storytelling have received high critical acclaim and garnered her numerous awards in the writing industry. She's had books published in several genres, but her focus now is entirely on gay male romance, which is her passion!

If you'd like to keep up with what's going on in M. L.'s world and find out about her new and upcoming releases, check out her website at www.mlrhodeswriting.com.

* * * *

Don't miss *Under My Skin*, by M. L. Rhodes,
available at AmberAllure.com!

Charlie Reid is a world-class wildlife artist who captures the heart of his subjects, revealing them to the world. But he is also desperate to keep his deeply hidden sexual desires secret from everyone, including himself. He never counts on meeting a man like Tyler McKay, however, an environmental engineer who transforms wastelands into viable bio communities that are not only beautiful but functional. Tyler is also the only man who might be able to penetrate Charlie's solid wall of denial and make him admit to yearnings to which he has never surrendered...

Can the men build a bond strong enough to withstand everything the world throws at them? But how far, and to what lengths, will Tyler push Charlie to make him admit who he truly is? When two stubborn alpha males put their desires and needs to the test, will they discover that "surrender" isn't necessarily a bad thing and that, in the game of love, there are sometimes no losers, but only winners?

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