



PIECES

Shawn Lane

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Patrick came back in mere seconds and tossed him the lube and the condom. Then he once more launched himself at Josh, pushing him onto the bed. "Want you."

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Shaking his head, he removed his lips and pulled off the shirt. He quickly divested himself of his own T-shirt.

Patrick stared at him, his full lips wet and swollen. Josh searched his gaze, looking for any sign he really should stop. Well, hell, he *knew* he should. Instead, he reached between their bodies and closed his hand over the bulge in Patrick's pants...

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BY

SHAWN LANE

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Pieces
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To Shayne, who always makes me smile

Chapter 1

Joshua Stevens picked up a bar towel and rubbed the highball glass, his gaze fixed on the patron sitting in the darkest corner of the bar. The man was hunched down in the booth, his expression sullen, his eyes downcast, staring at the drink in front of him.

"Why don't you go over and talk to him?"

He turned to his brother, Eddie, the co-owner of the bar. "Not sure that's a good idea. Not at the moment, anyway."

Eddie, who was older than Josh's twenty-eight by three years, reached up and grabbed a bottle of rum from the top shelf directly above Josh. "Someone's going to have to give him a ride home, anyway. Might as well be now. "

Every year--well, for the last three--this particular patron came to their bar on this exact night. The bar, formerly known as Bill's,

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had been the place they'd all hung out together at one time or another over the last several years. So much so that eventually Josh and Eddie had purchased the bar and renamed it, EJ's. That was before Andrew's death.

"Can I get some more peanuts?" a customer on a barstool called out.

"Sure." Josh grabbed the empty bowl, filled it with cocktail peanuts and then set it in front of the man.

It was getting late, almost one o'clock, and the bar had mostly emptied out. Besides Peanut Man and the man in the dark corner, there was a couple cuddling in a booth just to the left of the bar.

Eddie poured rum and Coke into a glass and then nudged Josh. "Go on. Why don't you take him? I can handle what's left and close up. Unless, you'd rather we call him a cab?"

"No, I'll get him home." Josh tossed the towel down and walked around the corner of the bar, picking up used napkins and other trash as he went and discarding it along the way. As he approached the dark corner, the man didn't even look up. He just continued to stare at the drink.

"Hi, Patrick." Josh sat across from him.

Patrick Donovan's gaze slowly rose to look at Josh. His blue-green eyes didn't focus. In fact, he appeared to be looking over Josh's shoulder.

Three years ago this night, Patrick's longtime lover hanged himself. Patrick had the extreme misfortune of discovering Andrew's body. Josh had been well acquainted with both Patrick and Andrew. His mother and Andrew's mother were sisters and he, Patrick, and Andrew had all gone to high school together.

Josh reached across the table and covered Patrick's hand with his. "It's Josh."

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Patrick blinked, and then ran his long fingers through his chin-length sandy blond hair. "I know." He looked away.

"Come on, I think you've been here long enough. I'm going to drive you home."

Still not looking at him, Patrick whispered, "What about Eddie? Why can't he drive me home?"

Josh sighed. "He would've, except you broke his nose the last time. He won't do it again."

"I said I was sorry," Patrick said with more than a touch of petulance.

"I know. Still, I'm taking you home." He gestured to the drink he had left. "I think you've had enough. Want me to take that away?"

Patrick didn't bother to answer, so Josh just scooted it across the table. Josh rose and placed his hand under Patrick's arm, pulling him up out of the booth.

On the one hand, Josh was glad for the man's unexpected subdued manner, as he'd gotten violent in the past when someone tried to extract him from the bar. But it also troubled him. Patrick seemed even more despondent than usual.

Patrick was shorter than Josh's six-foot-two frame by several inches, only reaching to about Josh's shoulders. Back in high school, when Josh, Andrew, and Patrick had been pretty much inseparable, Patrick had been the smallest.

The man slumped in his arms and Josh had to lunge to keep him upright. "Easy, Patrick. I've got you."

"Need help?" Eddie yelled from behind the bar.

Josh just shook his head. He knew well enough why Patrick preferred Eddie's company on the way home. Andrew, being their cousin, had resembled both Josh and Eddie, but Josh looked more

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closely like Andrew. They'd been about the same height, the same age, the same muscular build, and had the same shade of sable hair and brown eyes. To Patrick, Josh was a constant reminder of Andrew.

He got the other man to walk toward the exit with only a small amount of resistance. When they'd reached the door, Josh glanced back at the bar. The couple looked like they would be leaving soon, the man holding the bar tab in his hand. The man eating the peanuts had half his drink left, but the man was a regular so Josh didn't have any concerns.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Eddie."

"Yeah. Drive carefully and call me if there are any problems."

Josh buckled Patrick into the seat belt of the passenger side of his old beat-up truck. One of these days he would replace the damn truck, but it still ran pretty well even if it wasn't exactly pretty.

"You okay there, kid?"

"I'm fine. And I'm only a year younger than you. Not even. Just a few months."

"I know, but you'll always be a kid to me." Josh got in and started the truck. Patrick's condominium was less than ten miles from the bar. Not many cars on the road this time of night, but Josh decided there was no need to speed. He'd rather they make it to their destination in one piece.

Over the years, first as a patron of the bar and now as co-owner, Josh knew a few people had wandered out of the bar having drunk more than they should. Early on in their ownership, he and Eddie had decided to continue the previous owner's free cab ride home policy. They'd used it a few times. But that didn't

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deter everyone and there had been a few nasty accidents on this road.

Patrick leaned heavily on the passenger door, his head resting against the cracked window.

"Do you think you might be sick?" Josh asked. "I can pull over."

"As much of a piece of shit as this truck is, do you think anyone would notice if I puked inside?"

He winced over the surly tone. Apparently the detached Patrick had been replaced once more by the hostile one.

"I'd notice. Do you need me to pull over or not?"

"No."

Josh didn't quite believe him, but didn't see how arguing would help. If Patrick got sick all over himself and Josh's truck, he'd make Patrick clean it.

Right. You will not.

He sighed and shook his head.

"What's that sigh for?"

He gripped the steering wheel hard, turning his knuckles a pale, ghostly white in the dim glow of the dashboard lights. "Just wondering how long this is going to go on."

Patrick lifted his head off the glass and glanced at him. "What?"

"It's been three years," he said quietly.

"Oh. Sorry, I didn't know grief had a time limit."

"Normal grieving doesn't last this long, Patrick. No one expects you to forget Andrew or anything, but this...this isn't normal."

Patrick snorted. "I come here once a year on the day he died. Even you can't call that excessive."

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"Even me?"

"Yeah, being the cold, heartless bastard you are. If this had happened to you I guess you would have gotten over it in twenty-four hours, huh?"

"Patrick--"

"What am I saying? That implies you actually cared enough about someone to bother to form an actual relationship past a one-night stand."

His jaw tightened. He willed himself not to get drawn into this same fight. Patrick was drunk. Josh, however, was completely sober.

Whenever Patrick got mad at him, which was fairly often considering how little they saw of each other now, he found a way to bring up their one-night together. It was the summer after Patrick and Andrew graduated high school. Josh had been a year ahead of them. Patrick and Andrew weren't yet a couple. One particularly hot summer night they'd been smoking a little too much pot and suddenly he was kissing Patrick.

Unfortunately, the next morning Patrick thought the sex had meant more than Josh did. Josh was the first to admit he'd been young, stupid, and a bit of an ass at the time. But they'd had a huge fight about it and the next thing he knew, Andrew was Patrick's new boyfriend.

The silence in the truck became thick and nearly unbearable.

"My point is, I doubt Andrew would want you to do this every time this day comes around."

"Andrew didn't give a fuck about me either," Patrick said, his voice hollow. He rested his head on the cracked window once more, closing his eyes. "Am I so unlovable?"

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Josh swallowed heavily. "Andrew was sick. What happened was not your fault in any way. You know that, right?"

"Sure, whatever."

He turned down the street where Patrick's condo was located.

"You can just drop me here at the corner. I can walk the rest of the way."

"No way. I'm going to see you inside. Don't even bother arguing." He pulled into the driveway and drove to the back of the condo complex. "If you give me a call in the morning I'll pick you up and take you back to your car." He found a visitor spot not too far from Patrick's front door and parked.

When he got to the passenger side, Patrick had already got out of the truck and he yanked his arm away when Josh reached for it.

"I can walk," he grumbled.

"Give me your keys."

Patrick glared. "Get 'em yourself." He glanced pointedly at the left front pocket of his jeans.

Josh didn't even hesitate and slipped his hand into Patrick's pocket, fishing for the keys. Patrick pressed closer, taking a step until not even an inch separated them. Josh's hand closed over the keys and he extracted them. He gently pushed Patrick toward the front door.

Patrick leaned against the door, closing his eyes, his lips pursed.

Josh put a steadying hand on Patrick before turning the key in the lock. He helped him into the front hallway and shut the door. Before he could do anything else, Patrick launched himself at Josh.

Josh's arms came around Patrick, anchoring them both. He was about to give Patrick a gentle, but firm nudge away when Patrick

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rose a little and pressed his lips to Josh's. His mouth opened against the assault and Patrick's warm, alcohol-infused tongue slipped inside. His head swam as though he'd been the one who drank too much.

He felt the wall against his back and realized Patrick had pushed him there. Cooler heads should prevail. His brain told him that, but his cock rose in protest.

"Josh," Patrick moaned. "Please."

The plea seared through him, tingling from his toes all the way to make him light-headed. He closed his eyes, trying to resist Patrick's pull, but knowing it would be a losing battle. He wanted this.

"Your bedroom." He panted.

Patrick broke the kiss and gazed at him intently, his blue-green eyes surprisingly clear. He laced his fingers through Josh's and tugged him toward the stairs leading to the bedrooms on the second floor. They took the stairs almost in slow motion, as if God were giving him the chance to change his mind. Damn, he should.

Patrick yanked him into the bedroom, flicked on the overhead light and pulled him toward the bed.

He opened his mouth to declare they shouldn't do this. Patrick was way too vulnerable. "Lube and a condom?"

Patrick nodded. "Bathroom. Be right back."

Fuck, what was he saying? He watched the other man disappear into the bathroom, his gaze on Patrick's cute ass.

Patrick came back in mere seconds and tossed him the lube and the condom. Then he once more launched himself at Josh, pushing him onto the bed. "Want you."

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Releasing a shuddering breath, Josh flipped Patrick until he lay underneath. He crushed the other man into the mattress, searing their lips together, hot and moist. His erection pressed against his pants, straining, painfully constricted.

Without breaking the contact of their lips, Josh inched the hem of Patrick's shirt up past his abs, past his muscular chest, and off his arms. To get it off Patrick's head, he'd have to stop kissing him. Shaking his head, he removed his lips and pulled off the shirt. He quickly divested himself of his own T-shirt.

Patrick stared at him, his full lips wet and swollen. Josh searched his gaze, looking for any sign he really should stop. Well, hell, he *knew* he should. Instead, he reached between their bodies and closed his hand over the bulge in Patrick's pants.

"God, yes," Patrick whispered. "I want."

Josh nodded. "You take off your pants and I'll remove mine."

He stood, unbuckled his belt, and unzipped his jeans. He shed his jeans and briefs as quickly as he could and crawled back on the bed toward the now nude Patrick.

Though he'd seen Patrick naked all those years ago, he stopped to view him now. There'd been changes in them both really. Just out of high school, Patrick had been slim and pale. Now his skin was a golden tan, even where underwear should have covered him from the sun. And his muscles had filled out. Not too cut, but perfectly defined.

Yum.

"Kiss me now." Patrick pulled him by a chunk of hair until their mouths mashed together, their teeth clacking. It hurt a little, but he liked it.

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Eventually, he dislodged his hair from Patrick's grasp and he held the man's hands above his head. He knew this body, this skin. He'd kissed these lips, knew their taste. They were intoxicating. Too much, really.

With his free hand, he stroked along the man's chest, his fingertips grazing the copper nipples. Patrick shuddered beneath him, his eyelids drifting closed. He trailed his tongue along the path his fingers took, lapping at the gooseflesh appearing.

Patrick moaned and rose up, pushing against his tongue and caresses. "More. Oh, God, Andrew!"

Josh froze, straightening up from the bed. Patrick calling out Andrew's name deflated his erection as though it had been submerged in ice water. His heart hammering in his chest, he opened his mouth to tell Patrick he was leaving. This had been a terrible idea.

Soft snoring filled the room. The man had passed out.

Fuck, I'm an idiot.

Chapter 2

Patrick wasn't sure if it was the pounding in his head or the gardeners outside his condo using an extremely loud weed whacker that woke him. But he was pissed about both.

It took monumental effort, but he opened his eyes. Pinpricks of sunlight streamed in through his bedroom window. Who the fuck had opened the blinds?

Cursing under his breath, he reached over and yanked the mini-blind strings so hard it was surprising they didn't break. The blinds blocked out the annoying sun.

He groaned and rubbed a hand over his face. His tongue felt like it had swelled to twice its normal size. And his teeth felt like they wore little furry sweaters.

Gross.

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"Josh?" he called out, wincing at the roughened sound of his voice. Naturally, the only answer he received was a painful silence.

"Of course he left," Patrick muttered. He closed his eyes again, deciding he'd give in to depression and waste away the day in bed. Sure, he needed to pee, but so what? He didn't want to move.

The phone on his bedside table sprung to life with a startling chime. He grasped for the receiver more to shut it the hell up than to speak to the caller.

"What?" he growled into the phone.

"Where are you?" a male voice on the other end asked. He didn't quite recognize it.

"I'm in bed, where are you?"

"At the office. Where you should be, actually."

Oh, shit.

"Steve?"

"Uh-huh." Stephen Wagner, good friend and fellow lawyer, was calling from the Law Offices of Wagner, Thompson, and Rosenthal. Steve's brother, rather than Steve, was the Wagner in the firm.

"I'm...uh, indisposed."

"Clearly." Steve cleared his throat. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Listen, I'm in no shape to come into the office. I don't even have my car."

"Where is it?"

Patrick sighed. He didn't want to answer his friend. Really. "At the bar."

"What?"

"I just had too much to drink." As if that wasn't the mother of all understatements. "I definitely couldn't have driven. Anyway,

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can you cover for me? I don't think I had anything too urgent going on today."

"Damn, last night was it, wasn't it?" He heard Steve tapping on his desk.

"Yeah." His arm closed over the pillow that had belonged to Andrew. He pulled it to him and hugged it. It still lay on the bed they'd shared. He hadn't been able to part with it. Not that it still smelled of his lover. He'd washed the pillowcase with the rest of the sheets time and time again. But still...pathetic, Patrick knew.

"I forgot. I was going to go with you to keep an eye on you."

He wished he could forget. "I didn't want company. Can you cover for me?"

Steve sighed. "Yes. You want to have dinner later or something?"

"Call me later and check. There's someone I really need to talk to if I can."

"Okay, call you later."

Patrick returned the phone to the bedside table. He swung his legs out of the bed, got up, and went into the bathroom to pee. When he finished his business he made the mistake of checking his reflection in the mirror.

"Fuck, you look like shit," he told himself. From his tangled, sandy blond hair, scruffy growth on his chin, and dark smudges under his eyes, he shouldn't be too surprised Josh had run out on him. Again.

He turned away in disgust and twisted the knob in his glass enshrouded shower. He ran over the time he'd just spent with Josh, trying to remember the fuzzy details.

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Josh drove him home, helped him inside, they'd kissed, made it to his bedroom and then...what? They'd both undressed. After that, Patrick couldn't remember.

Probably passed out. That had to be why he didn't remember what happened. He knew Josh would never have taken advantage of him if he were unconscious so, other than what he could remember, nothing else had happened.

Patrick sighed heavily and stepped into the shower. He quickly washed, got out, and shaved without managing to cut his own throat. By accident or otherwise.

Back in his bedroom, he picked up the picture he kept on his dresser of himself, Andrew, Josh, and Eddie. It had been taken four years ago at a Halloween party at the bar. Josh and Eddie had dressed up like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Patrick smiled. They looked very cute in their getups.

Patrick had dressed like a shark, which they'd all suggested because of his profession. And Andrew had dressed as an angel with big feathered wings and all. Patrick had chosen the costume because of Andrew's profession, too, as a nurse.

He'd looked at the picture so many times over the last three years he probably really was pathetic. He opened the top drawer of his dresser and shoved the framed picture inside. All the wishes and dreams in the world wouldn't bring back those days. Wouldn't bring back Andrew.

And sure as shit wouldn't make his raging headache disappear either.

"Fuck," Patrick mumbled and headed back into the bathroom for some aspirin.

* * * *

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The cab dropped him off at EJ's Bar a few hours later. His head didn't feel much better and his stomach was a bit queasy, but he needed his car. He also needed to talk to Josh. He'd taken a chance Josh would already be here since the bar didn't open for another couple of hours. But sure enough the beat-up old truck was parked in the lot.

He walked up to the door of the bar and banged on it, wincing as the pain in his head sharpened.

"We're closed," Josh's muffled voice called.

"It's Patrick."

The door opened a minute or so later. Josh peered out at him, then past him at his car. "Come to get your vehicle?"

"Yeah, and we need to talk. Can I come inside?"

Josh hesitated. It nearly looked as though he would close the door in Patrick's face. But after a moment, he stepped back and allowed Patrick to step inside the bar. He closed the door and twisted the lock back in place.

"How do you feel?"

"Like I've been run over." Patrick walked to the bar counter and sat down at the first stool. "How much did I have last night?"

Josh busied himself wiping the bar counter with a big white towel. His hair looked tousled, like he'd just gotten out of bed, although he'd tucked the silky strands behind his ears. He wore a gray tank top and jeans and Patrick couldn't help admire his muscular arms. The man had always had a killer body even in high school.

"Five or six." Josh shrugged.

Patrick also couldn't help noticing Josh avoided his gaze. "About last night..."

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"Forget it. Don't give it a second thought." Josh turned his back and started fussing with the bar stock.

So he thought he would just dismiss Patrick, did he?

"First, I want to thank you for getting me home in one piece."

"What are friends for?"

Patrick leaned his chin on his hand and watched Josh actually walk away from him and around the bar to mess with the tables and chairs. He tamped down his irritation with some effort.

"I'm sorry I conked out," Patrick said to Josh's constantly moving figure.

"Like I said, forget it."

"I don't want to forget it." Patrick noticed the pounding in his head got worse the more Josh irritated him. "I want to make it up to you. Maybe we can have dinner one night or something. My treat."

"I have a bar to run."

Damn, the bastard still refused to turn around and face him. Patrick held his tongue with some effort, but he wanted to scream, *Look at me!*

"There must be some night Eddie can handle the bar without you."

Josh sighed, threw the rag down on the table he was wiping, and turned, finally, to face Patrick. "That would be a mistake, Patrick. Let's not go there."

"What? Go where?"

"Last night you called me Andrew."

Patrick frowned and shook his head. Shock coursed through him. He wouldn't have done that. "No way."

"Yeah, you did. I'm not Andrew and I don't want to be Andrew. I'm nobody's substitute lover, Patrick."

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"I did not call you Andrew," he insisted. "I wouldn't."

Josh's chiseled jaw tightened. "So I'm a liar?"

"No, but mistaken." How out of it was he to have called Josh of all people Andrew? Hell, how many times in the beginning of his relationship with Andrew had it been the other way?

"Whatever, Patrick. It's not going to happen. Last night I got carried away, but it won't happen again. The way to ensure that is to make sure we keep things friendly between us, but not personal."

Something that might have been his heart sunk into his stomach and formed a burning pit. For a moment, he could only stare at Josh. "You're ditching me as a friend?"

Josh grimaced. "No. I just think if we're going to do any friend things it should be with others around and not just the two of us. You're vulnerable and I obviously can't keep my hands to myself."

"This is just your usual bullshit. Even if I did call you Andrew by mistake I was drunk and out of it because of the day. It doesn't make me some weakling."

"I didn't say you were weak. Don't put words in my mouth that aren't there, Patrick."

"You think so though. You always have. I know you aren't him and I have never thought of you as him. I'm not trying to replace Andrew with anyone. He was irreplaceable."

"Yeah," Josh said softly. "He was."

"Good, I'm glad we agree on something." Patrick stood. His head hurt so much he thought his brain might explode. He needed to get home and lie down. "Look, it's just dinner for God's sake between two old friends. And unless you intend to take me on the table in the restaurant I'm pretty fucking sure you can keep your hands to yourself."

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Josh gaped at him and then laughed. "Yeah, I suppose that is true."

Patrick smiled, feeling a sense of relief. "So you will then?"

"Yes, all right. How about Wednesday? We can meet at Bristol's at seven."

He nodded. "Okay, that sounds perfect. Now I really need to go home and go to bed."

Josh studied him. "You look like crap."

"I've seen better days." And worse ones, too.

Josh went to the door of the bar, taking out his keys. "Here, I'll let you out."

Patrick walked to the door and stood beside him. He had this almost overpowering urge to kiss Josh until all doubts, all thoughts flew out of the man's head. His lips tingled anticipating just such a kiss.

But the door opened, letting in the blinding sun from outside and the moment, not the urge, passed.

"I'll see you Wednesday," he said instead, stepping outside.

"Take care of yourself, Patrick." And Josh closed the door in his face.

Chapter 3

The bastard wouldn't dare stand me up.

Patrick checked his watch for the fourth time since he'd been seated at a corner booth at Bristol's Steak and Seafood Restaurant. Fifteen past the hour.

Son of a bitch.

The waitress stopped by his table with a sympathetic smile. "Did you still want to wait for the other person?"

"Yeah."

"You want to order a drink?"

Memories of his hangover were still too fresh. "Iced tea, please. Thank you."

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As she moved away, he pulled out his cell phone. No messages from Josh telling him to fly a kite. He sighed and laid the phone on the table.

He hadn't been to Bristol's in a while, but it looked just like it had when Josh and Eddie had taken him there for his birthday not too long after Andrew took his own life. He'd avoided the place ever since even though at one time it had been his favorite restaurant for celebrations.

Patrick thought he could learn to love it again. Well, if Josh actually showed up.

From his position in the booth he could see the entryway of the restaurant. He watched, waited. Maybe even prayed.

The waitress came by and set the iced tea in front of him. She walked away again and left him alone with his menu.

His mind wandered, as it did all too often still, to the day he'd found Andrew. He hated when he thought about it, but sometimes Patrick had trouble turning off the memories. Places he'd been to with Andrew especially sparked them, but unless he wanted to avoid every location he'd known nearly all his life he had to get used to going to them again.

Just a couple of weeks before Andrew had killed himself, they'd been at Bristol's to celebrate Patrick passing the California Bar Exam. He treasured the memory as it had been really the last really good time he'd had with Andrew.

Josh suddenly appeared in the entryway of the restaurant. Patrick exhaled. He gripped the edge of the table, and forced himself to be calm. Josh had shown up after all.

Josh noticed him sitting at the booth and headed in his direction. He swung his tall frame into the seat across and offered a tentative smile. "Sorry I'm late."

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Patrick smiled. "I had begun to believe you stood me up."

"Traffic was a bitch."

The waitress came by and Josh ordered an iced tea before raising his menu. "I didn't really think about it when I suggested this place. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have."

He shook his head. "Don't worry about it. I can't avoid all our hangouts any longer. I don't avoid your bar."

"Okay," Josh said. "Look, like I said, I know you're still having a rough time with Andrew's death. I think you should see a psychiatrist."

Patrick didn't respond for several moments. It hurt like hell to think what Josh thought of him. "I'm not crazy."

Josh sighed. "I don't think that."

"I saw a counselor after his suicide," Patrick said softly. "I don't need nor want to see anyone else."

"But, the other night--"

Patrick slammed his fist down on the table. "Forget the other night. God, I used his name. So fucking what. People call their kids the wrong names every day and no one calls them crazy."

"It's not the same and I don't think you are crazy. Damn, you're the most stubborn person I've ever met."

The waitress arrived with Josh's tea. "Ready to order?"

Patrick cleared his throat and smiled. "I'll have the halibut, baked potato, and salad with bleu cheese."

"The New York, please, medium. Vegetables, and the clam chowder. Thank you."

When the waitress moved away from their table, Patrick said, "Please, don't you think if I needed to see someone I would? It's been three years, Josh. You said yourself I should be over it."

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Josh sighed. "But you aren't. And I don't think you're just going to get over it. Ever. Andrew was a big part of all our lives. Yours especially."

"True. I'm not going to forget Andrew or ever stop loving him. But don't I deserve to try and find someone else?"

"Yes."

God, I really am stupid.

Patrick picked up his iced tea just to give himself something to do. He finally got it. He was slow, practically had to be hit over the head, but he got it now. "Okay."

Josh looked at him. "Okay what?"

"I got your message."

"What message?"

"You aren't interested in me." Patrick shrugged. "You agree I should move on from Andrew, just not with you."

Josh looked uncomfortable, but he didn't bother to deny it. He picked up his napkin from his lap and readjusted it.

Pushing aside his sadness, Patrick said, "It's fine, Josh. Don't worry about it. I'm not expecting you to be my salvation or anything."

"The other night--"

"I'm really sick of talking about the other night. I got drunk and I attacked you. Fortunately for you, I passed out before I took advantage of you." Patrick rolled his eyes.

"More like you passed out before I took advantage of you."

"Whatever. Nothing happened except a few kisses and bare skin touching. You can pretend I was one of your anonymous one-night stands again."

"Patrick." Josh's jaw tightened.

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The waitress came by with his salad and Josh's soup. "Any ground pepper?"

Both of them shook their heads and they were once more left alone.

"Can I ask you a question, Josh?"

Josh nodded and ate a bite of soup.

"Have you ever been in love? Has there ever been anyone you've wanted a serious relationship with?" When Josh frowned in irritation, Patrick shook his head. "I'm genuinely curious. I'm not trying to judge you. I just really want to know."

The other man shrugged. "Not really, no."

"That's what I thought." Patrick forced a smile. "Well, now that all that unpleasantness is out of the way, how about a truce?"

"A truce?"

"Yep. I promise not to try to coax you into dating me or having sex with me. I'll treat you only as a friend, if you promise to stop telling me I need to see a counselor. Deal?"

Josh stared at him for a moment, in that *I'm assessing you* sort of way he had. He shrugged. "Okay, deal."

"Great." He scooped up his spoon and dipped it into Josh's soup. "I always taste my friend's food, just so you know."

Josh smiled, for what seemed like the first time in ages. "It's pretty good."

"Uh-huh. How is Eddie doing these days?"

* * * *

A couple of days later, Josh was just pouring a patron a drink behind the bar at a few minutes past eight when Patrick walked in dressed in tight jeans and a pale salmon polo shirt. He was not

Pieces

alone. Accompanying him was a greasy, dark-haired bearded man a couple of inches taller than Patrick dressed like a slob in ratty jeans and a holey shirt. The man had the palm of his hand on the small of Patrick's back.

"Hey, who is that with Patrick?" his brother asked him, coming up next to him to grab a bottle of rum.

"I don't know. Never seen him before." Josh placed the drink on a napkin before the customer and walked around the bar to Patrick's table. "Hi."

Patrick, who had his head tilted way too close to the other man, turned his face to look at Josh. "Oh, hello. Ken, you know what you want to drink?"

Ken didn't even glance at Josh, just kept his gaze focused on Patrick. "Hmm, just a beer. Draft. That microbrew mentioned on the sign in the front."

"Make that two. Thanks."

Josh didn't move away. "Aren't you going to introduce me?"

"Sure. Ken, this is Josh. I knew him in high school."

Ken finally glanced at him, but seemed quite unimpressed. "Hey."

Josh snorted and left their table. "*I knew him in high school.*" What kind of bullshit was that? Like they weren't friends still. Not even a friend from high school, but an acquaintance? He returned to behind the bar and grabbed a couple of beer mugs.

"You look pissed," Eddie said.

"What have I got to be pissed about? I don't fucking give a shit what douche bag Patrick wants to go out with."

Eddie smiled. "You don't, huh?"

Pieces

"No. Not at all." He shrugged and filled the mugs. "If that guy has bathed in the last decade I'll eat your hat." He pointed to the baseball cap Eddie wore backward.

"Leave my hat alone. That bad, huh?" Eddie glanced at the table. "They look sort of sweet together."

Josh followed his gaze and narrowed his eyes when he noticed Ken's hand rubbing up and down Patrick's bare arm. He slammed the beers down on a tray.

"Maybe you'd better let me take those over to them."

Josh shot him a look and picked up a couple other drinks to deliver and set them on the tray. He dropped off the other drinks first and then approached Patrick and Ken. He put Patrick's beer in front of him, and then said, "I'm going to need to see some ID."

Ken laughed. "Yeah, right."

Josh did not smile. "I'm serious."

"Fine," Ken said, making a tsking noise. He tossed his driver's license at Josh who caught it.

"I'll be right back."

"What?"

But Josh moved away with the beer and license. He reached for his cell phone set back behind the bar.

"What are you doing?" his brother asked.

"Calling my friend at the police station. This guy might have some outstanding warrants."

Eddie chuckled. "Give me that. You can't do that."

Josh frowned. "Why the hell not? That guy is a loser. He's not good enough for Patrick."

"Probably not, but I don't hear wedding bells yet. Just chill." Eddie pulled the cell phone out of his hand. "Give the guy his beer...and his license."

Pieces

He grimaced but walked back to the table. He put the license down and then as he went to put the drink down, he let it slip from his fingers into Ken's lap.

"Son of a bitch," Ken yelled and stood. "You asshole."

"Sorry. Slipped."

Patrick covered his mouth with his hand. "Calm down, Ken. It was an accident."

Ken glared at Patrick. "I'll be back." He stormed off toward the bathrooms.

"Was that necessary?" Patrick asked.

"I told you, it slipped. Who is that clown?"

Patrick shrugged. "I just met him tonight. I'm doing an online dating service."

"What? A good-looking successful lawyer like you has to go that route?"

"What can I say? It's worth a shot."

Josh shook his head, disgusted. "Not if that's the sort you have to meet."

"He's all right."

"He smells."

"He does not and--" Patrick stopped and stood up enough to see the door. "Shit. He just left."

Josh burst out laughing. "Good riddance."

"Easy for you to say," Patrick grumbled. "He was my ride home."

"You wouldn't have wanted that asshole to take you home. He would have been an octopus all over you. I'll drive you home."

"Who says I want to stay until closing?" His friend scowled.

"I'll talk to Eddie. Marty's here so we have help. Let me know when you're ready."

Chapter 4

As Josh pulled in front of Patrick's condo, Patrick reached for the truck handle. "Okay, thanks for the ride."

"Um."

Patrick arched an eyebrow. "You didn't want to come in, did you?"

Josh shrugged. "Well, if you insist. There's a parking space." He pulled his truck in and turned it off. They both got out and approached Patrick's door.

He admitted, to himself anyway, he was more than a little surprised Josh wanted to come inside. Patrick had been sure Josh would barely stop the truck to let him out.

Pieces

Patrick flipped on a light just inside the door that flooded his living room with recessed lighting. He winced. Feeling his cheeks heat, he said, "I've been meaning to clean it."

He went around the room scooping up papers and clothes he'd left strewn about and kicked his athletic shoes under the coffee table.

"It's okay," Josh said. "I'm not much of a housekeeper myself."

"Do you want some coffee or tea?"

"Yeah, sure."

Patrick smiled and switched on the kitchen lights. "Which?"

"Tea."

He filled the electric kettle and turned it on. "All right, I have regular, orange spice, chocolate macadamia coconut, and chamomile. Oh, and mint and berry fusion."

Josh laughed. "Um, just regular, thanks. No sugar."

Once Patrick fixed their tea, he handed a mug to Josh and walked over to his computer, which he'd left on earlier. He sat at the desk and signed into his email.

"What are you doing?"

"Seeing if they found more guys for me to try."

"Guys for you to try?"

"Yeah, from the dating service."

Josh snorted and went over to the dining room and grabbed a chair. He set it next to Patrick. "This I gotta see."

Patrick merely smiled and brought up the site. He entered his ID and password. About ten pictures popped up.

"How much is this costing you anyway?" Josh asked.

"Well, right now I'm on a two-week free trial. After that it's like forty for three months."

"Three months? You're going to do this for three months?"

Pieces

He patted Josh's leg. "Not if I can find Mr. Right in the trial period."

"I don't believe this," Josh muttered. He stabbed a finger at the first guy. "Let's see who this loser is."

"Who says he's a loser?" Patrick clicked on the picture and the profile came up. The guy wasn't too bad looking. Probably was a good fifteen years older than Patrick though. He had a goatee and a high shiny forehead.

"He could be your grandpa."

He chuckled. "A bit of an exaggeration."

Josh scooted closer and peered at the screen. "A hot dog salesman? Are you kidding me?"

"Hot dog salesmen need love too."

"You're an attorney. This guy is not in your league. *Please.* Next."

Patrick went to click on the picture of the second guy.

"Oh, no. That guy's an axe murderer if ever I saw one."

Patrick blinked and focused on the guy's picture. He looked like an average guy who could be a next door neighbor. "You can't tell that by looking at him."

Josh sighed, leaning close enough for Patrick to smell his fresh clean scent, and reached for the mouse, yanking it out of Patrick's hand. He skipped several pictures and landed on about the sixth one before double clicking.

"What was wrong with three, four, and five? Were they axe murderers, too?" His lips twitched.

"They weren't the right caliber." Josh read the details of six, the hand not holding the mouse resting on Patrick's thigh. Patrick tried to ignore the jolt it sent straight to his cock. "Stock broker?"

Pieces

He could be another crook bilking people out of their life savings. Nope."

"Why do I get the feeling you aren't going to approve of any of these guys?"

Josh actually clicked out of the dating site. "Because I think the whole idea is idiotic. You don't need some cheesy dating site."

Patrick rose and went back into the kitchen with his now empty mug. "And where do you think I'm going to meet a nice guy then?"

"I don't know. A bar? Like mine?" Josh tipped his mug to his lips and took the final sip before setting it beside Patrick's. "Work? Church?"

"Church? Um, no." Patrick sighed. "Well, thanks again for the ride. I guess you probably should be going back to the bar."

He swept past Josh, brushing his hip against Josh's as he passed, and headed for the front door. The truth was, sitting that close to Josh had turned him on. His cock was half hard and once Josh was gone he intended to take a long hot shower with some personal attention to his cock.

Patrick held the door open for Josh.

Josh narrowed his eyes. "It's not going to be that easy."

With the palm of his hand, Josh shut the door. He backed Patrick against the wall in the hallway and slammed his hand next to Patrick's head.

"You think I should leave, do you?" Josh whispered, his lips a fraction of an inch from Patrick's.

His heart hammering, Patrick stammered, "Well, I--"

Josh slammed his other hand against the wall, trapping Patrick between his muscular arms. He tilted his head and leaned closer.

Pieces

Patrick swallowed, mesmerized by the look of lust in Josh's brown eyes. Almost without thinking, he slid his fingers under Josh's shirt, smoothing his fingertips across the hot bare skin.

Josh's lips trailed from Patrick's ear across his jaw. His breath shallow, Patrick moaned, his hands skittering up Josh's abs to his chest even as Josh pressed his body into Patrick's, grinding his erection against his leg.

"Ah, fuck." Patrick gasped.

"Definitely fuck. Bedroom."

He hesitated just a second and Josh ground against him again.

"Patrick."

Patrick ducked and slipped under Josh's outstretched arms and headed up the stairs, knowing Josh would be right on his heels. He suspected having sex with Josh would lead to nothing but heartbreak since Josh would push him away in the morning. Yet he couldn't bring himself to refuse. He sort of suspected he wouldn't be able to refuse Josh ever, but Patrick hoped he never had to test that theory.

As he stepped through the doorway of his bedroom, Patrick stripped off his shirt and threw it in the general direction of the hamper. Kicking off his shoes, he noted the lube and condoms he'd fetched the other night were still on the table next to his bed.

Josh walked to the bed and yanked the quilt and blankets off, revealing freshly changed navy sheets. He toed off his shoes and turned toward Patrick. His long fingers slid into the waistband of Patrick's jeans.

Patrick took a step back, trying to clear his head, but Josh tugged him back. Josh's big hands undid the button and zipper of his jeans. He palmed Patrick's hard cock through his briefs, tearing a groan from his throat.

Pieces

It shouldn't feel *this* good. But it did, and Patrick wanted this, heartbreak or not. He shoved his jeans down his legs and stepped out of them. "What about you?"

Josh nodded and pulled off his shirt. He made short work of the khaki slacks he wore and left them in a wrinkled heap at his feet.

Patrick's gaze froze at the sight of Josh's hard cock pointing toward him. The man had gone commando. Swallowing, he whispered, "Kiss me."

Josh's lips curved in a sensual smile as he pulled Patrick close, his hands curving over Patrick's ass. His lips barely grazed Patrick's, teasing them, making him desperate for more. "Take these off," Josh said, his mouth moving against Patrick's.

Before he could move, Josh had already pushed the briefs down to his knees and closed his callused hand over Patrick's shaft.

"Geez." He gasped, jolts of lust firing up his skin.

"You aren't fast enough." Josh laughed. He pushed Patrick on the bed and yanked the briefs off the rest of the way.

He'd hardly caught his breath when Josh turned him on to his back and covered his body with his, molding their mouths together in a hard, nearly bruising kiss. He opened his mouth to breathe and Josh's tongue slipped in. He shook as Josh's hands slid up his abdomen to capture his hands above his head.

The kiss was forceful, possessive and totally thrilling. Patrick rose underneath him, pushing his cock against Josh. He ached, felt nearly feverish with desire.

He released Patrick's arms, kneading both hands all over his skin. Josh's hand closed around Patrick's hard cock. The rigid length jumped in his grasp.

Pieces

And then Josh did something he hadn't done on that long ago night together. He scooted down until his mouth was lined up with Patrick's erection. He darted his tongue out, scooping up the drop of pre-cum. He wrapped his lips around the tip.

"Yes." Patrick gasped, pushing himself up into Josh's mouth.

Josh sucked the shaft all the way in. He hollowed out his cheeks, sucking hard.

"God!" Patrick tensed, his fingers digging into Josh's shoulders. He was so close to coming.

The other man released his cock, winked and reached for the lube.

"You're killing me," Patrick complained.

Josh laughed. "Not just yet."

Lube sloshed out and Patrick braced himself for the invasion of Josh's slicked fingers. He hooked his hands under his legs and spread them wide. His eyes closed at the first push of Josh's index finger inside. The lube was a little cold, but he welcomed the feel of Josh preparing him as a second finger joined the first.

He hadn't had sex since Andrew's death. It had never been a mere common thing for Patrick like it was for Josh. He tensed a little.

"Shh, it's all right. Relax," Josh said. "Damn, you're tight."

Patrick nodded and turned his head into the pillow, biting his lip. His heart pounding hard and fast, he slipped his hand down to jerk his cock, stroking along the length.

"Wait for me," Josh whispered, withdrawing his fingers. "Just a little longer."

Patrick opened his eyes just in time to watch Josh tear the foil packet and roll the condom over his long, thick erection.

Pieces

Josh poised the head of his cock at Patrick's entrance and, with brown eyes meeting blue-green eyes, pushed in. He exhaled as Josh slid past the tight ring of muscle, wincing at the burn of the intrusion.

"All right, Patrick?"

He wiggled until Josh was in deeper, pressing his prostate. Patrick moaned. "Yes, perfect."

Josh loomed above him, a sexy grin on his face. "I second that perfect." He stayed for a few heartbeats even while Patrick's hand worked his own hard length, his fingers dipping down to squeeze his balls.

Patrick lifted up from the mattress, urging Josh to move. Josh's eyes drifted half-closed and he started thrusting, pushing in deeper with each slow pump of Patrick's ass.

Time froze for just a moment in Patrick's mind and he imagined that first time with Josh. It had been his first time, period. He'd never let on to Josh he'd never had sex before, just had faked his way through it. After all, he knew how it worked. That first penetration had been painful, but they were both high, and if Josh noticed it had been unusually painful for Patrick he didn't let on. By the time they finished though, Patrick thought it amazing.

The next morning when Josh turned away it had left his heart in pieces.

Now, here he was playing the same game.

Fisting the sheets, Patrick closed his eyes and pushed the painful memories away and let himself enjoy the feel of Josh fucking him. His orgasm was close, on the brink, tightening his balls. He stroked his cock harder, faster.

Pieces

Above him, Josh grabbed his legs and opened him wider, ramming his ass, the slap of his sac and their harsh pants loud in the otherwise quiet room.

"Josh, oh God." Patrick gasped, as his release slammed through him, gobs of white cum splattering his stomach.

"Yes." Josh tensed, then pumped three quick times, roaring his own release.

While Josh withdrew and got up to discard the condom, Patrick rolled to his side and moved the sheets to slide under them. A moment later Josh joined him in the bed and placed an arm loosely about Patrick's waist.

After a several minutes of silence, Patrick finally couldn't stand it. "What was that?"

"It was sex."

Patrick closed his eyes, trying not to let the simple but true words hurt. Had he actually expected anything else to come out of Josh's mouth? What else would he say? Making love? Or something like, *I couldn't keep from touching you one more minute?* Not in a million years.

It didn't take long for the sound of heavy breathing and soft snores to drift to him. Part of him wanted to wake Josh and tell him to leave. He didn't and wouldn't. But he lay awake long after wondering how many pieces of his heart he could lose and still survive?

* * * *

Patrick opened his eyes to see it was already after eight Saturday morning. He swung his legs out of bed and blinked a couple times to get his bearings. Josh still lay next to him sleeping

Pieces

away. He was surprised, really. He had expected Josh to sneak away in the dead of night to avoid the inevitable *it's not you, it's me* conversation.

He picked up his discarded clothes from the night before and tossed them in the hamper this time. Then he bent down and picked up Josh's and left them lying on the bed. Trying to be quiet, he pulled out sweatpants and a T-shirt and dressed.

As long as he was going to have a guest this morning, Patrick decided he might as well make breakfast.

By the time Josh appeared in the kitchen doorway, Patrick had already made coffee, bacon, biscuits, and fried potatoes. He had just taken out the carton of eggs.

"Oh, my God, that smells fantastic," Josh said, smiling. He wore plaid flannel pajama bottoms and nothing else.

"Good morning. Help yourself to some coffee. How do you want your eggs?"

"Over easy." Josh grabbed the mug Patrick handed him and went to the coffeepot.

"Wait." Patrick eyed him. "Aren't those my pajama bottoms?"

Josh laughed, his cheeks turning an appealing pink. "Uh, yeah."

He snorted. "Go sit down and I'll bring you breakfast."

Josh just grinned and took his coffee to the table. "This is cool. I didn't know you knew how to cook."

"Well, I learned from my mother. With her having all boys she insisted we know how to cook." Patrick shrugged. He plated Josh's potatoes and bacon, adding a biscuit. He cracked two eggs over the pan.

"And now I get to reap the rewards."

Pieces

"You might want to withhold judgment on that until after you taste it." He fixed his own plate and then traded his eggs for Josh's in the pan and brought Josh his plate.

Josh didn't wait. He stabbed his fork into the potatoes and took a large bite. "Yum."

Patrick chuckled and brought his own plate to the table and sat down. "You snore."

The other man nodded. "Yep, I know. Wow, you didn't whack a can over the counter for these biscuits."

He rolled his eyes. "Hardly. They are homemade."

"Mmm."

They ate silently for a while and Patrick wondered if Josh would broach the whole one-night stand thing or if he should or if he should just ignore it. He shrugged.

"So, what are you up to today?" he asked, his voice a master of casualness.

"I have some errands to do before I get to the bar. Tonight's Eddie's anniversary so I told him he could leave early and go out with his wife. It'll be a busy night, but Marty will be there."

Patrick nodded. "I'm sure you two can handle it." He finished his coffee and stood. He figured after he did up the dishes and got rid of Josh, he'd go back online and see if any of the guys the dating service sent were worth asking out.

"Need my help cleaning up?" Josh asked, following him in with his cleaned plate.

"Nah, I got it. Go ahead and leave. But don't run off with my pajamas."

"Okay, okay." Josh laughed and went back upstairs to dress.

Pieces

He grimaced and set about loading the dishwasher. He had known this was what he was going to get, so really he had only himself to blame if he was going to bitch about it now.

A few minutes later Josh returned, dressed in his clothes from the night before. "Sure you don't need my help?"

"Positive. Let me walk you out." He dried his hands on a dish towel and walked with Josh to the door. "Well, see you."

Josh hesitated at the door, holding it open. He turned to look at Patrick. "What are you going to do today?"

He shrugged. "Probably check out that dating site. After that I don't know."

"Oh." Josh looked away, not meeting Patrick's eyes. His hand gripped the door hard. "Don't."

"Excuse me?"

Josh still wouldn't look at him. "I don't want you to do that, Patrick."

"But--"

"Please, just don't."

Patrick swallowed. Did that mean... No, it couldn't. Could it? Josh wanted to maybe see him again? He should just ask. Instead he said, "Are you sure?"

Josh nodded. "Talk to you later."

Patrick stood in the doorway watching Josh get in his truck, trying not to be too hopeful. But it was difficult.

Chapter 5

Josh did not know what he was doing messing around with Patrick, but he couldn't deny he wanted to do it again. And within a few hours if he had anything to say about it. He knew the man was vulnerable and he didn't want to hurt Patrick, but he just couldn't let him date losers like Ken.

He parked his truck in the bar parking lot and went inside.

"Hey, sweetness." Josh greeted his sister-in-law, Kitty, who sat at the bar. He dropped a kiss on her dark red curls. "Looking forward to your hot date with Eddie?"

The pretty, petite woman smiled. "I sure am. Thanks so much for covering for him tonight, Josh. I so appreciate it."

"Anytime." Josh walked behind the bar and quickly noticed Peanut Man had already parked his butt on his usual stool. The

Pieces

man, Mr. Jenkins, spent most nights at the bar. He felt sorry for the old man. He didn't really know much about him. Unlike the clichéd bartender knowing everyone's business seen in movies and television, Josh didn't spend a lot of time sticking his nose in the bar customer's business. One thing he and Eddie did do was make sure he always had a cab ride home.

"You all set to go off with Kitty?" he asked his brother.

"Hell, yeah," Eddie said with a laugh. He clasped Josh on the shoulder. "Are you sure it's all right? Saturdays are busiest."

"Don't worry, Marty will help. Now go, go. Get out before I change my mind." Josh shook his head, grinning as Eddie hurried to Kitty. Married five years already. Time flew.

After they left Josh got busy getting ready for the rush he expected later. It wasn't quite five but already a number of patrons were arriving. Marty was due at five.

He'd just set a beer at a table when his cell rang. Josh frowned at the number. "Marty? What's up?"

"Josh, my mom's had a heart attack, I can't make it in. I couldn't call earlier, we've been at the hospital."

"Ah, Marty, I'm so sorry, buddy. Is she going to be okay?"

"We don't know yet."

"Take care of yourself and your family. Don't worry about this place at all."

"Thanks, Josh. I'm sorry. Bye." The call disconnected.

"Shit." Josh looked out at the patrons. Now it was possible. He could handle it now. But as the crowd got thicker... He pressed speed dial for a number on his phone.

"Hello."

Just Patrick's deep voice warmed and calmed him. "It's me."

"Who is me?"

Pieces

Josh smiled, hearing the amusement in Patrick's voice. "You know who. Josh. And don't you dare say Josh who."

Patrick laughed. "Wouldn't dare."

"I need a favor. It's huge."

"Hmm. I wouldn't say huge."

Josh rolled his eyes. "Give me a break."

"Okay, what's the favor?"

"Marty's mother had a heart attack and he can't make it. Can you come to the bar and wait tables?"

"You want me to be a waiter?"

"You put yourself through college that way."

"At a restaurant."

"It's the same."

"I don't know anything about mixing drinks," Patrick said.

"You don't have to. I'm the bartender. Please?"

Patrick sighed. "You know I will."

Josh chuckled. "Yeah, that's why I called you. Thanks, I owe you."

"Oh, you definitely do. And trust me, I'll be collecting later."

* * * *

When the door opened half an hour later to finally reveal Patrick, Josh was more than happy to see him. He was ecstatic. Especially when he noticed Patrick put an overnight bag behind the bar. He'd been sorry he hadn't mentioned it earlier when they talked on the phone and was now glad Patrick had figured it out himself.

Patrick wore a pair of jeans that looked like they'd been made specifically for him and a navy buttoned-down shirt. The navy

Pieces

shirt set off his blue-green eyes to perfection. Even his sandy blond hair looked freshly cut and styled. Josh's mouth watered.

"You look fantastic," he blurted out before he could stop himself.

Patrick smiled. "Thanks. I decided to go to the salon today for a haircut."

"Well, I'm really glad to see you. This place is jumping tonight."

"Good thing I brought reinforcements."

He frowned. "Reinforcements?"

As if on cue, the door of the bar opened again revealing a tall, thin, good-looking dark-haired man dressed in jeans like Patrick but wearing a green polo shirt.

"Steve, this is Josh. I asked Steve to help, too. He's another attorney at my firm and he used to wait tables with me."

Steve smiled and shook Josh's hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Uh, me, too." Josh didn't remember Patrick ever mentioning this guy. He narrowed his eyes. He seemed a little too friendly with Patrick. Steve put his arm on Patrick's shoulder and whispered something in his ear.

Patrick laughed. "Oh, definitely." He turned to Josh. "I told Steve you'd pay him."

"Oh, did you now?"

"Yep. But you don't have to pay me, if that makes you feel better. I'll take out my compensation another way." Patrick grinned.

"Right. Minimum wage plus tips," he said to Steve and tossed a bar apron at him and then one to Patrick.

"I'll get started." Steve tied the apron around his waist and moved off to wait on a table.

Pieces

"You okay?"

Josh nodded. "I just didn't know you were bringing a date."

"A date?" Patrick shook his head, laughing. "Steve isn't a date, Josh. I thought he could help."

He knew he was being stupid, but damn, he didn't like the way Patrick looked at this guy. "I do appreciate the assistance."

"But?"

Peanut Man signaled him for another drink. Josh sighed. "Later. I better get busy."

The evening went pretty fast, but Josh couldn't stop watching Patrick and Steve interacting while they waited on customers. They laughed, talked, and looked all too comfy with each other.

It shouldn't bother him. Patrick was free to see who he wanted to see. They'd made no sort of commitment. It was true he'd asked Patrick not to pursue the clowns on the dating site, which Josh thought was clear enough he didn't want Patrick seeing others, but maybe Patrick didn't want to go that route. After all Josh had been the one reluctant to start anything between them. It could be that either Patrick didn't get that Josh wanted to try after all or perhaps Patrick had decided he didn't want to himself.

Josh didn't know when exactly he had changed his mind about seeing Patrick. He thought it had probably started when he'd strutted in here the night before with greasy Ken. And then later when they'd viewed the dating site at Patrick's house. The plain truth was he didn't like seeing Patrick with other guys. He never had.

"What's the frown for?" Patrick asked as he came up to the bar. "Two more margaritas."

"Just wondering if Steve is something to you." Josh started preparing the margaritas.

Pieces

"Something? Like what?"

"Someone you're interested in." He didn't look at Patrick, not wanting to see the truth.

Patrick's hand closed over his arm. "Hey."

Josh glanced his way. Patrick was smiling.

"You know who I'm interested in?"

"No."

The other man sighed. "You."

"Is that because...never mind."

"No, what?" Patrick asked, his eyes searching Josh.

"I remind you of Andrew," Josh said softly. He didn't look away this time, but it was hard not to when a spark of anger appeared in Patrick's gorgeous eyes.

"You don't remind me of him. And I'm not interested in Steve nor is he interested in me. He has a *girlfriend*. Okay?"

Josh swallowed the lump in his throat. "Okay. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Just...stop assuming." He picked up the tray with the margaritas and went back on to the floor.

By the time closing came around, Josh's mood had improved. Soon he'd get Patrick alone and naked.

He got Mr. Jenkins his cab, paid Steve, and closed and locked the bar door so he could finish the cleanup.

"Thanks so much for helping. I couldn't have done it without you. Eddie will be grateful too when I tell him."

"I'm just glad I was able to help." Patrick smiled. "I'm exhausted though. I've been on my feet all night. I'm not used to that."

"Well, sit down there on that barstool while I finish wiping things down."

Patrick sat on the third stool in and sighed, closing his eyes.

Pieces

"Uh-oh, you aren't too tired to collect on my favor are you?"

The other man laughed and opened his eyes. "Hell, no. In fact, I was thinking."

"About?"

Patrick's grin was downright wicked. "I saw this porno once where the one guy did the other while he lay on barstools."

Josh's jaw dropped. "Are you serious?"

Patrick reached into the pocket of his jeans and tossed a pre-lubed condom packet onto the bar in front of him. He reached in again and a trial-sized bottle of lube landed next to it. "I've come prepared."

Cleaning up the bar went completely out of Josh's mind. Instead he envisioned Patrick naked on his back, his ass hanging over the edge of the stool while impaled on Josh's cock.

Oh, God.

He left the cloth he used to clean the counter and walked around the end of the bar toward Patrick. His cock, half-erect before even thinking about sex later with Patrick, had hardened fully. He undid his zipper to release it from the tight constraints of his pants.

Patrick swiveled on the stool. "I take it you like the idea?"

"What do you think?" Josh pushed his pants down his hips and closed his hand around his erection. When he reached Patrick he covered his mouth with his own, slipping his tongue inside.

"Mmm." Patrick sucked his tongue deeper, hard, almost biting.

Josh broke the kiss and pushed Patrick to lay on the stools, his head resting on the third one. Patrick twisted his feet and toed off his shoes.

"Remove your jeans," Josh said, reaching for the condom. He could barely wait to push inside Patrick's tight hole.

Pieces

Patrick unbuttoned his jeans and without sitting up shimmied them and his briefs down toward his feet. Josh yanked them off the rest of the way and dropped them to the floor.

"God, you're gorgeous," he whispered, stroking his fingers along Patrick's inner thighs, teasing close to Patrick's shaft, but not quite touching.

The other man leaned up and tugged Josh close for a searing kiss. Josh pressed his lips hard to Patrick's, threading his fingers in the man's sandy hair.

"Now." Patrick gasped against his lips. "Fuck me now."

Josh nipped his bottom lip and smiled. "I like how you beg."

He grabbed the little bottle of lube and squeezed half of it onto his fingers. Josh lifted Patrick's legs and rested them on his shoulders, slipping two of his fingers into Patrick's entrance. He worked them in and out and closed his other hand around the other man's cock, stroking the length.

"Josh, please."

He shook, desire burning through him. He withdrew his fingers and replaced them quickly with his cock head, pushing in slow and deep. He pulled Patrick's ass to the very edge of the barstool and slid in to the hilt.

Patrick's gaze met his, his eyes glazed with passion.

"Jerk yourself."

Josh grabbed Patrick's hand and placed it on his cock, rubbing it along the shaft. He left his hand covering Patrick's as they stroked together even as he pumped the man's snug hole. Angling his next thrust, he knew from the way Patrick groaned he'd hit the right spot.

"I'm so close," Patrick whispered.

Pieces

He nodded. "Me, too. God, Patrick, you're so fucking tight." His thrusts sped up, his fingers pressing into the soft flesh of Patrick's legs.

Patrick squeezed around him, shaking beneath him as cum sputtered out from his cock.

Josh's own release slammed through him, pulling a guttural groan from his throat.

Withdrawing, he dropped to his knees. Josh didn't think he'd ever look at his barstools the same way again after tonight.

"So, did that live up to your fantasies?"

A laugh rumbled from Patrick's chest as he sat up. "Pretty much. But you know, it's cold in here."

Josh grinned. "Yeah. Let's clean up and go to my house. You can follow me in your car."

"Great. I can't wait. I'm all yours."

Chapter 6

Patrick swung his legs out of Josh's bed as slowly and quietly as he could. He didn't want to wake Josh. He stood and glanced down at the still sleeping man with his tousled sable hair. His finger itched to stroke through the soft strands, but the dark smudges under Josh's closed eyes convinced Patrick to let his lover sleep.

His lover.

Maybe it was premature to think of Josh that way. A few times having sex didn't make him that, did it? He still wasn't quite sure what Josh wanted out of him.

The digital clock on the dresser read ten after eight. He wondered how long Josh would sleep. They hadn't gotten to Josh's

Pieces

place until close to three in the morning and then they'd spent more time having sex before going to sleep.

Patrick did not sleep late. Actually after eight seemed late to him, really. Even during nights like this when he had only gotten about four hours of rest.

He grabbed the duffle bag he'd brought with him the night before to the bar and slipped out of the bedroom. Josh had another bathroom off the hallway of his apartment so he went in there, showered and dressed.

When he re-emerged from the bathroom he checked on Josh. Still asleep.

Patrick made himself coffee and decided to go sit out on Josh's balcony to wait for him to wake up. It seemed like a nice sunny day. But as he went to the sliding glass doors, he noticed several framed photographs on the entertainment center in Josh's living room.

Prior to coming home with Josh, he'd not been in his new apartment. He approached the pictures and picked up the first one. It was a photo of Josh and Eddie as boys standing by the rocks on a beach with their parents. Patrick smiled. They were both cute kids.

The next one was a holiday gathering, Thanksgiving he thought, where Josh's family stood with his aunt and uncle and their children, including Andrew. Again they were young, probably pre-teens. Even then the resemblance between Josh, Eddie, and their cousin, Andrew, had been significant.

The next several were pictures of Josh's parents and grandparents and then following those was a picture of himself, Josh, and Eddie from their high school days.

Pieces

Patrick laughed. Lord, he'd been a dork. Josh had been gorgeous even then. He'd been so hung up on Josh.

Until their one-night stand the summer after high school, Patrick hadn't thought Josh found him attractive in any way. Then, of course, after sex, the reality had been Josh didn't mind fucking Patrick so long as there was nothing else to it.

So, really, what was he doing now? He'd asked Josh what this was about just the day before and been told it was just sex.

The last photo was a more recent one. Taken just a few months before Andrew hanged himself. They'd all gone to Las Vegas together and the picture was of Josh, Eddie, Eddie's wife Kitty, Patrick, and Andrew out in front of the Bellagio Hotel and Casino. Andrew's arm was around Patrick's waist and they were all smiling.

"Hey."

Startled, Patrick turned to see Josh had come into the living room. He wore pajama bottoms and a thin white T-shirt and his hair was bed-tousled. Patrick put the framed photo back and forced a smile.

"Good morning. I made coffee if you want some."

Josh didn't answer but his gaze fixated on the pictures Patrick had been studying. "Want to talk about anything?"

Patrick shrugged. "Nice pictures."

"That's it?"

"What is there to talk about?" He moved into the kitchen and Josh followed him. He took down another mug from the cabinet he'd found his in and filled it with coffee.

Josh took the mug and leaned a hip against the kitchen counter. "How you're feeling after seeing those pictures."

"I told you, nice pictures."

Pieces

"No sadness?"

"Not really. I can look at pictures of Andrew without weeping and wailing, you know." Patrick rolled his eyes.

"Okay. Well, if there's ever a time you do want to talk about it. Or *anything*, I'm a good listener."

For some reason that made him laugh and not in a good way. He heard the bitterness, the sarcasm in his own laugh. "You've got to be kidding, Josh."

Josh added vanilla creamer from the fridge to his coffee. He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You've never wanted to listen. I tried to talk to you after Andrew's death. You wanted no part of it then. You suggested, as you still do, that I should talk to a shrink."

"I just thought with suicide...it might help."

"Well, it didn't. What the hell is a shrink going to tell me that I don't already know?" Patrick turned away, his anger suddenly flaming hot.

Josh didn't respond for several moments and then he said, "You blame yourself, don't you?"

"It was my fault."

"No. How can it be? He had some mental issues, Patrick. They weren't your fault."

"Yes, they were. He killed himself because he wasn't getting what he wanted, what he needed out of our relationship."

"You don't know why he killed himself. He didn't leave a suicide note," Josh pointed out.

Patrick set his coffee down and hugged himself. "The night before...we had a fight. It was pretty fucked up."

He closed his eyes, trying to block out the memories. The guilt still consumed him, no matter how hard he tried not to let it. But

Pieces

Patrick didn't want to tell Josh everything. Not when he didn't even know what future he had with the man. If he had one.

"Patrick?" Josh's hand closed over his arm.

"During the fight, Andrew said he couldn't do this anymore. I thought he meant us. I left. Went to stay at my dad's that night. I knew when I went home Andrew would want to talk. Maybe break up."

"Wow. Must have been some fight."

He nodded, swallowed the painful lump. "Yeah. Anyway, I didn't want to deal with it. I was pretty sure that was the end for us. We'd been having...problems for a while. So, I deliberately delayed going home for as long as I could. Then...well you know what happened when I got home. I found him."

"Don't say it," Josh whispered.

"I can't help it. If I'd gone home that day right away maybe--"

"No."

"Or maybe never left. He might never have done it, Josh."

"Maybe he wouldn't have that day, but being suicidal he would have done it another day."

Patrick pulled away from the touch on his arm. Turned his back on Josh. "Well, why didn't I know he wanted to harm himself? Why didn't you? Or any of us? How come we didn't know the signs and get him help?"

"I don't know. I don't have all the answers. The truth is no one does. The answers, if there were some, died with Andrew. And he didn't leave us any clues. We can't ever know what he was thinking, Patrick. No matter how much we might want to."

Patrick leaned both hands against the counter and nodded. "I know. I guess. It still sucks."

Pieces

Josh rested his hand on Patrick's back. "It does suck. I'm sorry. I don't know how to make it better. But maybe...I can make you feel better right now."

He straightened and faced Josh who reached for his hand.

"Come back to bed with me."

"I'm not sure sex ever solved anything."

"Nope, but it still feels good, don't you think?"

Patrick smiled. He knew Josh was trying to lighten the mood and he was grateful. "Okay, you've convinced me."

* * * *

Sometime later, Patrick lowered himself onto Josh's thick, hard erection. His muscles loosened enough to take the cock all the way to the hilt with one thrust from Josh.

"God, you're tight," Josh said on a groan.

Bracing his hands on either side of Josh's hips, Patrick merely smiled down at his lover and began to fuck himself on the shaft within him. It felt good to be in charge, dictating how fast and deep Josh could go.

Josh's hand moved from where it rested on Patrick's thigh to close around Patrick's erection. With a saucy smile of his own, his thumb swept up over the tip and swiped the drop of pre-cum. He brought his thumb to his mouth and sucked on it.

"Geez, you're trying to kill me." Patrick panted, increasing the speed of his ass pumping up and down on Josh's cock.

His lover's hand slid down his chest and abdomen back to encircle his shaft, his fingers teasing the mushroomed head before sliding down to roll Patrick's balls, which pulled tight under Josh's ministrations.

Pieces

The first jolts of his oncoming orgasm tingled at the base of his spine. His eyes closed as Josh's grasp stroked his cock faster, harder, pulling Patrick's release out with every tug.

"Josh!" he cried as white globs of cum shot out all over his lover's hand and stomach.

Josh tensed underneath him, rapidly thrusting two, three more times before letting out a guttural groan.

Patrick moved off his lover and lay next to him, resting his head on Josh's chest. "God, that was amazing."

"Uh-huh." Josh's arms tightened around him.

He closed his eyes, letting his body relax, but his mind was still alert. Still wanting to push this thing with Josh. He knew he should enjoy the day and not press the other man, but some restless part of him, a perverse part, couldn't let it go.

"What?" Josh asked, somehow sensing Patrick's unease.

He leaned up onto his elbows and looked down at Josh. "What are you really doing here?"

Josh frowned but didn't reply.

Patrick sighed. "Before the dating service, you told me you didn't want anything to do with me."

"I didn't say that."

"Maybe not those exact words, but it was what you meant. And now...I'm just not sure what this is all about. I asked you yesterday and you said it was just sex."

Josh glanced away, his cheeks flushed.

His reaction, his silence, told him all he wanted to know, really. Patrick could try and pretend otherwise all he wanted. It still fucking hurt so bad he could barely catch his breath as he rose and got out of bed, searching for his clothes.

"Patrick."

Pieces

"Forget it. You've made yourself loud and clear."

Josh sighed and sat up, resting his head against the headboard. "I just don't know what I want. I don't know if I'm ready for a serious relationship."

Patrick pulled on his clothes with quick, short movements. He couldn't wait to get out of here now. Everything he feared was true. Josh didn't love him. Would never love him and he'd been fooling himself thinking maybe the man had grown up and was now ready for an adult relationship.

Damn. Why did it have to feel like his heart was being ripped to pieces every time he was with Josh?

"Can't we just...I don't know, see where it goes?" Josh whispered.

He shook his head. "I'm not looking for anything casual. I've never done casual sex. That's just not me, it's you. If you ever figure out what you do want and it's me, let me know. Hopefully I'll still be around."

Without waiting for a reply from Josh, if one was coming, Patrick walked out of the bedroom and straight out of Josh's apartment. He'd followed the man over from the bar, so he had his car at least. He got in, started it, and drove away from the man he loved. Maybe forever.

Chapter 7

Patrick glanced at the time on his work computer and decided even though it only read four he was ready to go home. To his empty condo.

He hadn't heard from or seen Josh since he walked out of his house two Sundays ago. Patrick had stayed away from the bar or any other place in town he might have run into the man. As far as he was concerned the next move would be entirely up to Josh, and from all appearances there wouldn't be one.

Powering down his computer, he reached for his suit coat he'd left folded on the chair when the phone on his desk buzzed.

Damn.

"Yes, Gina?"

Pieces

"There's a Mr. Stevens to see you. Says he doesn't have an appointment but you know each other."

Patrick frowned and sat back in his chair. Apparently he was about to hear from Josh after all. His heart thundering, he said, "I'll see him."

He held his breath, wondering what he would say, what Josh would say, if he ought to suggest someplace to talk other than the office for privacy, or if perhaps that was the very reason Josh had chosen his office to talk to him.

The door opened and the little bit of excitement Patrick felt disappeared as though iced water had been thrown in his face. Eddie came into his office, not Josh.

Patrick hoped his face didn't show how incredibly disappointed he was. "Hey, Eddie, this is a surprise. Have a seat."

Eddie gave him a strained smile and sat in the chair in front of his oak desk. "I'm sure I'm not who you expected. I'm sorry. I should have told your secretary to tell you it was Eddie Stevens."

"Don't worry about it. I'm not really expecting to see Josh. I'm sure he's told you we didn't end on the best of terms."

Eddie nodded. "Yeah, he's been pretty miserable the last couple of weeks. He won't talk about it much though. But that's Josh."

"I don't want to talk about it myself." Patrick sighed. "What brings you here?"

"I'd like to hire you as our lawyer, actually."

He blinked. "What?"

"A few days ago we were served with papers at the bar for a lawsuit. I wanted to call you right away, but Josh wouldn't have any part of that. He said he didn't want you to think he was using

Pieces

you in any way. Frankly, though, you're about the only lawyer I trust and that's because we've known you forever."

"What's the lawsuit about?"

"A short time ago we had a patron who refused to take a cab home even though we offered to call one for him. Unfortunately, he crashed his car head on into another car when he left the bar. The occupants of both cars were killed." Eddie shook his head. "It was terrible and a real tragedy. But we're being sued by the family of the victims in the other car for serving him. Should have known he was intoxicated."

"Well, you did, and you made every effort to get him a cab, too." Patrick wrote a note. "As I recall from my law school days, the dram shop laws for California state that bar owners can only be held responsible if the drunk driver was underage."

"Right. But there are other issues."

Patrick looked up from his notes. "Oh?"

Eddie winced. "This kid, the driver, wasn't legal."

"What?"

"He had a fake ID but it turns out he was only nineteen. Marty looked at the ID and it looked real to him so he served him."

Patrick put down his pen. "To be honest here, Eddie, I'm not an accident or a liability attorney and certainly not a dram shop law expert. My expertise is corporate contracts."

"So, you can't help us?"

"Not specifically, no. I wouldn't be the best choice for the case. I think you might still have a pretty good defense, but I don't know enough about it to know for sure and I wouldn't want to give you bad advice. It's not ethical and I could be disbarred."

"Okay." Eddie blew out a breath. "What do you recommend then?"

Pieces

"We don't have dram shop attorneys in our firm, but I'm pretty sure if I ask the partners here they can give you a referral."

"Thank you, that would be great." Eddie fidgeted. "Do you think we can lose the business?"

"I doubt it, Eddie. Like I said, I'm not an expert, but you have a good defense."

"Why would they sue then?"

He shrugged. "People can sue over whatever they want. I won't lie, though. Litigation defense can be an expensive drain on your finances. I assume you have liability insurance. You may even check with them about defending you."

Eddie rose and nodded. "Yeah, I have a call into them, too. I just wanted to get your opinion, because like I said, you're the only attorney I know I can trust. And Josh wouldn't bother you."

Patrick followed him to the door. "I'm sure it's more a case of Josh not wanting to be bothered by me."

Eddie stopped and held onto the edge of the open door. "Look, I don't know what's happened between you two, but I do know I haven't seen Josh this mokey since...well, the summer after you and Andrew graduated high school. Whatever it is, I hope you guys can work it out. Whether as friends or more."

"Thanks, Eddie. Give my love to Kitty."

Eddie smiled. "In other words...shut up, Eddie. Got it. I appreciate your talking to me."

"Anytime. And if you don't mind, keep me posted on the lawsuit."

"I definitely will."

* * * *

Pieces

Instead of driving directly to his condo, Patrick drove across town to the cemetery where Andrew's family had buried him. He hadn't been there in a long time, more than eighteen months, actually. He wasn't quite sure what he was doing there now.

Patrick parked in the lot, grabbed a blanket out of the trunk of his car, and made his way out to the graveside. It had one of those flat ground placards that read *Andrew Jacob Lewis, b. Oct. 30, 1982, d. Sept. 7, 2007*. The grave was barren of flowers. No one had visited for a while.

When Andrew first died, Patrick had come often. Eventually, he'd decided, after talking to the numerous counselors he'd gone to after the suicide, that it was no longer healthy to visit. Yet here he was.

He placed the blanket on the ground and sat next to Andrew's final resting place. Not that he really thought Andrew was here or that he necessarily had to be there to feel close to Andrew. Patrick didn't know for sure if he even believed in God.

Patrick wondered if Andrew had left a suicide note if it would have helped him understand or if it would have made him feel worse.

"What am I even doing here?"

Andrew's grave was not going to give him the answers that died with him. The truth was, Patrick had never really understood Andrew. Not completely.

"I feel kind of stupid now that I'm here."

He looked around at the mostly deserted cemetery. Several graves away a couple knelt by a grave covered in flowers. Patrick didn't know for sure, but something told him the grave belonged to their child.

Pieces

"I'm sorry." His finger traced Andrew's name on the placard. "I don't think I ever said it when you were alive. Not for this anyway. I never intended for you to know you were second best."

Patrick raised his face to the slight breeze washing over the graves. A few weeks from now the time would change back to standard time and the cemetery would be covered in ominous shadows about this time. Even now he could feel the change in the air, the sun lowering sooner than it should.

"The thing of it was, it hurt so bad when Josh didn't want me, you know? God, I was so happy the night we had sex that first time. I thought he had feelings for me just as I had for him. I swear I saw love in his eyes." Patrick snorted in self-disgust. "Boy, was I wrong. You think you know someone all that time and then they use you as a convenient fuck buddy."

He blew out a breath. One of the counselors he'd seen in the beginning suggested this very thing. Since he couldn't talk face-to-face with Andrew about his feelings, he should talk to him anyway. Until today, Patrick hadn't done it. Every time he came here he just felt too foolish.

"He left my heart in pieces. I never thought in a million years I was doing the same thing to you, but I was, wasn't I? You were my best friend. It just seemed so normal to turn to you when I was hurt. I didn't know you loved me," he whispered. "For all the pain Josh caused me by not caring about me, not returning my love, I did that to you. You loved me, and I used you to get over Josh."

Patrick hung his head, tears dropping onto his cheek. "I was such a selfish bastard. I hate myself more than you can know for not loving you the way I should have. It's true. I hate myself. I deserve to be alone for the rest of my life. Lord, what a drama queen, huh? Talk about a pity party for myself."

Pieces

"I did love you, Andrew. I may not have loved you as a partner, as a lover should have. But I did. There's not a day that passes without me thinking of you, missing you. I wish every one of those days that you had reached out to me and talked to me about your pain so I could have helped you. And if you couldn't talk to me, I would have been happy if there had been someone you could have shared with. *Anything*, but this."

The breeze started to chill Patrick and goose bumps popped up on his neck and face. He wiped the wetness off his cheeks. Maybe, Josh had been right after all and he should be talking to someone still. The guilt ate at him.

"I'm going to go now. I don't think I'm ever coming back to this place. I know you aren't here." He touched his chest. "You're here. Love you."

He stood and removed the blanket from the ground, folding it into sort of a wad. Patrick cast one last glance to the couple kneeling by the flowered covered grave and even from where he stood he felt their sorrow.

When he was back in his car, Patrick searched through his CDs until he found one filled with perky, happy pop music. He slipped it in the disc player and turned up the volume.

* * * *

The first thing Patrick did when he got home was look up the list of psychiatrists he'd seen right after Andrew's suicide. In the morning he'd call the one he thought had been the most helpful.

He figured he couldn't really move forward with his life until he got both Andrew and Josh out of his system.

Pieces

Feeling better, he made himself a cup of tea and turned on his computer to check his emails and maybe play some mindless computer games. They helped him unwind sometimes. He'd already let his dating service trial period lapse without renewing and he didn't intend to go there any time soon. Besides, he'd only done it to get Josh's attention anyway.

After a few minutes of reading his email, Patrick was about to click on a game icon when an instant message popped up.

Patrick? It's Josh. Can we talk?

He stared at the message for several heartbeats. Almost wanting to ignore it. Pretend he didn't see it. Was he ready to deal with Josh?

On instant message? he typed.

No, I just wanted to be sure you were home and I could come over to talk.

The house phone rang.

Patrick rose and walked the few steps to the phone. He knew who it would be, so he said, "Yeah, I'm home. You can come."

"I'll be over in a few. Bye."

He wondered if he would need a stiff drink. After these last two weeks with silence, Patrick hadn't thought to hear from Josh. Eddie had said he was miserable, but well, he still had no clue what to expect from Josh when he arrived. His stomach twisted in knots, he hoped it was what he wanted to hear.

Chapter 8

Josh took a deep breath and knocked on Patrick's door. There'd be no going back after tonight, no matter what the end result was. He'd thought long and hard about it before asking to see Patrick. And now...here he was.

It might be a bit dramatic, but his life would be forever changed one way or another after tonight.

The door opened, but Patrick stood a few feet away in the hall.

"Hi," Patrick said, his voice so soft it could have been a whisper on a breeze.

He looked so damn vulnerable standing there. His sandy hair tousled, his blue-green eyes haunted, dark circles smudged just under the lower lashes. Even his posture was off, hunched a little, almost like he expected Josh to kick him.

Pieces

Josh stepped inside, closed the door, and pulled Patrick into his arms in a tight, warm embrace. It was time to act, not think and rethink things.

Patrick's arms hung limply at his sides for several awkward heartbeats and Josh almost stepped away. Then Patrick leaned into him, his head resting on Josh's shoulder and his arms came up to circle around Josh's waist. Josh closed his eyes and sighed.

He could be content to stay here holding Patrick all night, but nothing would be resolved between them and he wanted to move forward. No matter what Patrick would decide.

"Should we go sit down?" he asked, nuzzling the soft hair on the top of Patrick's head.

Patrick nodded and pulled away. "Yeah. Do you want anything to drink?"

"No." He followed Patrick to the big green leather couch in his living room and sat close enough to Patrick so their knees touched. "How have you been?"

"Pretty crappy, actually. Alone and sad. Feeling unloved." Patrick smiled just a little. "I've had a few pity parties. I can be rather dramatic sometimes."

"Eddie told me he went to see you this afternoon." Josh fidgeted, feeling unsure now that he was actually faced with talking to Patrick. "I'm sorry. I didn't want him to bother you."

"I know, he told me. It wasn't a bother. I'm glad he told me about the lawsuit. I wish you didn't have to go through it."

"Yeah, me, too. There's so much to think about when you buy your own business. It never really occurred to us when we bought the old bar we'd have to face this. I'm sorry for the victims and their families though. The situation is bad for everyone."

Pieces

Patrick looked down at his folded hands. "I went to Andrew's grave today."

Josh blinked. "You did?"

"I think, maybe, you're right and I should talk to someone. I'm going to call tomorrow."

Without really giving himself a chance to resist, Josh reached for Patrick's hand and linked their fingers. "I think that's great. I'd even go with you if you think it will help."

"You will?"

"Yes. Patrick, these past two weeks I've done a lot of thinking about us. About our future and our past. I know I haven't been very open to a real relationship with anyone, really, let alone you. I'd like to change that."

"Why?"

Josh hadn't expected that question and he just stared at Patrick. What? He didn't know how to answer without screwing up.

"I've been thinking, too. I love you. I've always loved you."

Josh opened his mouth to reply, but Patrick held up his other hand.

"Let me finish. I fell in love with you in high school. I know, probably some people would say it was just a teenaged crush or puppy love or whatever. I just know when we met in high school I never wanted to be with anyone else. That summer my dreams came true or I thought so."

Patrick tried to pull his hand out of Josh's grasp, but he wouldn't let him. He wasn't going to get to pull away from Josh. He would have his say, too, when Patrick finished.

"You were my first time. Did you know that?" Patrick asked softly.

Pieces

Josh swallowed the lump that seemed to come from the pit of his stomach to rise up in his throat. "I thought...maybe, but you seemed to know what you were doing, so I wasn't sure."

He nodded. "It burned, but it didn't hurt as much as I thought it would." Patrick looked away. "I'd been using some toys."

"I'm glad I was your first," Josh said, and he meant it. He liked the idea Patrick hadn't given himself to some jerk in his class.

"I wasn't yours though, was I?"

It was Josh's turn to look away, unable to meet those too knowing eyes. He wasn't proud of the way he used to be about sex. Before and after Patrick. "Keep in mind I was a year ahead of you. I'd been out of high school a year before you."

"I know."

"In my senior year there was a guy a bit older than me a few houses down. We started experimenting. When I finished high school and turned eighteen we started having full sex. He moved away long before our night together. But there were others after him and before you."

Patrick sighed. "Yeah, well, I knew I didn't matter to you the way you mattered to me. We were high, I kissed you. You just weren't with it enough to stop me or you just were horny enough not to care. I was naïve, maybe, thinking too much like a girl. I don't know. I thought it meant we were together so the next morning when you rejected me--"

"I didn't reject you," Josh protested, finally releasing Patrick's hand to run his fingers through his hair. "I didn't know what to think. No one had ever wanted more from me than sex."

"I thought you made it pretty clear I wasn't your boyfriend." Patrick blew out a breath.

Pieces

He winced, remembering how startled he'd been when Patrick called himself Josh's boyfriend. Josh had laughed and said he didn't have or want a boyfriend. "I was an ass. I'm sorry."

"You can't pretend to feel something you don't feel, Josh. I know that better than anyone. That's really my point here."

"What is?"

"When you didn't want me I turned to Andrew. He was my best friend and I needed him. But the problem was I didn't know he loved me. The entire time I was with Andrew he loved me and I loved you. You thought I was trying to replace Andrew with you because you reminded me of him. The truth was the other way around."

Josh didn't know what to say other than the truth. Something he admitted he sometimes seemed to have trouble admitting. "I know."

Patrick just stared at him, his eyes unfathomable and a bit watery.

"About a year before his suicide, Andrew came to see me to tell me he was tired of competing with me. I told him he was nuts." Josh grimaced at his own choice of words. "He said he'd never been who you wanted."

"You knew and you didn't tell me?"

"I thought he was wrong, for one thing. I just thought you were having maybe some trouble and you'd work it out. Even if he wasn't wrong about your feelings, what could I have done? You two were together."

"And it wasn't as though you felt anything for me beyond friendship." Patrick nodded, looking so damn sure he knew what he was talking about. He had it all figured out. "I should have

Pieces

ended my relationship with Andrew a long time ago. Or better yet, never begun it. It was unfair to him. I hurt him over and over."

"I never realized until Andrew talked to me that things weren't great between you," Josh said softly. His hand moved to Patrick's knee, closed over it, wanting even that simple contact. "I thought you two had a great relationship. Everyone did."

"The fight we had that last time...we were making love and I said your name. And it wasn't the first time. I used to do it a lot when we first got together. I fought it all the time and it had gotten better. I thought..." Patrick's eyes now filled with unshed tears. "I can't help but think I drove him to take his life."

"But, honey, you didn't." Josh's heart twisted, seeing Patrick in so much pain and doubt. He scooted even closer to Patrick and put his arm around the other man's shoulder. "No one can cause someone else to take their own life. That was Andrew's decision alone. I'm sorry he made it and no one could help him. We all have our guilt over not seeing he needed that kind of help. But you are not responsible in any way."

"I didn't love him the way he needed."

"I know you cared about him. You wouldn't have stayed with him as long as you did without love. Andrew made choices, too. You never forced him into the relationship and, knowing how you felt, he decided to stay. And anyway, I doubt it was any one thing that sent him over the edge. I think he was in a lot of pain and he just didn't want to feel it anymore."

"Well, that's bullshit. People that kill themselves leave nothing but messes behind and loved ones who never understand." Patrick leaned closer still and swung his legs over Josh's on the sofa.

Pieces

Josh nodded. "I know. I don't understand someone killing themselves either. What I do know, is it wasn't your fault. Or anyone's."

Patrick held Josh's hand. "I don't want that to happen to me. I can't let it."

"It won't. God, I won't let it." Josh turned his face upward. "Never."

His eyes glistening, Patrick shook his head. "We can't be together."

Josh's heartbeat faltered. For a second, time stopped and the room went still and the only sound he heard was his blood pounding in his ears. The hurt from Patrick's words was so piercing, he could barely force a word out. "What?"

"I love you, Josh. I always have and I always will, but I can't be with someone who doesn't love me as much as I love them. I won't put myself in a situation like that where my partner doesn't share my feelings. If nothing else came from Andrew's death, I now realize life is too short not to love with your whole heart and deserve it in return."

The pieces of his heart that had shattered at Patrick's words reconnected. Josh smiled and cupped Patrick's jaw in his hand. "Patrick, I love you."

His lover stared at him. "What did you say?"

"I've loved you for a long time. I think some part of me loved you the first time I saw you in the quad at high school with that butterfly backpack slung over your shoulder. I didn't really think about it, even when we got together that night in the summer. You shocked the hell out of me with your assumptions that we were together. I didn't even have time to process it and I acted like an ass and you ran." Josh sighed. "Straight into Andrew's arms."

Pieces

"But--"

Josh stopped his words with a quick kiss. "My turn. I wanted to talk to you, tell you I was sorry for acting like a jerk, maybe take things a little slow, and then I saw you with your arms all over Andrew, kissing him and being with him. I couldn't tell you anything then. I just decided you never really wanted me anyway, you wanted him."

"I'm sorry," Patrick whispered.

Josh smiled. "You were always one to act rashly. It drives me a bit crazy but I love that part of you just as much as the rest of you. These last two weeks I did a lot of thinking, and I knew I wanted to be with you and make us work. I don't know what I was waiting for."

"Probably because you did believe I wanted Andrew. I don't know why I said his name that night you brought me home. Maybe it was because of what that night represented for me."

"It doesn't matter anymore. I'm not going to waste another minute of our lives wondering about the past. Even the past of a few weeks ago. I want the future and I want it with you. Please say you still want that, too."

Patrick shook as he pulled back just a bit from Josh. "Yes."

"You do?" He needed to hear the words.

"I do. More than anything."

Josh leaned forward and planted a quick kiss on his jaw and a longer one on his mouth. "I want to spend the night making love to you."

Patrick grinned. "The whole night? Did you take some extra stamina pills?"

Pieces

"Ha ha. Well, maybe not the entire night, but I sure as hell intend to try." Josh stood and pulled Patrick up with him. "You go strip and get into bed. I'll be there in a second."

"What are you going to do?"

Josh winked. "You'll see. Lie on your stomach."

* * * *

Patrick lay on the mattress in his bedroom waiting for his lover. He blew out a shaky breath, still stunned by the turn of events.

Josh loves me.

His heart, every part of him felt light. Lighter than he had in years.

Biting his lip, he leaned up on his elbows and looked back toward the doorway. The air was chilly enough goose bumps had appeared on his bare skin. He reached for the sheet he had earlier pushed aside to cover himself.

"Drop it," Josh ordered coming into the room.

"I thought you'd forgotten me."

"No way. Can't you tell?"

Patrick could indeed see Josh's tented slacks. Since his own erection pressed painfully against the mattress beneath him, he wiggled a little in anticipation. "Get to it."

Josh laughed. "Bossy." He set a wadded up wash cloth on the nightstand and shrugged out of his shirt and pants in less than a minute.

His mouth watering, Patrick nearly swallowed his tongue as he stared at Josh's bulging biceps and rippling abs. He reached out to

Pieces

touch as Josh knelt on the bed, his hard cock jutting toward him, a drop of pre-cum pearled on the tip.

"Not so fast." Josh moved away to snag his wash cloth.

"What are you doing?"

"You'll see. Or feel. Close your eyes."

Patrick gazed at his lover suspiciously, but smiled and closed his eyes. He waited, feeling Josh moving behind him, toward his legs and ass. He waited to hear the rip of the condom packet or the slosh of lube.

Instead, a drop of ice cold water fell on the crease of his ass. He shivered. "What?"

"Shh." Josh chuckled as another cold drop fell followed by two more.

"Oh, my God, that's fucking cold."

"It's a melting ice cube."

Patrick groaned. "Bastard."

Josh's wet fingers stroked along the crease where the water had recently dropped, his finger slipping inside Patrick's hole. Then the knuckles of his other hand brushed across Patrick's cheek before he turned to rub ice along the cheek.

"Josh!"

But his lover just laughed again, pressing the ice cube down his spine, the ice turning to water as the heat from his bare skin dissolved it. Patrick snuck his hand under his body and grasped his hard shaft.

Josh's tongue trailed down the same path as the ice, warming the cool wet skin. Patrick spread his legs, raising up just a little to stroke more of himself and to give Josh even better access to his entrance.

Pieces

Patrick trembled as the ice trailed down the crease and pushed into his hole, sliding in and out. He moaned, turning his face into the pillow. The ice disappeared to be replaced by Josh's warm, moist tongue slipping in just past the ring of muscle. The tongue was soon joined by a finger.

And then Josh was flipping him over onto his back, barely giving him time to breath. His lover winked and hiked Patrick's leg far up onto his shoulders and dove into his entrance once more with his tongue.

He rose up, pushing himself against Josh's probing tongue. His hand temporarily stilled on his own cock as he focused solely on the sensations Josh created with the sweetest damn tongue ever.

Patrick used his other hand to swirl his finger around his nipples, sometimes pinching the sensitive buds. "God, Josh, please. Fuck me."

But Josh ignored him and continued lavng at his hole, sticking a second finger inside. After several thrusts to loosen Patrick up, Josh withdrew and scooted up Patrick's body, lowering his face next to his lover.

"Love you," Josh whispered pressing his lips to Patrick's.

"I love you, too." Patrick closed his hand over the back of Josh's head and drew him down for a longer, deeper kiss, joining their tongues together. His pulse racing, his hand dipped between their bodies to stroke Josh's cock.

"Ah, Lord, you're killing me." Josh tore his mouth away and reached into the nightstand next to the bed for a condom and lube. He leaned up on his haunches and rolled on the latex.

Patrick reached for him.

Josh pushed his hands away. "Hold on,"

Pieces

He shook his head and reached for the lube. Sloshing some all over his hand, he slid it up and down Josh's covered cock. Patrick couldn't wait any longer, he wanted Josh pounding away inside him.

"Okay, okay, I get it," Josh said, laughing. He grabbed the lube and squished out the cool liquid and spread it inside Patrick's entrance. Bending Patrick's legs, Josh pushed inside him.

"Yes." Patrick gasped, welcoming the full feeling of Josh sliding deep into him. His hard cock slapping against his abdomen, he closed his hand over it and jerked himself to the rhythm of Josh's thrusts.

Closing his eyes, he met each pump of Josh's cock with a push back, harder and faster, drawing Josh in deeper. His balls drew tight as his fingers moved to roll them in his palm. His orgasm thrummed just below the surface, pulsing his erection. He rubbed it roughly.

"Ah, Josh," he yelled as his release poured from him.

Josh groaned and thrust deep into him, shuddering through his own orgasm.

A little while later, Patrick laid his head on Josh's chest. He could barely believe this was real. Josh loved him. From now on it wouldn't be him, but them.

"Did you really mean it when you said you would come to counseling with me?"

"Yep. We can even go to couples counseling if you want," Josh told him. "Whatever it takes and whatever you want. From now on. It's about you."

Patrick smiled and rose up to kiss him. "You're wrong."

"Wrong?"

"It's about us."

Pieces

* * * *

Two months later

"Calm down, Josh. It'll be all right." Patrick reached across the bar to hold Josh's hand.

They were waiting for Josh and Eddie's attorney to call and tell them news on the lawsuit. But the call was already an hour late.

"That's easy for you to say," Josh grouched. He tugged his hand away and picked up a glass.

It was still early. Only about four-thirty so the bar didn't have a lot of patrons. Two couples in the corner and Peanut Man, as Josh called him, down the bar several stools away from where Patrick sat.

"Honey, it really will. I promise. Your lawyer said you had a great case and he was pretty sure about this matter today."

"Well, why hasn't he called then?" Josh paced back and forth. "Damn Eddie. He had to take Kitty to fucking Europe right now."

Patrick laughed. "Your dad gave them that trip for their anniversary. It was booked months ago. He'll be back day after tomorrow."

Josh's cell, which he'd laid out on the bar, vibrated and began to play a popular song. He merely stared at it like it was a bug.

"Aren't you going to get that?"

Josh nodded but didn't move to pick it up.

Patrick grabbed it up and spoke. "Hello? Yeah, he's right here."

Josh grabbed the phone. "Don? Yeah. Yeah. Okay. So that means what?"

Pieces

He couldn't tell by Josh's face whether it was good news or bad news so he waited, uneasiness growing in the pit of his stomach.

"Thanks, Don. I will. Bye." Josh put down the phone.

"Well?"

Josh walked over to him grabbed the back of his head and kissed him hard.

"Is that good?" he asked when he came up for air.

His lover grinned. "Dismissed with prejudice. Which means--"

"They can't file it again," Patrick finished for him. "That's awesome. I knew it would be great news."

"I can't wait to tell Eddie. God, it's such a relief." Josh kissed him again, even more thoroughly.

"Stevens, you're gay?" Peanut Man demanded from the end of the bar, staring at them.

"Yes, Mr. Jenkins," Josh said calmly. "And Patrick is my partner."

"Hi, Mr. Jenkins." Patrick exchanged a glance with Josh.

Mr. Jenkins shrugged and rattled the glass bowl in front of him. "More peanuts."

"Coming right up." Josh smiled and leaned across the bar for one more kiss. "I love you."

"And I love you."

Mr. Jenkins rattled his dish again.

Patrick laughed. "You'd better fill that."

"Yeah, in a second." Josh sealed their lips, ignoring the peanut dish at the end of the bar.

A piece of his heart would always be missing, the piece that had belonged to Andrew, but now, thanks to Josh, the future would be bright and full of love.

Shawn Lane

Shawn Lane believes love and passion know no boundaries. Shawn writes both erotic love stories involving men in historical or contemporary settings and interracial romances between men and women. Shawn is always looking for new stories and new characters to create while holding down life in California.

* * * *

***Don't miss Only In His Dreams
by Shawn Lane,
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Shy, conservative Darrell Lincoln has worked hard to get his job as billing manager for the law firm of Anderson, Llewellyn, and Stevens. For a conscientious worker like Darrell, the job is perfect except for one thing. He has a big-time crush on one of the partners, Travis Anderson. Darrell thinks a gorgeous, wealthy, hotshot lawyer like Travis would be interested in a guy like him only in his dreams.

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