



A MATTER OF TIME

BOOK II

By

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CHAPTER ONE

I WAS GETTING BACK from having lunch with my friend Tran, who worked on the fourth in the same building as me, when my phone rang. I didn't recognize the number so I answered figuring maybe it was Dane Harcourt, my boss and the one constant in my life.

"Hello?"

"Jory?"

It was Nick Sullivan the doctor who couldn't decide if he loved me or hated me. "Hi."

He cleared his throat. "Are you all right? I saw you running last night and I—"

"You're only calling now?" I chuckled. "I could've been killed." And I was being funny, keeping things light but I had been running from men who wanted me dead the night before. The night before it had been anything but funny.

"I—no I called the police last night but you were already gone by the time they showed up and—"

I smiled into the phone. "It's fine. I'm fine."

There was a brief silence. "I was a total dick last night as well as the time I saw you before and I'm so sorry."

Last night before I had been running for my life I had allowed Nick Sullivan to serve me up a dish of just desserts. Weeks before he had confessed to being crazy about me but that was right before I had become an unwilling witness to murder. My life had turned upside down which had less to do with a contract being put out on my life and more to do with one of the detectives on the case, Sam Kage. I had fallen so hard and so fast for Detective Kage that everything and everyone else in my life had been forgotten, especially Dr. Nick Sullivan who had never been anything special to begin with. He would make someone a great partner someday but he would never be mine. When we had crossed paths at a club I felt that I should try and apologize for disappearing after he had confessed his interest in me. The venom I got back had been surprising.

"Jory?"

"Sorry," I said quickly.

"I really am sorry."

"It's okay, I deserved it all so we're good." I had dated him and forgotten him and that was mean. In my defence there had never been a drop of chemistry or even a spark of attraction.

“Are we?”

“Yep.”

He coughed softly. “Okay.”

“Okay,” I said softly. “I’ll see ya around.” And I didn’t give him time to say anything more. I just hung up.

“Excuse me.”

When I looked up the man standing there smiled wide before he thrust out his hand.

“Hello there son, Truman Ward here for my one o’clock with your boss Mr. Harcourt.”

Being Dane Harcourt’s assistant and actually being good at my job, I knew that the smiling man was not in the right place on the right day. I squinted at him. “I believe you’re two days early sir,” I smiled slowly, shaking the offered hand. “You were scheduled for the day after Thanksgiving not the day before.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “Crap, was that what my secretary was trying to tell me this morning before I left?”

“Monica?” I dredged the name from my memory.

“Yes.” his face brightened. “That’s right.”

“Yeah we talked yesterday,” I informed him. “It’s Friday sir at this same time.”

“Well hell,” he grunted, taking a seat in the chair closest to my desk. “Well Friday ain’t gonna work—I’ll be in D.C. Could ya give the big man a call and see if maybe he might spare sometime today. I just have a few things to talk to him about, some changes my wife wants to make to the house.”

Dane Harcourt hated making changes but I didn’t say that. Instead I nodded and got my boss on the phone. He asked me if it was possible and I said I could rearrange for three but not before. He gave me the go ahead and hung up. Mr. Ward was very pleased and while we waited, we talked. Or he talked and I listened.

He started in about his wife because that was the reason he was there. They’d been married forty years and he was building her a new house in Highland Park to celebrate. I asked all kinds of questions and he showed me pictures of his family that he told me all about. He had two sons; the oldest was in business with him as a Tax Attorney/Corporate Lawyer and his youngest was a Plastic Surgeon.

“Got more women crawling all over him than I’ve ever seen,” he chuckled. “But he’s just playing the field waiting for the right one to come along.”

I nodded, asked if the attorney was married.

“Engaged to a paediatrician. Sweetest little gal you ever met. We’re having her and her family for Thanksgiving tomorrow. Got a huge spread—like twenty people coming.”

“Must be nice.”

We talked about architecture and art and for some reason music because he didn’t understand what was going on with what people were singing about “these days” and I played him some jazz remixes on my iPod. He got a big kick out of using the headphones and was impressed that I knew my world history. He had been in Vietnam Nam doing three tours before coming home to finish up his law degree, at the same time becoming a certified public accountant. I asked a million questions about the war and if he had been disappointed that neither of his sons had enlisted.

He nodded at me. “Very perceptive question son.” But he didn’t answer so I figured it was private.

He was intrigued by the assortment of pens on my desk and I explained that each one had its own special function. I took him with me to get my afternoon coffee from Starbucks and on my way back when I hesitated he asked me what I was doing. I explained about the scented oils that I was out of and needed to pick up. I laughed when he offered to go along to the head shop with me.

Mr. Ward looking at bongos and candles and watching people smoke from a hookah was hysterical. I let him smell the patchouli, sandalwood and amber oil I wore and he cocked his head back and forth giving me a look like it was okay. I couldn’t stop smiling. When we got back Dane was there and thanked me for entertaining our guest. I nodded and Mr. Ward draped an arm across my shoulders and said that he had not had such a lovely afternoon in he couldn’t remember how long.

After work Dane sent me to pick up wine for him to take to Thanksgiving dinner the following day at his friend Jude’s house. He invited me along for the fifth time and I turned him down for the last time. I assured him that I would be fine. While not convinced, neither did he push me. He knew me well enough to know the harder I was pressed, the harder I resisted.

On my way to the train I got a call.

“Jory?”

“Yes?”

“Jory, this is Truman Ward from this afternoon.”

“Oh,” I smiled. “How’re you sir?”

“I’m good thank you. I wanted to call and see if maybe you would like to join my family for dinner tomorrow night say around five?”

“Sir, tomorrow’s Thanksgiving.”

“Yes I know,” he chuckled. “That’s why I’m calling.”

“But sir, you’re having like twenty people you said and—”

“And one more won’t make a difference. I have to say I so enjoyed meeting you and talking to you and I would just love it if you showed up.”

“But—”

“It’s very casual son, no suits or that kind of crap just football and good food and family and friends—you’ll have a good time. Please say you’ll come.”

How could I say no? “Yessir.”

“Oh excellent. I’m really pleased.”

“You’re kinda weird,” I assured him.

And he laughed harder before he gave me the address.

* * * *

THE TRAIN TO HIGHLAND Park dropped me off on a platform in the middle of town. I saw the deli Mr. Ward had told me to look for, and so took the right as I had been directed. I passed the little shops and found that the crisp air, the leaves blowing around on the ground and the grey sky were very soothing. I loved being outside in the fall, the smell of fireplaces, that mix of cold, slight damp and dirt making me feel good. Like winter was coming which I loved most of all.

The house was a huge four story Georgian Colonial with one of those crescent shaped driveways, done in red cobblestone. There were flowerbeds on both sides of the porch that went from one end of the front of the house to the other. The fall cornucopia wreath on the front door was very festive if not a little over the top. I used the knocker because I couldn’t find the doorbell and waited.

I was ignored for a minute when the door opened. The guy that answered was talking to someone behind him and was still engaged in conversation, only turning to me after several minutes. When he did I felt better. His smile was warm and seemed genuine.

“Oh,” he seemed taken aback. “Hi. Who’re you?”

I smiled wide. “I’m Jory.”

“You’re Jory?” He was staring at me, deep into my eyes. “My Dad’s friend Jory?”

I chuckled. “Yeah.”

“Oh for crissakes Colt let him in.”

He stepped sideways and I walked passed him, turning to wait for him to close the door.

“Hi,” a woman said, stepping in close to me, offering her hand. “I’m Cretia Ward, Truman’s daughter.”

I eased her forward and kissed her cheek before I let her go. “Jory Keyes.”

“Well Jory,” she nodded, looking me over. “You are so not what we expected.”

“No?”

“No.” She giggled. “Gimme your coat.”

“You were thinkin’ I was gonna be taller?” I teased her, sliding the cashmere pea coat off my shoulders to hand to her.

She giggled. “He said colleague from work. I was not expecting an *Abercrombie & Fitch* model.”

I laughed and passed her the bottle of wine Dane had made me take when I told him where I was going.

“Oh thank you. Let’s go give it to my Mom.”

“Wait.”

We both turned to the guy who had his hand out for me to take.

“I didn’t meet you.”

I smiled warmly and took the offered hand, covering it with my other. “Jory.”

“Colton.” He nodded and his eyes didn’t leave mine.

“Pleasure.”

“You too Jory.”

I took a breath and let Cretia grab my hand and pull me after her.

My apartment would have fit in the kitchen and when I made that observation aloud Cretia smiled and wrapped both arms around my one. I heard my name almost shouted and couldn't contain the smile as Mr. Ward walked over and pulled me into a tight bear hug.

“You made it—I'm so pleased.”

When he pushed me out to arm's length I smiled into his eyes.

“Come meet my wife.”

Mrs. Ward wanted me to call her Bette and she too couldn't seem to keep her hands off me, instead taking my hand and showing me her home. She was impressed that I knew that the china in her glass cabinets was actually Limoge from France.

“Jory,” she said, looking into my eyes. “You're just full of useless information aren't you?”

I laughed with her. “Pretty much.”

I sat cross-legged on the kitchen counter talking to her and Cretia came in and assured me that not one of her children was allowed to do that.

“It's because he's so pretty,” she told her daughter.

“You are pretty,” Cretia baited me. “I wish I had your hair and your long eyelashes.”

“I never thought much of brown eyes.” Bette smiled warmly at me. “But yours are just gorgeous Jory. Like melted chocolate.”

“Oooh Jory you've got her waxing poetic.” She giggled. “Better watch out she's gonna wanna adopt you.”

“That'd be all right,” I assured her.

“Why?” Bette was suddenly wary. “Where's your mother angel?”

“Oh I don't know.” I forced a smile. “I never met her.”

The gasp followed by her hand clutching my knee. “What happened?”

So I told her about how I'd been abandoned, left with my grandmother to raise, and Cretia stayed instead of leaving. When people came into the kitchen to say hello as more and more guests were

arriving, she shushed them and waved them away dismissively. I watched the sheepish looks on their faces but I went on with my story because she was riveted. I spoke fast in the same matter-of-fact way I had when I'd explained the circumstances to Sam. Before him and now Mrs. Ward, I hadn't talked about my mother in ages. And all at once I realized that any sting that had been lingering from my childhood was gone. It was weird to think that I had ever felt sorry for myself because of her abandonment. It seemed so insignificant a detail now. I had rich, warm memories of growing up with my grandmother. I wished I'd had more time with her. This was my only regret anymore. Bette Ward did not share my reaction. She leaned into my lap and put her arms around my waist. Cretia had tears in her eyes as I patted her mother's back and rested my cheek in her hair.

"Jesus what's goin' on in here?"

We all turned to the door and there was a stunning man there looking at the three of us.

"Hi Trip," Cretia sniffled, smiling through her tears. "We're just talking."

"About what, the Holocaust?"

I chuckled and tipped Bette's face up to me before I kissed her forehead. "You all right?"

She nodded before she let out a shaky breath. "Jump down and meet my son."

I slid off the counter and the man came forward to meet me. He had been looking at his mother and his sister but finally I drew his attention.

"Hi," he said softly, moving forward, holding out his hand for me to take.

I smiled and took his hand, liking the feel of the warm skin in mine. "Hey. I'm Jory."

He nodded and his eyes locked on mine. "Trip."

"Really?"

He shrugged, still holding my hand. "What can I tell you? It's a bad nickname that stuck. That's why ya always gotta be careful with that kind of thing."

"I'll remember that." I said, and tried to release his hand.

He tightened his hold so I didn't move.

"Are you the plastic surgeon or the Tax attorney?"

His smile was broad and his eyes crinkled in half. "You've been talking to my Dad."

"Yes."

“Well I’m going to be a surgeon but as of right now I’m still a resident.”

I nodded. “Well he’s very proud of you.”

“I know he is,” he said, slipping his hand from mine, the other immediately going to my shoulder. “Did you get a drink?”

“No.”

“No?” He looked passed me to his mother. “What is this dehydrate the guest day? You had like eight other people without drinks out there mother? I told you before you can’t be in here cooking—you gotta mingle. You’re the hostess.”

She smacked his arm as she passed him, touched my cheek and left through the swinging door with Cretia right behind her.

“So did you really take my Dad to a head shop?”

I winced a little and he smiled as he led me out into the living room.

Colton met us and invited me over to meet his fiancée, Channing Sinclair. Truman was right, she was very nice and the way she looked at his son had to be very satisfying. Her father came over to meet me and then her mother came over and then cousins and friends and it very quickly became a blur. I did what I was supposed to and asked if I could help in the kitchen. I was ushered back out and went to sit with Truman. For whatever reason I was comfortable with him and we started talking about landscaping. I told him I would love to look at the backyard and he took me up on my offer.

We walked out to the gazebo and then the rest of the way out to the very edge of his property. His neighbour was out with his family playing some croquet so we both leaned over and talked awhile. It was really nice and I decided right there and then that someday I would own a house. It had never occurred to me before.

When we got back it was time to eat and I was seated between Cretia and Trip for dinner. It was fun; lots of conversation between people who seemed to all genuinely like one another. I had never experienced the whole family meal thing except for once before with Sam’s family. This family and their friends weren’t loud and everyone sat down together, no kids running around, just eating, drinking, talking and lots of laughing. I was comfortable and when Bette leaned over me, wrapping her arms around my neck, I let my head rest against hers.

“Mom?” Trip asked her.

“Your Dad was right; I want to keep this one.”

“Sorry man,” Trip chuckled. “She’s crazy.”

"I like her," I said, closing my eyes, leaning back, and letting her hold me.

"Come keep me company," she said quickly and I got up and followed her into the kitchen.

She washed and I dried and we turned on the radio in the kitchen and I started dancing. She laughed and I was all over her. Cretia came in and told me all that heat was wasted on her mother.

"No it's not," Bette assured her. "But you know Jory I've got to go to a reception tomorrow night and they want me to get up and do the Electronic Glide."

"The Electric Slide," I corrected her and held out my hand. "Here c'mere I'll show you."

Her smile was mischievous and Cretia watched us move to the middle of the floor. I had her shaking her ass and doing the turns in fifteen minutes. She was having a blast and when Channing and Colton came in and joined us, I told them that we could do the Hustle next.

I went to get my pea coat out of the hall closet and when I turned around Trip was there.

"Where ya going?"

"I gotta work tomorrow and the last train's coming pretty soon."

"The train? You didn't drive?"

I smiled at him, shaking my head. "No I don't have a car."

"Stay," he said seriously, hand on my shoulder. "I'll take you home. I live in the city too."

"Oh no, I don't wanna put you out. I can just—"

His hand moved to the side of my neck. "You're not putting me out Jory."

I nodded and his hand slid to the nape of my neck, his fingers threading through my hair.

"In fact," he smiled gently. "Can I take you to dinner tomorrow night?"

I tipped my head and looked at him. "Your Dad said you've got women all over you— you just haven't met the right one yet."

"My Dad sees what he wants and so far I haven't been serious enough about anyone to bring them home."

"Meaning a guy."

He nodded slowly. "That's right."

I stepped back away from him. “Your old man really likes me—I am not gonna be the one to give him even a second of misery.”

He gave me a funny look. “Baby you’re jumping the gun a little aren’t you? Shouldn’t we screw around before we decide if you’re gonna be the one I’ll bring home to my folks?” The last was finished with a chuckle as he grabbed a hold of the lapel of my coat.

I nodded and brushed his hand off me before I jogged back into the living room. I went to kiss Bette goodbye and it was nice that she begged me to stay longer. Truman got up and pulled me into a brief clench before he thanked me for coming and made me promise not to be stranger. Colton and Cretia both gave me their numbers and Channing told me to call her the following day, so she could get my address to invite me to her wedding. It was nice that they all wanted to include me. My phone vibrated and I excused myself to answer it.

“Jory.”

“Hey boss.” I smiled into the phone.

“Are you still in Highland Park?”

“Yeah why?”

“Because I’m in Parkridge so if you want I’ll come by and pick you up on my way back.”

Which translated to “I’m coming to get you”. Because he never offered unless he had already decided what he wanted to do—he wasn’t hardwired to make overtures, if he ever made a suggestion the answer just needed to be yes.

“Okay,” I said quickly. “Lemme give you the address.”

“I have it. The man is my client after all.”

“Yessir.”

“Knock it off.”

I smiled wide and realized as usual that just talking to him brought this bubbly feeling in me. I had family—he was it. “You want me to wait outside?”

“Yes Jory, stand outside and freeze your ass off.”

I laughed and people looked at me as I hung up and sat back down on the couch beside Bette.

“You’re going to stay?”

“My boss is gonna get me so I’ll stay a little longer.”

“Oh I can’t wait to meet Dad’s architect,” Cretia squeaked out. “He speaks so highly of him.”

“Jory can I speak to you?” Trip called to me from the kitchen.

I got up and when the door swung closed behind me I saw him leaning against the counter, ankles crossed, arms crossed, waiting.

“Yes?”

“That was stupid what I said before and your concern for my Dad is actually really refreshing.” The corner of his mouth curled with a trace of a smile. “So I’m asking again—may I please take you out?”

I looked at him trying to figure him out. Aesthetically there was no reason to say no. The man was very nice to look at. With clear hazel eyes, thick dark brown hair and a lean, muscular frame, he was definitely my type. The problem was he had player written all over him and I wasn’t trying to be another notch in anyone’s bedpost.

“I don’t think so,” I said slowly because it wasn’t what I really wanted to say. It was the smart thing to do though. “I think you’re outta my league Doctor Ward.”

He nodded and pushed off the counter, walking toward me. “If I promise to just feed you— not even try and kiss you? How ‘bout then?”

“What’s the fun in that?” I grinned lazily.

He bit his bottom lip. “Listen Jory—how ‘bout you take me out? You name the place and I’ll be there. You can pay and everything.”

I squinted at him and his smile lit his face. “How is that a good deal for me?”

He reached out and grabbed the lapel of my coat as he had earlier, drawing me close. “C’mon I’m sorry already—Jesus I never work this hard.”

I arched a brow for him.

“And you know you’re gorgeous so you can treat me like this,” he said his eyes locked on mine.

I just stared back.

“You want me to beg?”

My eyes narrowed.

“God you are beautiful...say yes.”

“I’ll meet you at seven for drinks at The Arbor over there off Halsted.”

He nodded and smiled, undoing the buttons on my coat, his hands slipping inside to my sweater as he stepped closer to me. “I was thinking it could be tonight. A friend of mine is having a party—I’d love to take you.” Slowly he stroked the back of his fingers up the front of my sweater over my abdomen.

“Tomorrow,” I said.

We both heard the doorbell ring and I wondered absently where the button was outside. Bette called for me and when I turned to go Trip caught me with an arm around my neck.

“Don’t blow me off okay? I want to see you.”

I smiled and let my head fall forward as his lips brushed over the back of my neck. He felt good there was no denying that. “Okay.”

“Jory are you sure I can’t take you home?”

But the door opened and he was instantly off me. Cretia poked her head in and told me that my boss was standing in the living room waiting for me. I saw how big her eyes were.

“He’s gorgeous right?” I teased her.

“Ohmygod Jory that’s the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen in my life.”

I chuckled and followed her out with Trip trailing after me.

Dane stood with Truman glancing around the room in response to what the other man was pointing out. I realized that not one pair of eyes in the room was not on the two of them or more precisely, on Dane. Easy to understand the fascination as in his black Versace suit with the black dress shirt underneath and black cashmere topcoat, he looked like he had just walked off the cover of a magazine. The short jet-black hair and the steel grey eyes, sharp, chiselled features, his height, the width of his shoulders, his chest, and just the way everything fit...he was breathtaking. The air of cool detachment, the absence of a smile, the way he oozed confidence, his presence in a room was palpable, he charged the air around him. And I used to think I was over romanticizing him but after five years of being his assistant, after being with him when he met people, seeing their reactions, I knew it was simple truth. The man was riveting and there was no way not to notice.

I walked over to him and he tossed me his digital camera.

“What am I doing with this?”

“Look at the woman in the fifth picture.”

I flipped through the photos as he was offered a drink that he graciously declined.

“Who is that?” he asked me, leaning in close, pointing on the screen.

I turned and looked up into his eyes. “That’s Sabine Raleigh.”

The completely vacant look I got in return made me laugh.

“Who?”

“You went on like three dates with her,” I informed him.

“When?”

“Late July.”

He scowled at me.

“What?”

“Are you sure?”

“Am I sure of what? That you dated her?”

“Yes.”

I wasn’t positive if he was kidding or not. I almost laughed.

“Jory are you—”

“You’re not kidding.” I was in awe. “Holy shit.”

“Watch your language,” he snapped at me, shaking his head before he pointed at Truman. “Go thank him for his hospitality so we can go.”

I did as I was directed and hugged him and Bette again before I caught up with my boss. His hand went where it always did, to the back of my neck as he steered me out of the house. I would have walked into the side of the car as I was looking at the rest of the pictures but he grabbed the collar of my coat and yanked me to a stop.

“So what happened?” I probed, looking up at his profile.

“Get in,” he said flatly, holding open the door of his Mercedes for me.

I got in, leaned over and opened his door before putting my seatbelt on, still flipping through the photos. The camera was really nice and from the look of it Jude's home was stunning.

"What's he got? Like a loft or something?" I asked when he got in.

"Or something."

"It's nice."

"Yes it is."

I waited until we were on our way before I asked again what had happened.

"Wait," he said suddenly, pulling over to get out and take off his suit jacket and lay it over his topcoat in the backseat. When he got back in and pulled away from the curb I asked him again what he'd done. There was no answer.

"Boss?"

"You know what," he exhaled quickly. "Stop saying that all right?"

I looked at his profile. "Stop saying what?"

"Boss."

"Boss?"

"Yes, don't—it's not us anymore."

This was news. "So what should I—"

"Just use my name. Just Dane all right?"

"Okay."

"Excellent." He sighed long and loud.

"So...fess up. What'd you say to Sabine?"

He cleared his throat.

"I'm waiting."

"I told her it was a pleasure to meet her."

My eyes widened as I looked at him.

He glanced at me before he rolled his eyes.

“Oh shit,” I breathed out. “What’d she say?”

“She slapped me and left.”

I almost laughed but I covered it with a lot of coughing.

“It’s not funny.”

“No it’s not,” I agreed, clearing my throat. “Jesus.”

“You’re not helping.”

I flipped through the pictures again.

“Say something else.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.”

“Should I say oh shit? ‘Cause I’m thinking oh shit.”

“Jory—”

“Oh shit,” I breathed out again. “Christ Dane maybe it’s time to slow down huh? Holy crap.”

“I truly had no idea who she was.”

“Holy shit.”

“Stop saying that.”

“I can’t help it. She must have been so humiliated. I mean...I never really liked her but damn...at least I remembered who she is.”

He made a noise of disgust.

I raked my fingers through my hair. “Poor Sabine. She’s gotta be horrified.”

“I would imagine so.”

“Holy shit.”

He growled and told me to shut-up.

“And she’s the one with all the great restaurants remember?”

Clearly, from the vacant look on his face, even with prodding, he had no idea.

“Well I can tell you that she called for two weeks after you broke up with her.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“‘Cause once you break up with them I’m on deck.” I cracked a grin. “I handle clean-up.”

He looked at me hard.

“What?”

“You do a lot for me.”

“‘Cause ya pay me to,” I teased him.

He grunted and leaned back, getting comfortable in the seat as he drove. “I turned down the food offer for you. Mr. Ward’s wife wanted to make you a doggy bag.”

“Oh that would’ve been nice.”

“No,” he said, squinting his eyes. “You don’t do charity.”

Which made no sense. “It’s a common form of kindness here on Earth to give people food to take home with them when they leave. We even have special receptacles to carry the food in. It’s called Tupperware.”

He grunted again and I settled back in my seat, watching the streetlights go by.

“I hate leftovers.”

We had been silent for several miles and so his voice coupled with the fact that he was still following the same train of thought, surprised me.

“What?”

“Leftovers,” he repeated. “I hate them. It’s never as good as you remember.”

“Uh-huh.” I smiled slowly. “You think maybe you’re over analyzing this a little?”

He cleared his throat.

I waited and when he remained silent I was going to just start talking about something, anything, some random topic, but when I opened my mouth he began.

“Before my parents were killed my mother had ordered a cake for my birthday. Eighteen was huge and the party she had planned was going to be a spectacle. The news that the plane had gone down came the same day they delivered the cake and I guess our housekeeper just shoved it in the refrigerator without thinking.”

He never talked about his parents so I was silent making sure I didn’t disturb him.

“I found it in there like a week after the funeral, this huge Superman cake. What possessed her to order it I will never know but it was there, taking up an entire shelf with like Happy Birthday to our superhero or something to that effect on it.” He was silent for a few minutes just watching the road. “And I knew she would have gotten the biggest kick out of watching me blow out candles and do the Superman pose and everything else so I took it out and cut a slice.”

I couldn’t imagine how much Dane missed his parents. There had just been the three of them and his grandmother. She had passed two years before his folks. And they had died aboard a private plane on their way home from one of his father’s many business trips. His mother didn’t usually go with him but the meeting had been in San Francisco and she loved the city by the bay.

“The cake was really good I remember but there was so much of it. If I’d of had my party...but it was a full sheet and I was just one guy. I swear it lasted forever. Every night for desert—I had it. My friends came by, my Dad’s business associates, people I didn’t know—I offered everybody cake and they probably thought how weird it was that I had this cheesy little kid’s cake but nobody said anything about it.”

I stared at his profile and waited.

“I remember there was still half of it left and I tried to give some to Jude to take home. He said he hated leftovers and I realized that that was all it was—something leftover. I had made a big deal out of something I’m sure my mother would have tossed out the next morning if not the night of the party. She always wanted me to live in the moment—the cake lying in the fridge day after day would have annoyed the hell out of her.”

I nodded as he turned to smile at me.

“I pitched it the next day.”

“And so what—now you don’t believe in leftovers on some spiritual level?”

“I just don’t like them at all.”

“So that’s why I couldn’t take any from Mrs. Ward?”

“Yes.”

“Spoken like someone who never had to make one meal stretch into two or three. When you grow up poor leftovers are part of survival.”

“I hate them. I never want to see something twice. You can have too much of a good thing.”

I shook my head. “You’re very disturbed.”

“Obviously.”

“Are you going to send Sabine some flowers and a card of apology?”

He rolled his eyes like I was stupid. “Sure. Find me a card for I’m sorry I forgot you.”

I chuckled. “Seriously maybe you should slow down huh player?”

“Shut-up.”

I sat there smiling out the window.

“You’re saying you have no weird thing from your childhood that makes no logical sense?”

“No, I won’t say that.”

“Tell me.”

I shrugged. “Garbage bags.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Garbage bags. You know the plastic kind? Hefty or Glad or whatever.”

“Yes I know what a garbage bag is, just make me understand.”

“Okay. See when I was little it was luxury item. We used the plastic bags that they packed our groceries in to put trash in because real garbage bags were at the bottom of the list. My grandmother lived on her social security and the state helped her with food stamps for me. That was all there was so...but the little bags broke all the time and sometimes all we had were the brown paper ones. It was a mess.”

“And what?”

“So now I keep like four different sizes of garbage bags at all times. I completely freak if I run out of them. I feel like I’m back there in the trailer park.”

“But you loved your grandmother.”

“I did but I didn’t love being called poor white trash for where I lived. I didn’t love our scary neighbours or never having enough so we could pay the electric bill and eat at the same time. Sometimes at the end of the month all we had was rice and beans.”

“Which is probably why you don’t eat either.”

“Probably.”

“Huh. Garbage bags.”

“Yep. Any size you need.” I sighed. “Even got lawn bags.”

“You don’t have a lawn.”

“So not the point.”

He laughed softly and then let out a deep breath. “We’re both deeply flawed.”

“You think?”

“I know.”

“Well if no leftovers and a variety of garbage bags is the extent of our neurosis—then I’m fine with it.”

“Okay.” Dane agreed with me.

“Okay.”

“Are you tired?”

“No why?”

“I don’t feel like going home.”

“You wanna hang out with me?”

He shrugged and I smiled because he did.

“Did it hurt when Sabine slapped you?”

“Could we stop revisiting this topic?”

I almost cackled. “Open mouth insert foot.”

“Shut-up.”

“Your friends are gonna give you so much shit.”

He groaned loudly and I asked him what he wanted to do.

“I don’t care.”

We drove to the Varsity theatre downtown where they were showing *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and they had recliners, couches and overstuffed chairs instead of rows of seats. I got us both steaming mugs of Oolong and got a weird look when I passed it to him before I sat down.

“What? You don’t want me to sit by you?”

He just continued to look at me like I had sprouted wings or something equally strange.

“You want me to pull a chair over here in case some hot woman wants to sit down?”

He sipped his tea. “No.”

“Then what’s with the look?”

“No, look it’s just interesting.”

“What is?”

He turned his deep dark eyes on me. “You Jory.”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

He smiled over the top of his cup. “Well the fact that you’re here hanging with me at twenty-two years old instead of out getting laid...that’s interesting.”

I snorted. “I’ll be twenty-three in January.”

“Which has what to do with anything I just said?”

“I dunno.”

“Just talking to hear yourself huh?”

“No I just... isn’t Thanksgiving a holiday that you’re supposed to spend with your family?”

“Yes it is.”

I looked him in the eye. “Well then.”

He stared at me and I stared back and between my words and the way I met his gaze with my own, he understood what I was trying to say.

“Okay,” he said as the movie started.

And somewhere near the middle of the film he gave my leg a gentle pat as he slouched down in his seat. It was not to be missed that the man treated me more like his brother than his assistant. I wondered briefly if he realized it himself.

CHAPTER TWO

SITTING AT THE BAR the next evening at The Arbor, watching Trip on the dance floor with his friends, I wondered how I had so misread a dinner invitation. I thought we would get drinks, move on to dinner and finally take a walk and get to know each other. I had imagined us alone. Apparently he had imagined dancing at the club with friends. He had invited half a dozen people to join us and he was currently sandwiched between two very beautiful women doing the bump and grind. As I glanced at them I realized that what I had thought would be just him and me, he had seen as an opportunity to party. And I could get out there and do some dirt dancing of my own but I didn't feel like it. At twenty-two I was tired of the club scene. I'd rather be home ironing my clothes. This was what came of having a fake ID at sixteen. All the excitement was gone by the time you were legal enough to do all the things the law said you could.

I declined two drinks the bartender tried to put down in front of me sent over from men I didn't know and instead paid my tab and headed for the door. I glanced over my shoulder but Trip didn't even notice. I was going to make a clean getaway.

Outside on the street my phone rang and I leaned back against the glass window and answered it.

"I need to talk to you," Sam Kage said flatly on the other end.

I was surprised that I was talking to the vice detective again. I had thought our last encounter was it. When he came to my apartment in the middle of the night and yelled at me for not letting him protect me, I thought I had finally driven him away. I had hoped I was wrong, prayed I was wrong, but feared I was right. Sam Kage had a hold over me that was hard to articulate and I was usually so good at talking.

"Jory."

"Sorry, why do you need to talk to me?"

"You're my witness you idiot."

My friend's husband had killed a man and I had been around to see it. Sam Kage was the detective on the case. Thrust together by circumstance we had found something more, something unexpected and it had been moving forward until we hit a snag. Sam considered me, sleeping with me, having me around, a detour when I had been thinking permanent. I had left instead of trying to sway his feelings. And it killed me to leave him but I knew that it would be fatal down the road. As it was I thought of him often and each and every time my heart hurt. Even being on the phone with him was hard. But once I could breathe I could guess why he was calling. I had been chased by guys sent to silence me and my testimony just nights before and he was probably following up on that. I had called his partner, Dominic Kairov, instead of him which I knew had been petty. It was the reason for Sam's appearance at my door in the wee hours of the night. He had showed up to yell at me.

“Are you there?”

“Yeah, sorry. Go ahead.”

He cleared his throat. “You know those guys that chased you the other night we brought them in on—”

“You know who they are?”

“Yeah we know who they fuckin’ are.”

“Oh.”

“Oh,” he repeated like I was brain dead. “Jesus.”

“Maybe I’ll just hang—”

“Wait,” he said fast. “Just wait.”

I sighed long and loud but said nothing.

“Okay so like I said we brought them in on separate charges and their rap sheets are good for attempted murder, aggravated assault and attempted rape. Lucky...you were just lucky they didn’t get a hold of you.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“Yeah? That’s all you have to say?”

“What do you want me to say?” I said softly, rubbing the bridge of my nose, realizing that I hadn’t eaten dinner yet and I had a lot to drink while I was watching Trip dance.

“Why do you sound all weird?”

“I’m drunk,” I said flatly.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m on my way home.”

“How ‘bout you meet me for dinner.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You hate me.” I said and I sounded petulant even to myself.

“I don’t,” he said, and I could almost hear the smile in his voice. The flutter that rolled through my stomach was really annoying.

“Well I hate you.” I was back to sounding like a brat.

“No ya don’t.”

And I didn’t, I was crazy about him plain and simple and too drunk not to show it. I chuckled. “Well somebody hates somebody or we’d be together.”

“You’re a drama queen that’s why we’re not together.”

I grunted.

“Just come on. Tell me where ya are.”

So I told him and he said to give him five minutes. I promised to give him that. I fiddled with my phone, deleting old text messages and downloading a new song from my ringtone. It was always a good diversion. I lost track of time.

“Jory.”

I looked up as Trip came to stand over me. “Hey man.”

“Where’d ya go?”

“I’m gonna jet,” I smiled slowly. “I’ll see ya later.”

“But I thought we were gonna hang out.”

“So did I but its cool.”

“No,” he said; squatting down beside me, hand on my back. “I want to—”

“J!”

I looked to the street and there was Sam getting out of his tank that he had parked beside the curb. I really needed to ask him why he felt the need to drive the monster car. He didn’t need to compensate for anything.

“Who’s that?” Trip asked me as Sam came around the front of the SUV and strode toward us.

And I had the strangest moment of clarity watching him close in on me. “That’s Sam.”

“Jory.”

My eyes flicked back to Trip’s.

“Who’s Sam?”

“Hey.”

We both looked up at Detective Kage as he held his hand out to me.

“That was fast.” I smiled at him, liking the way the corduroys hugged his long, muscular legs, the enormous belt buckle and the steel toed boots that were all beat to hell. A white t-shirt peeked out from under a flannel work shirt and the fleece lined denim jacket finished off his outfit. “What’d you do work construction today Detective?”

His smile came slowly, warming his eyes, firing them as he stared down at me. “I did a lot of walking around today. I didn’t wanna freeze my ass off.”

“Canvassing the neighbourhood,” I offered as I took his hand and he hauled me to my feet.

“That’s right,” he said gently, his hand on my shoulder. “I forgot you watch TV so you know what’s going on.”

I nodded, agreeing with him that I was a big dork as Trip stood up next to me. “Sam this is my friend Trip Ward, Trip this is Sam Kage.”

They didn’t shake, they just nodded at each other as Sam’s hand went to the back of my neck and he drew me closer to him.

“Let’s get some food in you.”

“Okay,” I agreed, offering Trip my hand. “I’ll see ya man.”

“Wait, no Jory I thought we were gonna—”

“You’re leavin’ me hangin’ here.” I smiled wide.

Instead of taking my hand he stepped into my arms and hugged me tight, his hands sliding over my back. “We should’ve gone somewhere just the two of us.”

“Yeah we should’ve.” I squeezed back because he felt good in my arms. I needed to be held, I

craved it.

“We gotta go,” Sam said, and I felt his hand tangle in my hair, pull gently but insistently.

I let Trip go and Sam grabbed the lapel of my suit jacket. “Take care,” I said.

“Jory lemme take you out tomorrow. I’ll pick you up at work and we’ll have dinner and then we can—”

“He’ll be busy,” Sam said gruffly, yanking me forward so hard I almost fell. “Get in the car before I put you in the car.”

“Oh yeah?” I teased him, shrugging off his hand, walking backwards. “Ya think you can do that?”

He grunted and moved faster than I would have thought he could. I had wrongly assumed that a man his size wasn’t capable of speed but he had a hold of my arm again before I even realized what he was doing. “Lemme show you where the car is.”

I smiled, looking down at my feet. “I can walk.”

“You’re barely vertical. How many drinks did you have?”

“I dunno.”

“Why were you drinking anyway?”

“I was sitting by myself and I got bored.”

“Why were you sitting alone?” he asked as he opened the door for me, holding it open.

I climbed up and he slammed the door behind me. I glanced back over to the club entrance and Trip was still standing there watching me. I waved and he returned the gesture.

“You were supposed to be on a date with that guy?” Sam asked when he opened the door and slid into the driver’s seat.

“I think so.” I turned and looked at him. “Isn’t that what dinner usually implies?”

He reached out and put a hand on my cheek. “You look confused baby.”

“Well he invited me to dinner but not alone. What is that?”

“I used to invite friends if I wanted the other person to think it wasn’t really a date.”

I shrugged, brushing his hand away. “Then I guess it wasn’t really a date.”

“I guess not,” he agreed starting the car.

“But last night when he invited me he said—”

“You spent Thanksgiving with him?”

“With him and his family, yeah.” I was more than tipsy or I wouldn’t have just started chatting with him like we were girlfriends or something. “They’re really nice but he came off all player and everything and so I said I wouldn’t go out with him but then he apologized for thinking he was getting laid and—”

“What made him think he was gettin’ laid?”

“Did you see him? He’s gorgeous—I’m sure he gets laid all the time.”

He just nodded.

I smiled in spite of myself. “I might be drunker than I thought.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Even drunk I know sarcasm when I hear it.”

“Just shut the fuck up.”

“You know if you’re gonna be all—”

“What J? What are you gonna do? I can do whatever the hell I want with you starting now and there ain’t shit you can do about it. So you know what...screw the food. I’m taking you home with me.”

“Wait—no, I’ve gotta work tomorrow. I—”

“Tomorrow’s Saturday. You don’t hafta work.”

“Yes I do. I’ve gotta deliver something for my boss. I’ve gotta be there at like—”

“You’re coming with me.”

“I can’t. Don’t—”

“Don’t what? Don’t just do whatever I want since you always do whatever the hell you want?”

“No I—”

“You don’t always get to have things your way so sit there and shut up.”

I vowed it would be a cold day in hell before I ever spoke to him again. Arms crossed, staring out my window, I didn’t even look at him. When he suddenly pulled off down a street I didn’t know, I turned and looked at him.

He was gripping the steering wheel so tight his knuckles were white. “I fuckin’ hate this.”

“What?” It was an early thaw for hell.

He turned and looked at me. “This. You and me, I fuckin’ hate it.”

“Then let me out and I’ll get—”

“No,” he roared and in the small area it was even louder. It resonated through my whole body.

“I don’t—”

“This is eatin’ me up.”

I watched him swallow hard, saw how ragged his eyes were, how rung out he looked.

“Jory...”

I was good at changing the subject when people were drowning in too much emotion. I needed to help him not push him under. “That night you saw me out did you really think I looked like a hustler?” I teased him, smiling lazily. We had passed each other, me walking out with three of my female co-workers, him walking in with his friends, a beautiful blonde on his arm. He had delivered the scorching remark that I looked like I was a rent boy.

“No.” His voice sounded hoarse, crackly.

“Did I look good?”

“Yes.”

“Do I look good now?”

In answer he was on me, his mouth sealing over mine, his tongue pushing for entrance that I instantly allowed. As soon as my lips parted, his tongue swept inside, and he gathered me close, crushing me against him, kissing me so hard, so long, reacquainting himself with every part of my mouth. When I pulled back to look up into his face, he bit my bottom lip to keep me close. I smiled and he ended up kissing my nose, my eyes, still holding me in his arms so tight.

“Did you sleep with the blonde?” I asked him, holding my breath.

His voice was low and husky, filled with gravel. “No Jory. I don’t sleep with anyone but you.”

“Then why say those things you said, why say you wanted to get married and—”

“‘Cause you were being so fuckin’ smug,” he barked at me, letting me go suddenly, pushing me back into my seat. “After we left my folks place that day you started talking like of course I’m gonna do this or that—talkin’ like you fuckin’ own me—like I belong to you and for you it’s so easy—you just fall in love and—”

“Who says I’m in love?” I argued.

His scowl was black. “Oh fuck you. I know you’ve got it bad so don’t even try and sit there and pretend you don’t. How fast you ran—what you did—calling Dom instead of me— all that shit is about you creating drama because your feelings got hurt. Well fuck you J. You don’t just run off if I do some stupid shit. You call me on it and tell me I’m an idiot and tell me where to go. That’s what you do. All that shit I said that Sunday—you think I meant any of that?”

I just stared at him.

His laugh was more a bark. “Fuck you did. That’s funny. I would’ve thought you knew me better.”

“Why say it if you didn’t mean it?” I repeated my earlier question.

“Because I was mad!” he roared at me, his hand on the back of my head to pull me close, staring into my eyes. “You can be gay and have your life and be whatever but me if I have you there’s stuff I gotta let go.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t let it go,” I said honestly, staring deep into his beautiful eyes. “I mean you resenting me down the road does not sound like a good time.”

He cupped my face in his hands, drawing me close to kiss me breathless; kissing me so long I could hear my heart pounding in my ears from lack of oxygen.

I tore my mouth free and his hands went to my ass as he drew me across the seat, over the emergency brake into his lap, his lips on my throat, biting, licking, sucking, and kissing whatever skin he could reach. I trembled hard under his hands. He felt so good and I had never thought in a million years he would be the one holding me again.

“I have no choice anymore,” he confessed, his nose running up the side of my neck as his lips trailed over my skin. “Need you. Can’t sleep without you and it’s only you. There’s no woman I want...no other guy...just you. I am completely addicted to you.”

He was? “You are?”

“Yeah.” He sounded so miserable. “Shit.”

I smiled at him. “You don’t sound very happy about it.”

“Cause it would be a helluva lot easier if I didn’t feel like this.”

I looked into his eyes.

“But see I’m crazy about you makin’ tea whenever there’s a problem and your smell on my sheets and having you next to me in the middle of the night...I mean I got used to all that so fuckin’ fast.”

He was a mess and I loved it.

“You put me through it when you left and I’ve been so...pissed...at you and then that night I saw you out and you look like you’re okay—you’re fine without me and—and I just wanted to take you home and...then the other night—what if you were hurt or killed or...what the fuck am I supposed to do? And that asshole tonight he thinks he’s got a shot with you... everybody thinks they’ve got a shot because I’m not around and...it’s not gonna fuckin’ happen! I will not allow it to happen. I want you with me all the time—can’t have anyone else touching you or...you belong to me. You get that right? You’re mine. I think I’m gonna mark you—put my name on you so everybody knows that you’re—”

It was too much so I cut him off, shifting in his lap so my ass was pressing against his groin, wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing him with every drop of love and hate and everything in between that I had. I was ravenous for him and the way I kissed him brought moans and whimpers up out of him. It made me smile, big strong man just shaking with need for his lover. It was staggering to be that wanted, to drown in the heat of the kiss, of the embrace.

“Swear on my life Sam, swear you’re gonna tell everyone about me.”

“Shit,” he almost groaned and I could tell he was in agony. “I fuckin’ hate you.”

“Swear.”

“I swear,” he almost yelled. “But you hafta take my word that I will. You need to trust me.” He was exasperated, sick of fighting with me. It took so much energy.

“I do.”

“I really fuckin’ hate you,” he growled at me, his hands sliding up and down my thighs as I shifted around in his lap, shoving my groin against his abdomen.

"I know." I smiled into his smoky blue eyes, reaching down between us, my hand slipping over the front of his jeans, rubbing gently but firmly.

"Jesus God," he blurted out, his head falling back against the seat. "Jory I swear baby I did not get in bed with anybody else. Please-please-please let me get in bed with—"

"Yes Sam." I cut him off. "Let's go to my place."

He lifted me up and dumped me back in my seat, and I laughed at how fast he drove, the squealing tires, the engine revving loud. I told him to put the light on the top of the car and he shot me a scathing look that just made me laugh that much harder.

At my door he hovered over me, his lips on the side of my neck and I had trouble with the lock. He took the keys and got the door opened and then locked behind us. Lifted into his arms, I wrapped my legs around his waist as he carried me to my bedroom. Clothes were torn off and left where they fell, both of us getting in bed at the same time. I scrambled back against the headboard and he came down on top of me, his mouth on me, swallowing me down his throat. I arched up against him and heard him fumbling in my nightstand. When slick fingers slid inside me, I yelled his name.

"I might hurt you," he confessed, lifting his lips from me.

"Try," I breathed out.

The noise in the back of his throat before he lifted my hips and buried himself in me deep and hard was raw and throaty. And the thrust would have hurt but his hand was back to stroke my shaft and keep my arousal at fever pitch. To be filled and held at the same time was heaven.

"I missed you."

I had missed him more. My eyes were all over him, watching the cording muscles as he moved above me and then the way he caught his breath as I pushed against him, rolling him over on his back. His hands gripped my thighs as I rose above him, reaching up to pull me down, gather me close, he was so gentle as he caressed my skin.

"Promise me you won't go anywhere," he said my face in his hands as he stared into my eyes, the throb of pleasure sliding through him as I seated myself deeper.

"I promise." I smiled slowly.

"Don't leave me. I'll hurt you if you try and leave me."

I smiled down into his eyes. "Yeah? You'll hurt me?"

"Jory," his voice cracked. "Please baby I—"

But my mouth on his cut him off as I kissed the worry right out of him. When I pulled back his eyes were clouded, his lips swollen. He looked utterly ravaged.

“You know that woman was right.”

I squinted at him. “What are we talking about?”

“That woman that time, the one who came with my neighbour...you could be a model if you wanted. You are so beautiful.”

I laughed at him, trying to kiss him.

“You are. Your mouth and your skin and your sweet ass.”

“I don’t think she was talking about my ass,” I chuckled, loving our mindless pillow talk.

He ignored me. “I love how your eyes get when we’re doing this—Jesus J it’s so fuckin’ hot.”

I flicked my tongue over his lips before sucking his bottom lip inside my mouth. I felt his body shudder beneath mine and I shifted, lowering myself over him, taking all of him inside me.

“God you feel so good.” His voice was raw, husky, his pupils dilated as he stared up at me. “This shit is gonna kill me.”

And I smiled as I made love to the man I loved. I was an idiot and a drama queen, he was right. He was as crazy about me as I was about him and how I had missed that I had no idea.

“Please come back to my place J.”

“No.” I grinned lazily, clenching my muscles so he gasped. “I like it here.”

His voice was filled with sand when he could finally speak. “Then can I stay here with you?”

“I’ll think about it.”

He had me flat on my back a second later, my legs still around his waist. “I wanna sleep here with you all right? Can I do that please?”

“Yes,” I said quickly as he pushed down into me. “Stay.”

“I’m the only one you ever let sleep with you huh J?”

“Yes.”

“Cause you trust me.”

“Yes.”

“Remember that all right?”

“Yes dear.”

The way he was looking at me made my heart hurt. My tears came from joy and when he wiped them away and kissed my eyes, I told him he could stay forever if he wanted.

“I want to,” he said, his face buried on my shoulder.

I couldn’t hold him tight enough.

CHAPTER THREE

MY PHONE WOKE ME at five in the morning, and my boss, Dane Harcourt, was on the other end reminding me I had to deliver the envelope with the charity information to the hospital before nine. I was groggy but I told him I was all over it. He grunted like maybe he wasn't sure I was coherent enough and I asked him why he couldn't take it over himself. He said that would be a neat trick considering he was in Cape Cod. It was another romantic getaway and I made him promise to try and retain a name this time. He snorted out a laugh before he hung up. I lay there a minute listening to the silence of the apartment and realized that I was alone. I got up and went room to room just to make sure before I called Sam. He was on site at a crime scene somewhere and his voice sounded funny when he answered.

"What's wrong?" I asked gently.

No answer.

"I woke up and you were gone."

"You looked so sweet layin' there all warm and...like a kitten."

"A kitten," I said after a minute.

Sam chuckled and I smiled because I'd caused that.

"I'm really glad you called." He sighed deeply. "You sound so good."

"I sound sleepy."

"Exactly. I wish I was there—in bed with you. I'm freezing out here."

"Are you okay?"

"No," was all he said.

"What can I do?"

"I dunno kitten what can you do?"

"Okay enough with the kitten crap," I warned him, smiling into the phone. "Just tell me. Please Sam. Say something—anything."

He cleared his throat. "Okay—you can pack a bag and go to my place and wait for me. Can you do that?"

“I can do that.”

“‘Cause if I could come home and you’d be there...that’d be good.”

I heard the tremor in his voice. Whatever he was looking at, standing in, was bad. “Okay.”

“I wanted to stay with you.” His voice cracked, got very quiet. “I didn’t wanna come out.”

“‘Cause you like me all warm and naked in bed with you,” I teased him.

“Yes,” was all he got out, his voice filled with gravel. Something was eating him up.

“I’ll be there. What time are you getting off?”

“Six. Meet me there at six. I’ll get some food and—”

“I’ll get it,” I told him. “You just come home.”

“Just come home?”

“Yeah. Your part’s simple.”

“Okay. I’ll see ya.”

“Bye.” I smiled.

“Wait.”

“What?”

Long silence. “Nothing.”

He wanted to say something or he wanted me to say something. “Tell me.”

“Be careful walking around okay? Call me if you need me.”

“I will I’ll see ya at six.”

“I left my extra set of keys on your nightstand.”

“You did?”

“I did.”

“Okay.”

“Those are yours to keep all right.”

“Sam,” I said breathlessly. “Are you sure you wanna—”

“I’m sure. I’ll see ya later kitten.”

“Sam you gotta stop with the—”

But he cut me off when he hung up. I went to my nightstand and picked up the keys. The key chain was obviously new and I had to smile at the rhinestone encrusted J. That had to be thrown out right away. How gay did he think I was?

* * * *

IT WAS A SILENT auction to benefit the Pediatric Unit at the hospital. Originally my boss had been contacted to be one of the bachelors silently auctioned off, but he declined and said he would provide free services instead. The hospital was smart and accepted. A house designed by Dane Harcourt was worth its weight in gold as a symbol of status and luxury. If you had a Harcourt house you had arrived.

As I walked up to the window in the Emergency Room, I saw Nick Sullivan leaning at the desk on the other side of the glass. When he turned to look out toward the lobby where I was standing, I raised my hand and waved. He came through the sliding glass doors seconds later.

“Hey,” he smiled wide. “What’re you doing here at the crack of dawn? Have you even been to bed yet?”

“Ha-ha,” I smirked at him, yawning.

He stepped in close to me and took hold of the lapel of my pea coat. “Are we okay?”

“Yeah.” I smiled at him. “Aren’t we?”

“If I didn’t care so much I wouldn’t have been such a jerk.”

“Then you must really care ‘cause you were a dick, I assured him.

He put an arm around my neck and led me through the doors to the ER. “What’re you doing here J?”

“I have an envelope for the lady in charge of the silent auction tonight.”

He gave me an odd look.

“Did you know there’s a huge charity event tonight doctor to raise money for the children’s ward?”

“Yes, very funny. I know I have to be there after all.”

“So that’s why I’m here. I need to see the lady in charge.”

“Oh.” He let me go. “Phyllis Dwyer. Let me call her down here for you.”

“I can go to her office if you tell me where it is.”

“No-no.” He smiled at me. “I’ll call her. Wait here.”

So I stood there while he walked behind the desk to make a call.

“Jory, right?”

I looked up into lovely pale blue eyes. The woman smiling at me had the nicest face. “Yeah. Who’re you?” I asked, leaning on the desk.

“I’m Colby St. James; I just transferred in from San Francisco.”

“Why?” I asked her like she was high.

She chuckled. “My family’s here.”

I nodded. “So how’re you liking it?”

“I like it except that I got kind of a rude awakening last week when I discovered that the man I had my eye on actually has his eye on you.”

“Oh,” I smiled sheepishly. “Doctor Nick.”

“Mmmm. The man is edible.”

“Is he?” I teased her.

“Yes.” She arched one eyebrow for me. “He’s a great doctor, good with kids, funny, smart, sarcastic, and do I even need to add gorgeous? Have you not noticed those emerald eyes?”

I nodded. “You should do his PR for him.”

She smiled impishly. “You’re adorable I get why he’s smitten.”

“Was smitten,” I corrected her.

“Is smitten,” she corrected me. “He told me what a jerk he was at the club. You know he’s sorry.”

“I know.”

She tilted her head to look at me. “And have you forgiven him Jory?”

I nodded. “I have.”

She leaned forward to look into my eyes. “You know I’m standing here looking at you and my goodness you’re even prettier than Doctor Nick.”

I grinned at her.

“I would kill for your eyelashes.”

“Jory.”

I looked up and Nick was back. He looked from me to Colby and back again. “I called Phyllis. She’ll be right down. What’re you guys talking about?”

“Just trying to think of a good place to take Colby for a night on the town,” I told him, straightening up, reaching out to fix his collar under his white lab coat. “Any suggestions?”

He froze under my touch; letting me smooth out his collar, tighten his tie.

“I dunno J.” He stared at me. “But after you give Phyllis the envelope will you have breakfast with me? I’m just getting off so—whaddya say?”

I squinted at him.

“Please.” He smiled at me. “I’ve got stuff to say.”

I shrugged. “All right.”

“Great.” He beamed at me. “I’ll be right back.”

Colby and I watched him walk away before we returned our gazes to one another.

“Wow,” she chuckled, “I had no idea the man had it quite that bad.”

“Knock it off,” I teased her.

“Oh Jory,” Colby said suddenly and her voice had a breathy quality that had been missing before. “I Googled your boss and—is this him?”

I leaned over the desk and there on the website for Harcourt, Brown and Cogan was the one and only Dane Harcourt. It was a particularly good shot. The photographer had been laying on the ground looking up at him and it had been a cloudy day. So the sky and his eyes were the exact same colour.

“It is a good picture isn’t it.” I waggled my eyebrows at her.

Her eyes narrowed as she looked at me. “You took it.”

“I did,” I chuckled. “Dane didn’t like the guy that Miles and Sherman hired—thought he was arrogant—so since we had a deadline for the website...I got elected.”

“It’s a good picture Jory, perhaps helped by the fact that his eyes look very kind. He obviously likes you if he’s looking at you like that.” She fixed me with a long stare. “Is he gay?”

I snorted out a laugh. “Uh no. He’s actually the exact opposite of gay—he’s like the uber straight guy.”

“You mean—”

“I mean he’s like a serial dater.”

She giggled. “Maybe he just hasn’t found the right girl yet.”

“Maybe.”

“Well,” she swallowed. “I get how he can...date so much.”

“Yep,” I agreed. “Much prettier than Doctor Nick or me.”

“Nothing pretty about that man,” she said and I saw the bemused look in her eyes. “How tall is he?”

“He’s six five.”

“Oh.”

“His eyes are grey.”

“I can see that.”

I chuckled and she looked up at me. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re just evil.” She smiled at me.

“Why don’t you gimme your number and we can have lunch next week. I’ll invite my boss.”

She wrote it on a post-it note for me without hesitation.

Phyllis Dwyer came down and collected the envelope from me, gave me a hug and thanked me profusely. She said that she would love to meet my boss sometime. I told her I’d try to arrange that. She said she was sure the design plans would go for a higher price than the Lexus they had. I told her I wouldn’t be surprised. A house by Dane Harcourt was a one of a kind. I watched Colby’s eyes widen just listening to me talk.

“He’s a big deal,” she said when Mrs. Dwyer left.

“A very big deal,” I agreed as Nick came to stand beside me.

“C’mon let’s go.” He smiled at me, hand on my back. “I know the perfect place.”

* * * *

I HAD DUCKED INTO the bathroom when we got to the restaurant, leaving Nick alone to wait for the table. When I got out he was standing beside the wall furthest from the door and I stopped a minute and looked at him. Easy to see why I had been drawn to him; the thick, dark brown hair and dark green eyes were very appealing. He was tall with the long muscles of a swimmer, broad shoulders and carried himself with unmistakable confidence. Not sexy and dangerous like Sam, more arrogant but kind at the same time with that boy-next-door quality. It was weird but when I first met him I’d thought he was handsome but really nothing special. After I spent more time with him though, upon closer inspection, I realized he was very handsome and all at once he took my breath away. Like the more I saw him the better looking he got. And what really got me was the way he looked at me; always he stared right into my eyes like I was the most amazing man he had ever seen. He saw me suddenly and he pushed away from the wall, straightened and walked over to me. When he smiled he had those great lines in his face that I loved and his eyes sparkled. He liked me and it showed.

“Hey.” I smiled up at him.

“The table’s ready c’mon.”

I followed him to the hostess and then through the restaurant. It was nice to be warm on a cold slushy morning with nothing to do but sit around. When we got to the booth I slid in first after hanging up my coat on the hook. He didn’t pick another but instead hung his over mine. Funny.

“You know why I brought you here?” he asked me, looking up, smiling into my eyes.

“I have no idea.”

“Because you like crepes and they have the best. Get whatever you want it’s on me.”

“We can go Dutch.” I smiled at him.

“No,” he insisted. “I invited you—I’m dying to do something for you to...please J.”

I closed my menu and put it down on the table. “Why do you need to do anything for me? We’re fine.”

He searched my eyes. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah I’m sure.”

“If we’re fine why are you sitting so far away?” he prodded.

“I’m not. I’m right here.”

“Why don’t you slide over closer to me?”

I shook my head. “I’m good here.”

“Come a little closer.”

“Nick.”

“Jory,” he said gently, sliding over close to me. “I am so sorry for how I acted the night I was with my family and then at the club with my friends. I just...I was completely out of line and the only excuse I can make is that I have never felt like this before and I’m not handling it well at all. I mean,” he smiled faintly, gave me the slightest shrug. “I’m usually the person being chased. I’ve never been on the other side before.” He sighed, putting an arm around the back of the booth. “I gotta say it kinda stinks.”

“Does it?”

“Yeah,” he nodded as the waiter put two large glasses of ice water down in front of us.

He ordered and then me and when I looked back at him he was scowling.

“What?”

“You have nothing to say?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Yes you do. I want you to say I can see you.”

I looked into his eyes.

“I’m so sorry I embarrassed you.”

“It’s okay. I deserved it.”

“You didn’t deserve all that. Can you forgive me?”

“I already did,” I told him honestly, smiling up at the waiter as he dropped off my smoky black tea and Aaron’s cappuccino. “God I love Oolong.” I grinned over at him.

“It smells like sweat socks,” he assured me, hand on the back of my neck, massaging the base of my skull, his fingers sliding over the groove.

I laughed and he smiled wide. Yeah, it did sort of smell like that. But it tasted like heaven.

“And so—talk. You were being chased and—”

“I can’t talk about that.”

“No?”

I shook my head.

“Okay then...I don’t know what you did for Thanksgiving—fill me in,” he ordered, taking a sip of his cappuccino and getting foam on his upper lip.

Without even a thought, I reached out and wiped it off with my fingers. “I’m sorry I didn’t use the plane ticket and go skiing with you.”

“It’s okay, I got to see my family instead and that was good. Everything happens for a reason.”

“I agree.”

We were silent for a few minutes.

“You look great.”

“Thanks.” I smiled at him.

“Can I ask something?” He looked at me hard, his hand stroking up the back of my neck, his fingers in my hair.

“Course.”

“Are you sleeping with that Detective?”

“Yes,” I answered without even having to think about it.

“I see. And you’re staying with him?”

“No,” I lied. It was none of his business.

He brightened. “No? Then where do you live because I went by your old place but your landlord said you were gone.”

“I live close to downtown now.”

“Can I come see your new place?”

“Yeah sure.”

“When?”

“I dunno. Soon,” I answered, leaning away from his hand.

“Sorry, I just like putting my hands on you. I know its kinda lame.”

“No.” I smiled. “It’s wonderful. The guy who you—”

“Don’t,” he warned me. “I don’t wanna talk about the next guy, I wanna talk about you. Does the detective want you to be with him?”

I took a deep breath. “He’s not sure what he wants.”

He’s not out?”

“He’s barely gay.” I let out a long breath.

“Oh,” he nodded, getting it. “You’re his first.”

“Yeah.”

He tipped his head. “Well I wish you had been my first.”

“That’s a very nice thing to say.”

He ran the back of his fingers up my throat. “Your skin is amazing.”

I just stared into his eyes.

“Can I just tell you that when you’re with me I’m happy?”

“Thank you.”

He gave me a crooked grin. “You think I’m crazy.”

“I think you’re a catch and I’m an idiot not to try and keep you.”

He grunted. “Don’t hafta try and do anything. You say the word you can move in tomorrow.”

“Why? You don’t know anything about me.”

“Yeah, but what I do know I’m crazy about. My feelings haven’t changed,” he said, hand on my cheek. “I want to be with you all the time. I want to go to bed with you and wake up with you and eat dinner with you every night and sleep with you—God do I wanna sleep with you. It’s like an ache I can’t get rid of. You should have never let me in your bed if it was a one-time only deal.”

“Nick—”

“Stop. I know you don’t feel the same. I’m not stupid.”

“Nick—”

“No-no, I’m not looking for you to have to defend yourself. It’s okay; I think it’ll change in time.”

In time? “Nick—”

“No, listen,” he began, burying his hand in my hair, curling a long piece around my ear. “I know being in bed with me didn’t rock your world or anything but—”

“Oh God, you’re being so honest right now,” I groaned.

“Well I’m thinking this is my last shot and even though I’m calm cool and collected on the outside, inside I’m a little bit of a mess.”

I bumped him gently with my shoulder and he leaned into me, his face in my hair.

“Jory baby I’m so sorry,” he whispered, arm around my neck, pinning me against him.

“Stop saying that,” I ordered him, closing my eyes, taking a breath. “It’s okay. Honest.”

“Okay.” He let out a deep breath as I leaned away from him, lifting my mug. “So I told my family all about you. My sister Sarah that you saw at the foosball table that night isn’t even speaking to me. She said that until she talks to you, I’m cut off. She can’t believe I spoke to you that way.”

“She sounds adorable.”

“She’s psychotic.”

I laughed at him. “That’s not a very nice thing to say.”

“I just want you to promise to meet my family for Christmas. Everyone’s coming back here. My Mom wants a white Christmas this year.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.” He grinned, brushing my hair out of my face, his fingers trailing across my forehead. “Is that a commitment Mr. Keyes?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” he breathed out. “Now start from the beginning and tell me why people are chasing you.”

I chuckled. “I can’t do that I told you.”

“Please.”

“No—I’m being serious. It’s scary and the less people that know about it the better.”

“But the Detective knows about it.”

“Of course.”

He nodded. “Okay then tell me what you did for Thanksgiving.”

“That I can do.”

We ate and talked about nothing important. I told him I was going to set Colby up with Dane and he thought that would make for interesting conversation for us down the road.

“So what now?” he asked me later as he pushed away his plate.

“How’dya mean?”

“What are your short-term plans Mr. Keyes?”

“Well for right now I need to spend some time with Sam.”

“Who?”

“The detective.” I smiled at him.

“Oh. Is that his name? Sam?”

I chuckled, nodding.

“That’s so boring.”

“Knock it off.”

“So you’re going to be with him because how I feel about you—you feel about him.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

“We can still talk if you want. But I don’t know if that’s what you want.”

“Is it all I can have?”

“Right now yeah.”

“Then it’s what I want.”

“Then we’ll talk.”

“Good.”

An hour later as we stood outside in front of the restaurant I told him it had been a good idea to have breakfast. The company had been great and the meal was good.

“God you’re beautiful.” He smiled lazily, his eyes glowing. “Can I kiss ya?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” I stammered as he leaned close.

“Maybe I should,” he said gently, his fingers warm on the side of my neck as he bent toward me.

I took a step back. “I don’t sleep with one person and kiss somebody else. It’s not me.”

He stared at me hard. “I’ll remember that when you’re with me and won’t worry that you’ll cheat.”

I shook my head. “You’re amazing.”

“This is what I’ve been saying.”

I grabbed him, wrapping my arms around him, hugging him tight. “Thank you for how you feel Nick. I’m humbled by it.”

He trembled in my arms, burying his face in my shoulder as he clutched at my back, my hair, finding my bare skin as he nuzzled my coat collar with his nose. I felt his lips on the side of my neck.

“You know all this is because you don’t think we have any chemistry,” he said softly, seductively. “But I promise you we do.”

I tried to let him go but he was holding on too tight.

“I feel right when I hold you and it’s new for me.”

I pulled free and looked up into his eyes.

He stared back at me for long minutes.

“Okay,” I said, shoving my hands deep into my pockets, walking backwards, and heading for the curb to call a cab. “I’ll see ya Nicky.”

“If the detective screws up J—you know who to call.”

I nodded.

“And I still get to see your place and you did promise to meet my family.”

I smiled wide. “Yes.”

“And you won’t blow me off.”

“No.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

“Just making sure,” he called over to me, lifting a hand before he turned away, walking down the street.

I wondered for a second if I would ever see him again.

* * * *

IT WAS AFTER SEVEN when Sam came into the apartment and closed and locked the door behind him.

“Hi,” I called over to him from where I was reading on the couch.

He pulled off his trench coat and threw it on the chair. His keys were dropped on the coffee table as he crossed the room to me.

“Are you okay?”

“No,” he said, reaching me. “It smells great in here.”

I put the magazine down and looked up at him. “How was work honey?”

“It was shit,” he chuckled, grabbing my right thigh, yanking me around, forcing me to my back so he could lie down on top of me, between my legs.

“I’m sorry,” I told him as he bent and kissed me. It was possessive and hot and devouring. What it lacked was the urgency that was usual with us. He was taking his time, kissing me slowly, deeply, like he had all the time in the world. When I whimpered he smiled against my mouth.

“I’m so glad to see you.”

I wrapped my legs around his waist and he pressed against me as he kissed me long and hard. I was getting dizzy it felt so good.

“Why don’t you go take a shower or a hot bath and relax?”

“The shower I’ll do,” he said, pulling back from me. “But I wanna talk to you so I’ll make it fast.”

“You can talk to me in the tub,” I assured him, panting, trying to catch my breath. “I’ll run the bath and you can sit in it.”

“No thanks,” he shook his head before he put his fingers under my chin and tilted my head up. “I just wanna sit and eat with you.”

“Okay.”

“Do you have any alcohol in your arsenal?”

“Yessir.” My mouth was dry and I was barely breathing.

He nodded, leaned in and kissed me again. His tongue tangled with mine as a hand slipped under my shirt to slowly rub my stomach. "I bet you taste better than the food."

I couldn't speak. He annihilated me. His fingers stroking, petting me made my brain shut down.

"I'm gonna take a shower. I'll be right back."

"Okay" I said before he kissed my forehead and rose off me. I sat up and watched him walk out of the room, down the hall to his bedroom.

After I calmed a minute I got up to get his dinner. When he came back in the kitchen a little while later, he looked better. He had on a long t-shirt under a short one, jeans and thick sweat socks. His hair was still wet and was sticking up in places. He could not have been any more adorable.

I fed him lobster bisque, linguine and clams, fresh French bread, spinach salad with vinegar and oil dressing, and poured him many glasses of the Chardonnay that the guy at the wine store had said was good. I told him all about breakfast with Nick, walking around the bookstore afterwards, the Christmas shopping I had started for Dane's friends and the million places I had gone to get dinner.

"You had breakfast with the doctor?"

"Yes."

"And what'd he say when you told him you were gonna stay with me?"

"I just told him I had to see where this thing with you was gonna go."

He nodded. "You didn't tell him we were dating?"

"Is that what we're doing?"

"I dunno."

"We're just sort of hanging out right?"

"We're doin' more than that."

"Are we?"

We shared a long look before I smiled wide.

"J—"

"I packed a bag like you asked. Tomorrow morning I'll split so you can have some time to yourself but for now let's just say we—"

He reached across the table and put a hand over mine. "Stop talking."

I grinned at him. "Okay."

After a few minutes he said my name and when I looked up he was leaning his chin on his hand.

"What?"

"I can't let you go home."

I stared into his smoky blue eyes. "Oh no?"

"No."

"Eat your salad," I ordered him.

"Yes baby."

When I got up to do the dishes he helped me clear the table. He dried everything I washed and put the dishes away. While I was replacing the vase full of wildflowers on his dining table he walked back in from taking out the garbage. He was on the phone and as far as I could tell he was agreeing to something.

"So?" I asked as soon as he hung up.

"I completely forgot that tonight is Dom's birthday. Everyone is at his place already."

"Oh." I nodded. "Then you should go."

"You gotta come with me."

My stomach rolled over. "No."

"Yes."

"It's not a good idea."

"Yes it is."

"No it's really not."

"J—"

"Sam—"

“Get your coat J we’re leaving now.”

“Maybe you should—”

“I can carry you out if you like.”

And from the furrowed brows I got I realized he was serious. Funny that I wanted to meet his friends but now I was terrified. Reality was always different than you imagined.

* * * *

I STOOD ON THE sidewalk looking at the house a minute before I turned and looked at Sam.

What?”

“Are you kidding?”

“What?”

“This is your friend’s house?” I was stunned.

“Yeah I know it looks fancy right?”

Fancy was an understatement.

“Dom’s wife passed like I told ya and her folks helped him buy it. I guess it was something she had asked them to do in the letter she left, take care of him and stuff. His wife wanted him to have a home. Her folks still help him out from time to time, send him money, gifts, and it makes sense ya know? I mean if you think about it he’s all they’ve really got left of their daughter.”

His logic seemed flawed. “Her parents must be loaded Sam.”

“Not really but between what they kicked in and some smart investments that Dom made there was enough for the house.”

He had no idea what he was talking about. He didn’t know what houses cost, I did. There was no way any good investing and money kicked in from well-meaning in-laws yielded a house like the one I was walking into. From stairs that led up to a now dormant garden, to the glass front door, the huge bay window that faced the street, the sunken living room, the enormous rooms, the full bar, the deck in back, it was a showpiece and not one that a man on a detective salary could afford. I had snooped and looked at Sam’s pay stubs and I knew that he and Dominic Kairov were both detectives at the same grade. I had to wonder in what ways Dominic was feathering his nest that the others were not but I was not comfortable asking Sam for those answers. What he wanted to share about his partner I was more than happy to hear but I got the feeling that probing was out of the question.

Dominic, or Dom, Kairov had been with Sam since their police academy days. They were assigned to the same precinct after graduation and had been through times good and bad. Good being when they had both made Detective at thirty-one and bad when Dominic's wife had committed suicide two years ago. Her parents, Sam had confided to me, had blamed him not for the act itself but for the depression that drove her to it. Between his long absences, infidelity and emotional distance he had been the opposite of a model husband so I was surprised to hear that they had sprung for half of a million dollar mortgage. It made no sense and Sam should have noticed but no one, including Sam, questioned how Dominic was living because his wife was dead. If he said her family had helped him out, given him gifts, then it must have been true. I knew Sam believed Dominic; the man was after all his partner, brother and friend.

As I followed Sam through the house he was stopped over and over by people wanting to talk to him. He did a lot of hand shaking, hugging men and kissing women. I was introduced as simply Jory but he kept me close, his hand on the back of my neck as he steered me in front of him through the house. On the back deck, sitting by the fireplace were Sam's closest friends, the detectives he worked with day in and day out. Dominic was the first to his feet, pulling Sam close for the guy clench before shoving him away.

"Oh you brought the witness." He smiled at me before turning to Sam. "That's what the safe house is for buddy," he teased his friend. "Did you miss the memo?"

Sam smirked at him as he groaned that he needed a drink.

Dominic nodded, draped an arm around his shoulders and led him away. He called back over his shoulder that I could follow them to the bar. I was not asked if I wanted anything because I was not, relatively speaking, Sam's date. I could fend for myself like any of the other guys. I watched them go before turning around to survey the room. I knew no one, I had not been invited and I had just been abandoned. It was shaping up to be a great night.

I wandered around looking at the expensive artwork, Baccarat crystal goblets on the set table in the dining room and the lavish furnishings. There were rugs that cost more than my rent and again I wondered how Dominic Kairov managed it. As I sat down on the stairs beside some women lounging in a small area of the living room, I overheard Sam's name.

"So who's that girl with Sam and Dom?" one of them asked.

Another snickered. "That's the girl Dominic set Sam up with on the double-date remember?"

"Oh that's right," first girl said. "She was nice. Her name's Maggie something."

"Yeah-yeah Maggie, that's right. Maggie Dixon."

"So our Sam's been on two dates with her?" First girl arched one perfectly waxed brow. "Well that's one more than usual."

“She’s cute,” another girl chimed in. “What’s she do?”

“I think she teaches school. Third or fourth grade I think.”

“Awww, a school teacher for Sammy? How cute is that?”

“Look at them, they’re adorable together.”

Margaret Dixon was a curvy, petite brunette with deep dimples and big brown eyes. She had a great laugh, warm demeanour and was, by all accounts, very likable. She was one of those touchy-feely people so she basically had her hands all over Sam but it was charming instead of flirty or bold. Her hair curled down to the middle of her back, she actually had that peaches and cream complexion you always heard about but never saw in real life and the hourglass figure was being well served by the tight jeans and low-cut wrap shirt. She was the kind of girl men lined up for. She was Sam’s type, the girls assured one another and watching them together it was hard not to concede.

He seemed at ease with Maggie. His eyes were soft when he looked at her and when he bent over her to show her how to hold the pool cue; the girls all did the *aww* in harmony. I watched him get her a drink, let her feed him the cherry and then give her the stem he had tied with his tongue. Some comment was made because Maggie flushed a very becoming shade of pink and Sam arched one eyebrow and smiled wickedly. The howls of laughter from the table made everyone look. I was ready to go. I slunk off toward the kitchen to see if there was any bottled water anywhere.

The music got louder as the night wore on but it wasn’t quite as pounding on the second floor. I found a sitting room between two bedrooms that was quiet and filled with back issues of *Architectural Digest*. I found one with a photo spread of Dane from ten years back and had a good laugh over his clothes as well as his hair. I took a picture of it with my phone and sent my boss a text message asking him what had been going on with him in the nineties. When my phone rang I expected it.

“Don’t you have anything better to do than annoy me?” he asked irritably.

“No.”

“Why not?”

I explained about what I was doing and where I was and I was instantly sorry. He was really not pleased with my decision to spend time with Sam and wondered how I could be sitting in someone’s house pretending to be something I wasn’t. I told him it was my life and he promptly corrected me. Since I spent more hours with him, at work, than anywhere else, it was technically his life and as such he had a say in where and with whom I spent the remainder of my time.

“I just want to be with him,” I defended myself.

“Great. Are you?”

There was no argument for that.

“So is this detective’s home nice?” He was changing the subject. It was really decent of him.

“Yeah,”

“Yes.”

“Yes,” I repeated, rolling my eyes. “It’s actually a little too nice.”

“Explain that.”

“I think this might be one of Peter Armand’s designs.”

He snorted. “I very much doubt that someone your detective knows is living in an Armand house.”

“Exactly.”

“Go out front and take a picture and I’ll be able to tell you.”

“Okay. Call me back.”

“I will.” He yawned and hung up.

I went downstairs and out through the front door. When I was across the street I lifted my phone to take a picture. I heard the squeal of tires as soon as I finished sending the shot to Dane.

There were two black Hummers and they spilled out people into the street. I walked backwards as I watched the men take the stairs, kick open the front door and pour inside. The screams were audible all the way out to the street as the music abruptly cut off. I heard firecrackers going off inside along with the lightning show. I sunk down behind the Lexus beside me and called 911.

I told the operator that I was at the home of a police detective and I was clear and concise as I gave the address and read her off both license plates from each Hummer. They had left no one in either car so I snuck up to the closest one and grabbed the keys. Almost to the second, I heard someone scream Dominic’s name. No mistake about who they were there to see. At least I was outside where I could help.

All I could think about was saving Sam even though I hated him. I hit the horn and when three of the guys appeared at the bay window I waved from the Hummer before I got in. I locked the doors, started the car and was expecting a ferocious burst of speed and got only a slow crawl. Glass exploded around me as the windows were shot out and the car was blasted with bullets. The moving rule applied though and as I picked up speed traveling down the slight hill, I heard the wail of sirens. I managed to turn off the main road as a wall of police cars streaked passed me; I counted ten in all

and continued on taking every side street I could find. Not that anyone was after me but a bullet-ridden car would stand out. And I wondered at myself that I was more mad than scared. Flying lead should have been horrifying but all I kept seeing, the thing that kept popping back into my head, was the way Sam had been looking at Maggie. I wanted him to look at me what way.

I drove to his apartment and grabbed my stuff because I didn't want to come between him and the promise of his happily-ever-after. He obviously found Maggie Dixon charming and he deserved the chance to see where it would go without having to worry about me. She was probably the reason he had insisted on going to Dominic's party in the first place. Sam was not the type to do anything he didn't want to, so going must have had more to do with her presence than anything else. Lost in my thoughts, when I finally looked at my phone I realized I had twenty missed calls. I hadn't even heard the insistent ringing.

"Jory?" he said quickly, answering on the first ring. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay." I shivered, but not from cold. The Hummer had heated seats. "Are you okay? You didn't get hurt did you?"

"No I didn't get hurt! Jesus Christ what the hell were you doing with that fuckin' stunt?"

"It got them out of the house didn't it?"

"Jory! Where the hell are you?"

"I have no idea," I said, leaning forward, trying to read a street sign. "But I think I'm near Midway."

"Jory goddamn it! Pull the fuck over and wait for me. I—"

"You know Sam it's not a good idea. I went by your place and got my stuff. I—"

"You what?"

"I think I made a mistake and we both know you think you did."

"I have no idea what you're—"

"Watching you flirt with Maggie Dixon all night doesn't top my list of fun things to do."

"Jory! God nobody makes me as crazy as you! I have no idea how you've lived this long!"

I grunted, waving at the other car in the intersection that I had nearly run into. I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing which was dangerous when you were piloting the Enterprise. I leaned out the window to yell over to them. "Sorry big car—didn't see ya! My bad."

“Jory!”

Shit. Sam. I moved the phone back to where I could talk into it. “So I think maybe I should just let you get on with your life and—”

“Jory—Jory— New voice, calmer, voice, a little deeper. “Jory.”

“Yes?”

“Jory this is Dominic. Where are you buddy?”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Where are you?”

“Was anybody hurt?”

“Jory you—”

“I called the police for you.”

“I know you did buddy and I—we all appreciate it but—”

“You’re sure you’re okay?”

“Jory...buddy...you’re in shock aren’t ya?”

“What? Why?”

He sighed deeply. “Jory you saved all our lives. God knows what would’ve happened if you hadn’t done what you did. But you got them away from everybody and...and shit—first you called for back-up like a fuckin’ pro and got every single one of those fuckers arrested. That was amazing and you—you need to let Sammy and me come get you so we can get you back to his place.”

“I don’t think that’s gonna work.”

“Why not?”

“It just won’t.”

“Well then we’ll put you in a safe house where—”

“Maybe I should go away huh?”

“No-no-no Jory just—”

"I don't mean I wouldn't testify. I would make sure I—oh shit hold on," I told him, clicking over to talk to Dane. "Hey."

"That is an Armand house. How in the world does someone on a policeman's sal—"

"I can't talk now."

"Why not?"

"I'm kind of in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"You'd never believe me."

"Oh I'm sure I would believe you. Are you still at the detective's friend's house?"

"No."

"Then where are you?"

"I'm not exactly sure." I stalled him.

"You're stalling. Tell me."

So I explained about the Hummer and the bullets in it and how I was driving it around. When I finished there was only silence on his end. "Dane?"

"Are you kidding?"

"No."

He cleared his throat. "I'm at the Valentine Lounge downtown. I want you here in twenty minutes."

"No."

"No?"

"Boss—"

"Dane," he corrected me.

"Oh yeah," I nodded to myself. "Sorry."

“Jory I want you here.”

“But what am I gonna do with the Hummer?”

“Park it somewhere.” He took a breath. “Anywhere.”

“You should’ve seen the guns and stuff. It was mad scary.”

“Was it?” he said flatly. “Mad scary.”

“Yeah.” I sighed because I was crashing, my adrenaline just draining from my body and his voice on the other end of the line sounded like home for some reason. I was delirious.

“Listen Jory,” he said, letting out a deep breath. “I need to talk to you about something so I need you to come see me. Don’t make me wait.”

I turned my phone all the way off so Sam couldn’t find me, and drove to see Dane. I wondered vaguely when my life was going to even out. Anytime would be good.

* * * *

I DITCHED THE HUMMER in a vacant lot and my clothes and things at the train terminal; I used three lockers, before I went to meet Dane at the Valentine Lounge. It was a very chic cocktail lounge that played mostly Bossa Nova, very martini with olive kind of place. I had been once before on a date with Rafael Soto. He liked to dress me up and take me out, show me off and then drive me home. After the third date where he wouldn’t even touch me because he didn’t want me to wrinkle, I told him to get lost. What I had found charming and slow moving had actually been run-of-the-mill crazy. But I knew where the lounge was because of it, so everything did in fact always happen for a reason. Sometimes it took a long time to figure out the why.

Dane was sitting almost in the middle of the place on a couch surrounded by people. They were his friends, but there were two women I didn’t know on either side of him. When he saw me, he made the gesture with his hand for me to hurry and I moved as fast as I could. I felt stupid standing there with my hands shoved down in the pockets of my jeans, looking kind of out of it I was sure. He stood and grabbed a handful of the front of my shirt and tugged me forward into his arms. I went stiff because he never hugged me, but the hand in my hair holding me against him, the other rubbing circles on my back was too much. I shivered hard and wrapped my arms around his waist. He gave me a last hard squeeze and pushed me out to look me over.

“Dane?” One of the women asked. “Who’s—”

“That’s his brother Jory,” Jude offered and I turned to look at him.

He smiled and nodded and I looked up into Dane’s eyes.

“This is what we’re going to talk about,” he said gruffly; hand on the back of my neck as he led me a few feet away from the others. When he turned, both hands went to my shoulders. “I was going to have a long talk with you in the office but for one, you might not make it to Monday at the rate you’re going so I have to step in now and two, there’s no formality between us anymore so I might as well tell you my plan here at the Valentine Lounge.”

I was silent, waiting.

“Jory, we’re going to change your last name from Keyes to Harcourt, I’m going to make you the beneficiary of my estate and you’re going to have access to a lot of things you don’t have now.”

I was silent and he just stared into my eyes. “What?” I said finally.

“I’m not adopting you, I’m not taking care of you...you still have to work and make your own way and everything else but you don’t need the last name Keyes and you don’t need to say no to me.”

“I can’t live with you or off of you or—”

“Who’s asking you to? I wouldn’t live with you on a bet,” he snapped at me. “You’d be dead in a week for real because I’d throw you off the balcony of my place.”

“But—”

“And by the way you’re fired.”

I was stunned as I stared up at him.

“Your eyes are huge,” he chuckled.

“You can’t fire me.”

“Oh no?”

“But—”

“Just...be still.”

I went silent and waited.

He took a deep breath. “You’ve worked for me for five years and in that time you’ve gone from my assistant to my friend, to the person I imagine in my life always. And I can say all that because you being gay has nothing whatsoever to do with me. I want to take care of you but being in bed with you is not my idea of fun. You’re simply the brother I never had and the one I want to keep. And for that reason, I can’t work with you. I got you an interview Monday morning at nine, at Barrington

with David O'Shea, for a position in their graphic design department. Its very entry level and you're going to make less than you do now, so if you run short you come hit me up for a loan that you'll have to pay back. That's what family does. You can keep your AMEX too. It's got your name on it already."

"Dane I—"

"That's what got me thinking about all this. That day we went to Macy's and I was getting my card out and you paid with yours. I thought he's got a credit card that I pay for with his name on it. And I know it's just for work but still it's like we're attached somehow." He sighed and stared into my eyes. "I thought this is how I want it to be. I don't just want to run your life at work I want a say in it all the time. And even as a friend I don't have enough power...so I started to think and this is what I came up with. You're going to be my brother."

"You can't just—"

"I spoke to my lawyer," he nodded. "I can do it all. Tomorrow morning you sign papers with me at brunch, which we'll have together with my lawyer, and you'll go from Jory Keyes to Jory Harcourt. You need to get a new Driver's License and a new Social Security card but other than that it's done. Jory Keyes will cease and Jory Harcourt will begin."

"I don't wanna be a—"

"Yes you do—"

"I don't mean I don't wanna be a Harcourt, I don't wanna be a graphic—"

"Yes you do."

"No I don't!"

"Yes...you do. I know you do. I watch you. And being my assistant is not fulfilling. You need a career not a job and this way you get to keep me and find the job of your dreams. We both know the only reason you haven't left is because you were worried about losing me. Worry solved."

"Could you be any more conceited?"

"How so?"

"You think the only reason I stay is to be close to you?"

"Yes. I know it is. You think if you leave I'll disappear from your life."

I just looked at him.

“I won’t.”

I cleared my throat. “Who are you going to get to be your assistant?”

“I hired a wonderful woman this morning. She’s older than me and seems very warm and extremely professional. I liked her the minute I met her.”

I looked at him. “You replaced me.”

“I hired a new assistant, I’m keeping you.”

I tried to wrap my brain around everything he’d just said.

“For starters that place you live...from now on you make the payments to yourself. You’re buying it from me. Once you own it, you can sell it or do whatever.”

It was hard. I wasn’t a charity case. “I don’t deserve all this.”

“You deserve every bit of it,” he said solemnly. “And who’s to say what a person deserves or doesn’t. We fit together and I want you to be my family. It doesn’t have to be a big deal. We’re still us, you’re still you—you just have me now to look out for you.”

I scowled at him. “You wanna run my life.”

“I thought that’s what I’ve been saying.”

My mind was racing. “How can you just give me your name?”

“I was adopted and got my name. My parents are gone, you know that, and there was only my father, he had no brothers or sisters and his parents both passed before I was even born. There is no other Harcourt that I’m related to, so now there’s just going to be me...and now you. We’ll make our own history.”

I stared up into the grey eyes I knew so well. Funny that earlier I was thinking he was home. Turned out he really was.

“And I will get married one of these days and you’ll stand up there with me. After I have children you’ll be an uncle and come every Thanksgiving and Christmas and have dinner with your family on Sunday nights. You’ll bring your partner along with you and someday, I’m sure...and kids of your own.”

The air had been sucked from the room and I felt my heart pounding in my chest.

“This is what I want.” He smiled down at me, hand on the side of my neck. “Okay?”

I couldn't speak.

He let out a quick breath. "This one time," he whispered hoarsely and I saw the muscles in his jaw working as he pressed his lips together. "I want you to be my brother. I—you know. I want you to stay. Just agree."

All at once I understood and the simplicity of it was staggering. He loved me. He couldn't say it because the words were too much, they would weigh too much between us, but I saw it there in the steady gaze, felt it in the warmth of the hand on my cheek, and heard it in the way he was holding his breath. Waiting for me. He would wait forever if I asked. I nodded because I couldn't speak.

His arm slipped around my neck as he drew me close, hugging me tight, his chin resting on the top of my head as he thanked me.

"I should thank you," I croaked out.

"No," he said, shoving me away. "Let's go."

"Where are we—"

"I'm taking you home to my place. I don't trust you to be safe anywhere else."

"But you don't hafta leave all your—"

"Where are all your things?"

I explained about the train terminal.

Hand on the back of my neck. "Let's go and get your stuff. You're crashing hard, you're barely standing."

"That's not..." I began even as I almost tripped over my own feet. "Shit."

He chuckled as he steered me back to the others. When he announced that he had to leave—family emergency the delight in his tone was not to be missed. His friend Jude smiled at me and I was congratulated on a choice well made.

* * * *

DANE LIVED IN A very exclusive building, downtown close to the Water Tower. There was a security guard that sat behind the desk when you came in and another who hung out by the elevators. They were medium sized guys, really nice, nothing menacing about them, which was somehow spookier than if they had been big and scary. You got the idea that they could become menacing very quickly. The fact that they were both packing didn't change the image. If you tried to

hurt someone in Dane's building you could be shot. It had to be comforting for the residents even if it gave visitors the willies. That was probably the whole point.

Inside Dane's apartment were two floors. The bottom was a giant room where the living room, dining room, and kitchen all sort of blended together. The steel staircase rose from the first floor to the second and his office, bedroom and bathroom, two guest bedrooms and one bathroom were there. He had a sunroom that led out onto the balcony that faced Lake Michigan where the pool and sauna was. On the first floor was another balcony that looked out in the other direction toward the city. It was a dazzling place to live, even more exciting that he could simply come down in his elevator and be downtown where all the night life and shopping was. I had always loved it and got really excited when he went out of town and I got to house sit. As I stood in the living room looking out at the balcony he walked by and passed me a set of keys and the card for the elevator.

"I have a set of keys for your place," he assured me, yawning as he climbed the stairs to the second floor. "I'm going to make up the other bedroom for you. Just give me a minute."

He was freaking me out by acting like everything was normal. And to him it probably was. Because my new status was his decision, he had been given the time to work through it in his mind. I was the one who had woken up in the Twilight Zone. When my phone rang I answered it without even checking the number.

"Jory."

"Hey." I sighed. "You all right Sam?"

"Tell me where you are."

I flopped down onto the leather couch. "I'm safe don't worry."

"How do I not worry? I—"

"Sam," I said softly. "Have you noticed that we catch a break and then split apart again?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I mean we have these moments of bliss followed by total shit." I was weary and I could hear it in my voice. "It's exhausting isn't it?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm not trying to say anything I'm telling you straight up. You are not ready for me."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I saw you with that girl Sam. I saw how you were looking at her. You can't lie now and tell me

you weren't interested in her. I watched you. Maggie Dixon interests you."

"So what?"

There was no denial only the defensive retort. I hit a nerve. "So go with it—see where it leads."

"You think I need your permission you cocky piece of shit?"

"I think what you said that night in the car was all true. You want what your parents have but you wanna be in bed with me. You can't have both."

"You don't get to say what I can or cannot have."

"I know but we keep doin' this and the outcome never changes. We shatter at the first hint of trouble."

"We don't shatter, you run. You always run."

"I don't fit in your life Sam. You left me tonight at the party because it would've looked weird if you kept me with you. Maggie fits perfect I don't."

"You don't know anything."

"Deny that you abandoned me."

"Jory it was Dom's birthday, it was about him not you."

"So wanting you with me or wanting you to include me that was just selfish on my part."

"Why couldn't you have mingled with my friends?"

"Why couldn't you have kept me with you?"

"I'm supposed to do what, hold your hand all night?"

"I didn't expect that...I just expected to be included."

"You are incapable of thinking about anyone else but yourself."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah that's right."

We were talking in circles. I thought he was wrong, he thought I was wrong, there was no middle ground, no understanding that we were going to reach.

“Are you going to tell Dom about me Sam?”

“You said you’d wait for me to—”

“C’mon be honest, you can’t and you know it. Your life doesn’t work with a partner it only works with a wife. Why fight it?” I waited only seconds for a response. “Your folks are gonna love Maggie.”

“You know Jory it’s funny that you think you of all people can know what’s good for me. You can’t even take care of yourself but you think you know what’s best for me.”

“Deny any of it.”

“I think maybe it’s a good thing that you go. You obviously know nothing about sticking it out through the hard times. You run at the first sign of trouble. You’re a quitter and you should know that about yourself.”

“Only if there really is no way to win.” I sighed deeply. “You can’t fool yourself into thinking things are gonna work out when the facts are right in front of you.”

“You’re really stupid.”

“Okay.”

“It’s gonna be done this time you know? I can’t keep running after you.”

“Sure,” I said as my eyes filled. “I know.”

“And so you even care?”

I cared more than I could even express. I had never, ever been crazier about anyone else. Sam Kage was the man if my dreams, it was too bad that being with him always became a nightmare.

“Take care,” he said and hung up.

I fell sideways onto the couch. I would mourn him and our affair over breakfast; I was just too tired at that moment. I couldn’t keep my eyes open. I didn’t remember going to bed.

CHAPTER FOUR

I HIT THE BUTTON to speak, but before I could even say who I was the buzzer on the door went off and I went through it to the lobby.

“Jory!” she squealed loudly.

I lifted my eyes and there four flights up was my partner Dylan Greer waving at me like crazy.

“Hurry up I want you to meet everybody!”

I climbed the stairs as fast as I could, unwrapping my scarf as I moved. When I hit her floor, she ran from her door to reach me and I caught her when she leaped at me and carried her to her door, her arms and legs wrapped around me.

“You came.” She smiled into my eyes, smoothing her fingers over my eyebrows.

“I said I would.”

“I know.” She sighed as I carried her through the open door, depositing her in the hallway of her apartment. “But I’ve invited you a million times before.”

“And this time I could actually make it,” I assured her.

She nodded. “Gimme your coat. What do you want to drink?”

“What’ve you got?” I asked as I passed her first my coat and then the wine I had brought her.

“Oh thank you sir.” She smiled at me, taking my hand, tugging me into the living room. “How ‘bout a very strong margarita?”

“Okay.” I grinned at her, brushing the hair out her eyes. “I love your face.”

I watched her tremble under my hand, as always a grateful recipient of my attention. She wore her adoration of me on her sleeve where I showed off mine for her. “Well I like yours a little bit too ya know?”

We shared a long look before there was throat clearing close by. We both turned to the man smiling at us.

“You’ve gotta be Jory.” His smile widened as he extended his hand. “I’m Chris, her husband.”

I took the hand and returned the smile. “It’s great to finally meet you.”

“And you,” he nodded, reaching out to squeeze my shoulder. “She talks about you every day.”

“Sorry,” I said, shooting her a look.

“What?” Her dark scowl was adorable.

“No,” he chuckled. “It’s good really. She loves working with you.”

I wrapped my arms around her neck and pressed against her back. “Well it goes both ways.”

They were listening to oldies and when a new song started she drew me away from her husband to the area behind the couch. I took her into my arms and she put her head on my shoulder and leaned. As I moved, I heard her sigh, and she melted against me. When the song ended and I dipped her low, the room erupted in applause.

My head snapped up and I realized there were seven other people there besides us.

“Everybody,” she chuckled as she looked at all of them upside down. “This is my partner Jory.”

I smiled and she giggled. When I looked down at her she was staring up into my face. “Let me up so you can meet my friends.”

As soon as I set her on her feet, she grabbed the front of my sweater and pulled me around to the centre of the group next to the coffee table. There was a board game set-up. I didn’t groan out loud which I was very proud of.

Her friends were very nice and when I was asked what it was like to have Dylan Greer as a partner, I leaned on her and said that from the moment we were introduced it had been heaven. When she turned to look at me, I smiled wide. Her hand was on my cheek and I heard the laughter around us.

My interview with first David O’Shea and then his boss Philip Torres at Barrington had gone way better than good. He needed a new graphic designer but he needed one that could work with a partner to develop branding for new clients. We had to create logos, develop artwork and create print material. I was assigned to the production department after I was hired, starting at the bottom of the barrel with someone from concept design. We worked together after sitting in on a client meeting and came up with a something iconic for them to look at. It was usually a group setting where the client was introduced to everyone. There were four teams that did this part of the PR process at Barrington and we were one of them. When I had been walked through the department on the following Tuesday after I’d been hired, it was then that I had caught my first glimpse of Dylan Greer.

She was sitting at her desk alone, and everyone else in the production room was clustered around another desk talking to one another. Miguel Ortiz who had been my tour guide led me over to her desk. He knocked on it to get her attention, as she was face down on the drafting table. She rolled her head instead of sitting up and his exasperated sigh was not to be missed.

“Greer this is Harcourt,” he grumbled at her. “You’re new partner. Try not to run this one off.”

And with that he squeezed my shoulder and left. He had given me the good luck speech on the way down. Apparently Dylan was extremely gifted, extremely moody and sometimes violent. Her last partner had gotten a stapler launched at his head. He didn’t quit however until she laughed at him long and hard and loud in the middle of a client meeting. The only reason she was still there and not instantly fired was that the client had thought the idea just as ridiculous as her. When she had walked her own sketches up to the table and explained her intent, the client had agreed to the concept on the spot. She was, after all, brilliant but manic. I liked her instantly.

As she lifted her head up off the table and looked into my eyes I arched a brow for her. The smile was adorable. Her tiny little heart shaped mouth and huge black eyes made her look like a character from a graphic novel—some lovely piece of Japanese manga. The porcelain skin and jet-black midnight blue highlighted hair added to the impression.

“You don’t look like a Greer,” I said to her.

“Do I look like an Okamoto?” she asked crisply.

“Yes.”

“You don’t look like a Harcourt,” she volleyed back. “It’s kinda snooty.”

I shrugged. No one new that I met would ever know I had ever been anything but a Harcourt. Jory Keyes was dead and he wasn’t coming back even for an explanation. “Well I’m kind of stuck up myself. You know the type, conceited asshole.”

She eyed me hard. “You look okay to me.”

I smiled wide. “You look okay to me too.”

She offered me her hand. “Call me Dy.”

I leaned in and hugged her tight. “Call me J.”

Her arms wrapped instantly around me and she put her head down on my shoulder. We went and hid in the supply closet so no one would see her cry. She didn’t want to be a bitch but she liked everything done a certain way, the right way, and so the whole department hated her for insisting on quality instead of quantity. I assured her I didn’t, couldn’t ever hate her and we went from there. By the time we got back to her desk, we were a team and a pretty formidable one as the weeks progressed.

We clicked in some invisible way that taught me to trust my instincts and her to explore her limits. She didn’t have to worry about me keeping up with her or being jealous of her or stabbing her in the back—her only concern was the work. And I, who was unsure if I could even do the job, came

to the realization that I had the ability, as she nurtured my talent from potential to possibility to fruition.

Our ideas bounced off each other and sometimes the walls. She drew on any surface that was handy and when the others complained, Gloria Todd the head of our department moved us off the main floor and into a tiny cubbyhole of a corner office. Dylan papered one side of the room tearing it down and taping it back up every morning. Where she was fevered and driven and frantic I was calm and soothing and still. She said I was like water to her flame but instead of drowning her I just kept her even. We fit like puzzle pieces and were both noticed and complimented. It didn't even bother me that Dane had been right. I liked my new job, my new life. I liked being Jory Harcourt.

Dylan had been pressuring me for two months to meet her husband and she wanted to meet the *somebody special* in my life. Since there was no one as I was taking a long hiatus from dating, I asked her if my brother would suffice. She was happier with that and so had arranged a small dinner party with two other couples, her best friends that she wanted me to meet, her husband and one of his co-workers that she was crazy about. I knew before the words were out of her mouth that she was playing matchmaker but she was my friend and wanted what was best for me, so I agreed to meet Raymond Alvarez, along with everyone else, at her house on Saturday night.

At a quarter to nine neither Dane nor Ray was there and Dylan, true to form, went ahead and served dinner. She had no patience whatsoever and waiting to serve food was not where she was going to start. We ate from a buffet line on her counter and sat around in the living room. When the doorbell chimed after we all had gotten settled, Chris rose to get it, gentle hand on his wife's knee to keep her seated. I was not surprised that it was Dane. Funny to see him there in his Armani tuxedo looking like he had literally stepped off the cover of *GQ*. He was stunning.

"Oh my goodness," Dylan breathed out, her eyes running over the man slowly, up and down finally settling on his face, on his pale grey eyes under perfectly shaped thick black brows. "Are you Dane?"

"I am." He smiled at her, passing her the bottle of Dom Perignon. "I'm sorry to be late, I forgot I had to put in an appearance at a charity function this evening, but I didn't want you to think for a moment that meeting Jory's partner wasn't of paramount importance to me. So I brought you a gift and I'm hoping that perhaps we may have dinner with you and your husband next week sometime if that would work."

She could only nod. He was giving her his full attention and it was short-circuiting her brain. "That would work. That would be great."

"Excellent." He smiled at her before he offered Chris his hand. "Pleasure to meet you."

He was spellbound as well. "And you," he said as he shook Dane's hand.

I watched Dane meet the others, shake their hands, smile until the room was silent, watching, waiting on him. I got up and he stepped in front of me, hand on my shoulder.

“How are you?”

I smiled up at him. “I’m good. Are we still on for brunch tomorrow?” It had become our Sunday morning ritual after the first time meeting with the lawyer.

“Sure, let’s hit the gym first, I have to beat Jude at racquetball this week or I owe him like a car or something, and even though annihilating you isn’t much practice, at least it gets my blood moving.”

I chuckled. “Funny. You’re frickin’ hilarious.”

He grinned before patting my cheek gently, turning to go. “Don’t forget we’ve got to go through applications sometime tomorrow. I’ve got to start interviewing next week.”

“How many assistants is that in the two months that I’ve been gone?”

He smirked at me. “Just shut- up.”

“Carina then Debbie and last Friday you fired Shannon right?” I teased him.

“Keep it up.”

I nodded, looking down before my eyes were suddenly back on his. “Say it.”

“What?”

I squinted at him. “C’mon just say it.”

He gave me a long look before he suddenly sighed. “Fine you’re right. You were the best assistant I ever had. You took care of me at work, at home, you were phenomenal. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“Yes.”

“You know you’re amazing, I should tell you more often.”

It was all I needed to hear.

“Here,” he said as he passed me something.

When I looked at what was in my hand I realized I was looking at the royal blue leather billfold that I had wanted when we went to Vale for Christmas. I had decided it was too expensive. I didn’t actually *need* a new wallet. My head snapped up and he smiled.

“Your wallet is a travesty,” he grinned wickedly. “Use that instead.”

“Thank you.” I smiled back. “I’ve been obsessing about this wishing I’d just gotten it.” I did that a lot and always had to judge a purchase not made on the amount of thought I would put into it afterwards. Sometimes I was just out for some retail therapy but other times I really wanted something and when I didn’t end up getting it afterwards it nagged at me like dripping water in the shower.

“I know you,” he said before giving me a final pat on the cheek. The second the door closed behind him Dylan yelled my name.

“Jory!”

I turned to face her.

“Dane Harcourt is your brother? The architect?”

“Yeah.” I smiled because when he was my boss I was proud to claim him but now that we were family, I practically glowed when anyone mentioned that we were related. Dane had given me his name and made me his brother when he had decided that he didn’t just want to run my work life but my whole life. He was born to be a big brother and I was so glad he had chosen to be mine.

“Holy shit,” Chris breathed out and everyone laughed at him. “Jory buddy you could’ve warned me. I’m a huge fan of his work.”

I shrugged. “Sorry.”

“So where did you guys go for Christmas?” Dylan asked me, carrying the champagne to her refrigerator. “I knew you went out of town but you never said where.”

“We went to Vale,” I told her. “It was nice. He skied and I shopped and we ate and drank and it was awesome. Next year we’re going someplace warm like maybe Maui or Cancun.”

“There’s only you guys?” she asked me. “Your folks are gone?”

I nodded. “Only us.”

“You didn’t want to be an architect Jory?” Chris asked me.

I shook my head. “Nah. He’s the genius I just ride.”

“You’re a genius too,” Dylan chimed in, cupping my face in her hands. “I promise you.”

I leaned in to kiss her nose.

“But I could kill you for letting that man walk into my house. My God what he must think.”

“He thought it was charming believe me.”

“He’s incredible,” she breathed out, her eyes narrowing as she looked at me. “And you two look nothing alike apart from the fact that you’re both gorgeous.”

I patted her cheek. “He and I are in different leagues babe.”

“Jory come over here and dish,” one of the women called me from the couch. “Sit here by me.”

Fun to talk about Dane and realize they were all amazed. I would have been the same way. It wasn’t often that a man like that walked into your living room.

By eleven it was clear Ray had blown the evening off so I left to meet Evan at the club. Before I could go inside though my phone rang.

“Jory?”

“Hey Nick.” I smiled into the phone. “How ya been?”

“Okay.”

I stepped out of the way of some people, so I was standing in front of the club. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t return your calls around Christmas but—”

“I just didn’t want you to think I was breaking my promise. I told you I would meet your family but you never called me back?”

“Yeah I know and I’m sorry. I had just met somebody and it seemed like it was going to be serious and so I basically blew you off. It was a real shitty thing to do.”

I laughed softly. “Everybody blows off their friends for a lover Nicky don’t beat yourself up. Who cares—we’re friends—we’re good. Tell me what happened?”

“He told me after New Year’s that he didn’t want to break up with me over the holidays but that it was over before Christmas. He said I was shitty in bed and that I should think about taking lessons from someone. It’s getting to be the story of my life J.”

I winced. “I never said you were shitty in bed I said we—emphasis on the word we—had no chemistry. That has as much to do with me as you.”

“No it doesn’t because we both know you’re great in bed.”

I was silent because I wasn’t sure yet whether he was trying to be offensive or not.

“I bet all the guys you’ve been in bed with tell you all the time how hot you are and how good and—”

“Bye Nick,” I said before I clicked off my phone and headed into the club.

I had a good time hanging out with Evan but took home numbers instead of guys. He asked me as I was leaving if I was turning into a monk.

On my way home I ducked through an alley and when I hit the sidewalk I remembered I needed tea. The bodega three corners from me sold a smoky flavoured mix I loved, so I went to see if the old man was working. If the husband was working it would still be open, if it was his son’s night he’d closed up to hit the clubs. As I moved up the street I checked both sides as was my new habit and there on the other side coming out of a diner was Sam. He was holding hands with Maggie Dixon. Dominic, another guy and two women were with them. I slowed but didn’t stop, wanting to hide, but moving instead.

The last time I had seen him was when I appeared in front of the Grand Jury. He had ignored me in court and had walked away without speaking after my turn on the stand. I had given my testimony and two others had given theirs and after that Brian had decided to take a plea. His choice was to become a witness against his boss and they had put him into protective custody. They didn’t need me anymore and it was understood that the threats on my life would cease. The assistant DA had called to tell me that I was released from any further service. I could be a private citizen again. Nothing had happened for the two months I had been at my new job and I had never once heard from Sam.

I had thought of calling him at Christmas but it seemed futile and then Dane had eclipsed anything else with his plans and the travel and our bonding. I had wanted to call him on New Year’s and then to tell him it was my birthday and alert him to the fact that I had turned twenty-three. I had no idea why that had seemed important at the time. But the days came and went with growing absences and stacking silence. Too much time had passed with neither of us reaching for the other. On the street, walking by him like a stranger, I felt the finality of it and the enormity of the chasm between us. Best to let sleeping dogs lie so I did. I shoved my gloved hands deep into my pockets as I went by, tucking my chin to my chest, taking the deep breath of cold January air.

The store was open, and I got the wave from the old man as I went to the back where the tins his wife put her private tea leaves in were. My phone rang and I read Nick’s number on the display.

“Do I wanna talk to you?” I asked him irritably.

“Sorry-sorry I’m sorry. I’m just feeling really shitty and I took it out on you because I could. I’m sorry.”

I grunted.

“Please Jory I’m so—”

“Don’t say sorry even one more time.”

“Okay—sorry.”

I growled.

“Shit—I...God Jory I’ve been such a mess. I should’ve called you and...’cause you’re the one I wanted to meet my folks not Ray Alvarez.”

Wait. “What?”

I said that—”

“Ray Alvarez?”

“Yeah, Raymond Alvarez. That’s the guy’s name.”

“Shit.”

“It’s funny you know,” he went on, not really hearing me. “I went to his place tonight and he tried to get rid of me for an hour—said he had somewhere else he had to be. I told him I didn’t care I wanted to fix things with him. And he finally broke down and yelled at me. He told me that we were already broken up and that’s why he had agreed to a date. Somebody at work set him up and he was more interested in meeting some new guy then in talking it out with me.”

“When did he break up with you?”

“Couple weeks ago.”

I nodded. “I see.”

“And he told me it wasn’t even really a break-up since we’d basically just been dating. He never asked me for it to be exclusive or anything, I just assumed ya know?”

“Sure.”

“So I tried one last time tonight...I just wanted to be sure before I completely moved on.”

“You wanted to make sure of what? That he didn’t want you even after he said he didn’t?”

“Yeah.”

“What the fuck for? Have a little pride Nicky. If some guys tells you to bounce, you do.”

“Easy for you to say Jory. Have you ever even been in love?”

“Have you?”

“Yeah with you.”

“And that ended damn fast when this guy Ray stepped into the picture,” I reminded him. “You were very convincing when you said you were crazy about me but it went away.”

“It didn’t end it just—”

“It was infatuation so it died,” I assured him. “You’re in such a big hurry to share your life with someone that you hardly even care who it is.”

“That’s not true.”

“I think it is,” I told him understanding finally that Nick was ready to settle down and the partner wasn’t really all that important. He needed somebody on the front of the Christmas card with him. He wasn’t picky. “You take care Nicky.”

“Jory please don’t—”

“I’ll see ya,” I said as I hung up. I felt sorry for him at the same time I knew that I was no one’s door prize. When my phone rang again I answered before I turned to head back up front.

“Jory honey, Ray just called and—”

I cut Dylan off and told her all about Chris’ co-worker and my doctor. She listened a long time before she let out a deep exhale.

“It’s hilarious right?”

As there was only laughter on the line I got the idea that she agreed with me. I laughed right along with her. The world was actually a teeny tiny place and I was comic relief. I had always suspected as much.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FOLLOWING FRIDAY NIGHT Dylan and I decided to have our happy hour drinks at a new place. It was called Molly's Cool Dive Bar and we were having a good time throwing darts. We had been warned once that we were going to have to stop if more of them didn't start hitting the board. They were flying all over the place, pool tables, and walls, into the drinks of other patrons. It was a bad idea so we quit and just drank Screwdrivers. It was not the kind of place that served a Cosmopolitan or a Mojito. It was either a Screwdriver or a Tom Collins, for the alcohol that wasn't a beer or a shot. Dylan dared me to take a shot of Tequila with her and so of course by the time her husband showed up we were very happy to see him.

"Great," he groaned. "You're both drunk?"

"No," I assured him, shaking my head, trying very hard not to smile. "We're fine. We can go to dinner."

"All evidence to the contrary." He rolled his eyes at me as he pulled his wife to his feet. "Just neither one of you sing all right?"

"I sing well," Dylan informed him solemnly.

"No honey ya really don't," he assured her, grabbing my bicep, tugging me off the barstool, sliding his arm around my neck to steady me before he reached for his wife. "But Jory can't either as we all found out on Wednesday when we were out with Dane."

It had been a fun night. Dylan and I got tipsy on the house wine at Tulio's and over lasagne and Chicken Tetrazzini that was served family style, we sang from Mariah Carey's songbook. Chris had been mortified until he saw Dane's smile. He made us shut up while we ate but on the walk to the car, he encouraged both Dylan and I to let out our inner diva. It was funny and Chris now understood that Dane had an appreciation for the ridiculous and just truly liked me. Whatever I did was okay.

"You know Jory for who Dane Harcourt is—he's a really cool guy."

"I know," I burped.

"Gross," he groaned and shoved me out the front door ahead of he and Dylan.

Dinner Date was a small, intimate little restaurant downtown that served a beer based cheese fondue appetizer and had huge Long Island Iced Tea. I got one and so did Dylan and Chris warned both of us not to spill. When a man appeared at the table we all looked up at him.

"Guys this is Ray Alvarez that blew us off last Saturday."

"That's not fair," he said quickly and my head snapped up because the voice was so deep and

warmed with a very mellifluous accent. "You must be Jory," he smiled down at me, holding out his hand for me to take. "It's good to finally put a face to the name."

I nodded as I shook his hand. "And you."

"I understand we both know Nick Sullivan."

"Yes," I said, realizing that he still had my hand.

He pointed at the booth. "Can I sit?"

"Sure," I told him as he released my hand at the same time sliding into the seat beside me.

He turned to look at me. "So how long've you known Nick?"

"Close to a year."

"Oh so longer than me."

"Yeah but you had the whole relationship deal with him. "

He chuckled and I understood from where Nick's obsession had sprung. If you caught the eye of Ray Alvarez you wanted to keep it. And not because he was so drop dead gorgeous, but his eyes were dark and liquid and the smile had that hint of naughty instead of nice and his voice just resonated inside of you. His hair was almost black, thick and straight, cut short in the back but longer on top. It looked soft and I had the urge to touch it and see.

"We went out a few times," he told me. "It didn't constitute a relationship."

I wasn't listening. "What?"

His smile was wide and under the table his knee bumped mine. "We're talking about Nick."

"Oh yeah."

He leaned his chin in his hand, studied my face, his eyes coming to rest on my mouth. I swallowed hard realizing all of a sudden how long it had been since I'd been to bed with anyone. I felt the blood rush to my groin as he leaned closer to me.

"What are you guys drinking?" he asked, looking at my empty glass, smiling over at Dylan, "because it's huge whatever it is."

"Long Island Iced Tea." She giggled, reaching across the table for his hand.

He squeezed it tight and smiled at her.

"I was mad at you for standing Jory up."

"Dy," I scolded her.

"No it's okay," he told me, the smile there again. "I got stuck explaining things to Nick and I couldn't get out of there. I really wanted to meet you that night and I hope you won't hold it against me."

"Sure," I nodded as Chris got up.

"I gotta move the car guys I'll be right back."

"I need to pee," Dylan announced as I scowled at her. "What?"

"TMI," I reminded her. "Just hey guys I'll be right back is sufficient."

"Oh don't be such a girl," she snapped at me as she scooted out of the booth.

"You guys are cute," Ray told me when I leaned back against the booth.

"I'm crazy about the girl," I said, rolling my head to look at him.

"Jory could I take you to dinner tomorrow?"

"That's fast." I squinted at him.

"I like what I see," he said softly. "And I should feed you before I take you home."

"I'm going home with you?"

"After dinner tomorrow night, yes you are."

"I see."

"I called Nick and he told me all about you. He says you're amazing in bed."

"And you trust him since you told him he was a lousy lay?"

"True-true," he smiled wide. "But just because Nick is bad in bed doesn't mean he doesn't know what good is." He chuckled indulgently. "Besides, you're gorgeous and I bet the rest of you is just as good. Aesthetics can go a long way."

I nodded, shifting away from him, sitting up straight.

"How old are you?"

He hadn't noticed my slow withdraw and that was fine with me. "I'm twenty-three. You?"

"I'm thirty," he nodded, looking me over like I was something he was thinking of buying. "And without breaking the nice mood we've got going here can I ask you a question?"

What mood? "Go ahead." It wasn't his fault he was so conceited. He was hot and I was sure that everyone he'd ever given his attention to had probably treated it like a gift.

He took a quick breath. "We've both been with Nicky and I know he's versatile so..." The inevitable trail off into silence as he searched my face.

"What?"

"Are you versatile too or do you have a preference?"

I had only ever been one way but I was not about to share that information. "Ray I'm really flattered that you want to take me out but unfortunately I'm busy tomorrow."

His smile faded just a bit. "Sunday then."

"How 'bout I call you?"

It took him a second to realize what I was saying. "Are you being serious? Are you blowing me off?"

I shrugged.

He scowled. "Are you drunk?"

"Little bit." I grinned. "But the whole one night stand thing is just not appealing at all."

He stared into my eyes. "You're turning me down."

"Yeah."

"Me?"

I smiled wide. "Yeah."

He stared at me a minute before he got up and walked away. When Dylan and Chris returned to the table I was the only one there.

"Jory where's—"

"Gone," I cut off my friend, smiling at her.

“But—”

“Guys.” I smiled at both of them. “You’re banned from ever trying to set me up again.”

Chris pointed at his wife. “It was her idea.”

I laughed at how quickly he’d ratted her out.

“Jory.” She laughed, reaching for my hand across the table.

“Excuse me.”

My head snapped up and I found myself looking at Sam Kage.

“I need to speak to you right now.”

“Okay.” I tried to breathe, sliding out of the booth, his presence and not the alcohol making me unsteady.

“C’mere,” he almost growled at me.

“Jory,” Dylan said quickly before I could step away from the table. “Who’s this?”

“Oh, um this is Detective Kage. Detective these are my friends Dylan and Chris Greer.”

He nodded, his brows furrowing, the muscles in his jaw flexing hard. “Hello,” he said quickly, his eyes flicking to mine.

“I’ll be right back,” I assured them before I walked directly out the front door to the street. I turned to face him and he was closer than I thought he would be. I took another step back to put more space between us.

He stared at me a long minute before he asked me how I was.

“I’m fine. You?”

He nodded. “I’m good.”

I shoved my hands deep into my pockets. “What are you doing here?”

His own hands were buried in the pockets of his wool trench coat. “We have a problem.”

“We meaning?”

“We meaning the department,” he clarified.

“Okay.”

“You know that night you saw Brian Minor kill that guy.”

“Of course.” I shivered partly from cold, partly from the memory.

“Well do you remember the faces of any of the other guys?”

“Sure.”

“Yeah well,” he exhaled sharply. “Turns out one of those guys is a little more connected than we thought.”

“I’m not following you.”

“You know the last day you spent at my place...you remember that morning when you called me and I was already working?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, well that morning I was actually at your old apartment. Turns out the manager rented it out right after you left to a young guy that looked a lot like you.”

“Like me how?”

“Young, blond, I noticed it right off.”

I forced a smile. “You’re freaking me out a little. Just say whatever you—”

“Jory somebody cut up the guy that looked like you at your old place and they made it clear that they thought it was you.”

“How?”

“They wrote something on the wall.”

“On the wall?” I trembled, swallowing hard. “With what?”

“Just—it was there okay. It wasn’t made to look like an accident it was a message to us that they had gotten to you and meant as a warning to anyone else who might think about talking.”

I nodded. “But it wasn’t me.”

“No.”

“And everybody saw me in court.”

“Right.”

“Brian turned state’s evidence didn’t he?”

“Yes he did.”

“Okay so what does this—”

“It turns out that it was never about Brian.”

“You lost me.”

“There was another guy there the night Brian shot Saul Grant. “

“There were a lot of guys.”

“Yeah but one in particular was important. Brian’s protégé Roman Ivanovich Michaeliev.”

“Protégé?”

“Yeah. Roman was supposed to be learning Brian’s business.”

“Why?”

“Roman’s father is actually Brian’s boss.”

“And so?”

“So Brian was never supposed to kill anybody and put Roman at risk.”

“But he did.”

“Yes he did.”

“Why?”

“Cause Brian’s an animal.”

“Okay.” I shrugged. “I have no idea who—”

“But he knows you Jory and now you’re the only one that can tie him to that crime scene.”

“There’s Brian.”

“There’s not.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The thing is everybody else who was in the house that night, including Brian—is now dead.”

“Oh shit,” I breathed out. “Brian’s dead?”

“Yep. He was stabbed to death two weeks ago.”

“I thought he was in the witness protection program or whatever?”

“He was.”

“He was? So then—what? How does he get killed with people supposedly taking care of him?”

“It looks like we have a leak.”

“You mean somebody told where Brian was.”

“Right.”

“Who?”

“If we knew that we wouldn’t have a leak. I’d just be able to tell you who it was.”

I nodded. “Okay so what now?”

“Well so you know you’re the only one who was in the house when Brian Minor shot Saul Grant that’s still breathing right now besides Roman.”

“And he wants to kill me.”

“Yes he does.”

“Why?”

“Because you saw him there, you can put him there and—”

“But the only person who shot Saul was Brian. Everybody else just watched.”

“Watching makes you an accessory Jory it doesn’t make you innocent.”

I nodded. “So Roman’s still gonna try and kill me even though Brian is dead.”

“Yes, because he’s still being charged with a crime as long as you’re around.”

“Will I have to testify against him?”

“No, you already gave your statement. They expect him to take a plea.”

“But meanwhile if I happen to turn up dead, he walks.”

“Right.”

It took me a minute to digest it all. “So what now?”

“Well last night there was some activity about you. No one knows where you are, seems you dropped out of sight.”

“And?”

“And they’re looking for you.”

“To kill me.”

“Yes.”

I concentrated on breathing so I wouldn’t hyperventilate.

He was studying me, his arms crossing over his chest. “It was a nice touch changing Keyes to Harcourt. Did you think of that or your boss?”

“Well he’s not my boss anymore. I changed jobs.”

“Oh. You still live in the same place?”

“Yeah.”

He nodded. “Well so I don’t suppose you’d let me place you in protective custody this time around?”

“Doesn’t seem like it did Brian any good.”

“No it didn’t,” he conceded.

“So...no.”

“Okay.”

We stood in silence for long minutes.

“If Brian and Roman were friends, why did he kill him?”

“First, like I said, Brian put Roman in jeopardy by killing Saul with Roman right there and second,” he sighed, pulling his hair back from his face hard. “When it got right down to it, Brian was turning state’s evidence. He would have buried Roman and his father.”

I nodded.

“You get it right?”

“Yeah” I told him staring down at my shoes.

“So you should—”

“Not get shot,” I said to the ground.

“Yes. Try hard.”

“Okay.”

There was a long silence.

“I saw you last week out with Dominic and your girl Maggie,” I said to change the subject, raising my eyes to his.

“You did?”

“Yeah.” I smiled at him.

“Why didn’t you stop?”

“What would have been the point?”

He shrugged. “I guess.”

I cleared my throat. “So listen I’m freezing so I’m gonna go back in. It was good to see you and I really appreciate you finding me to tell me all this. I’ll be careful.”

“Good.”

I pressed my lips together tight and stepped around him, nervous for whatever reason.

“Who was that guy I saw talking to you in the booth?”

I turned around to look at him.

“Jory?”

“What guy?”

“Earlier. There was a guy...who was he?”

“Oh...nobody.”

“Nobody? He was sittin’ awful close.”

I made a face. “Some guy lookin’ to get laid. I sent him on his way.” I wondered how long he had been watching me before he came over to talk

“You’re not interested in gettin’ laid?”

“I’m not interested in a one night stand,” I told him. “It ain’t me.”

“No?”

I grinned lazily. “It used to be me I’ll give you that but not anymore.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

“Were your holidays good?” I asked, walking backwards, still facing him.

“They were. My folks are crazy about Maggie and her family’s great.”

“Great,” I said lamely, pivoting around.

“Jory.”

I didn’t stop walking but looked at him over my shoulder.

“Take care.”

“Yessir Detective Kage,” I said softly, opening the door, feeling the warm air envelope me as I went back inside the restaurant. I was so proud of myself for not breaking down but I was exhausted from all the energy it took. Who knew pretending to be nonchalant could be so draining?

I insisted that Dylan and Chris stay and eat and drink. They could turn the evening into a date night. For me it was a bust between Ray being a jerk and Sam having become a stranger. And even though it was freezing out I decided to walk home to clear my head. I was surprised when my phone rang.

“What?” I asked irritably, reading the number on my display before I answered.

“I just got off the phone with Ray,” Nick began. “He accused me of making you turn him down to get back at him. I told him I didn’t have that kind of power over you.”

“And you don’t.”

“I know I don’t,” he said quickly. “Like I said, that’s what I told him.”

I was silent.

“So for the record why did you turn him down?”

“‘Cause the guy’s a dick Nicky,” I told him. “Why would you with all you’ve got going for you even let a guy like that close to you? He’s a conceited asshole.”

“I know.”

“So? Why?”

“He comes on really strong J. He acted like he was really into me and I—”

I made a noise. “He’s a total tool. I’d have to be lobotomized before I let him close to me.”

He chuckled. “You know I like you I really do. You wanna come and have pie with me?”

“Pie?” I smiled into the phone. “I haven’t decided if I even like you anymore.”

“You like me. I’m likable. I’m an idiot but I’m likeable.”

“And so what? We’re gonna be friends now?”

“Could we please?”

He’d screwed up, I’d screwed up—we really were very compatible. “Fine. Should I come now?”

“That’d be good.”

So at one o’clock in the morning I went to the County hospital, picked up my friend and went and had peach pie and coffee. He told me all about Ray Alvarez and we laughed like idiots. He ended up snorting milk out of his nose. You could never have too many friends.

CHAPTER SIX

SOMETIMES THERE IS NOTHING better than zoning out over a task. Just doing something mindless can be more relaxing than almost anything. So I didn't mind that I had been nominated to do the dishes after dinner while everyone else sat around and vegged. Besides, my friend Richard told me that his kitchen never looked better than after I cleaned it up. He had just left me, telling me to hurry up because they were about to start playing board games. I wasn't surprised when my phone beeped and I saw Dane's number on the display. This was inevitable.

"Remind me to kill you," he said instead of hello.

"Hi." I tried not to even smile. "How are you?"

"You did this on purpose."

"Whatever do you mean?" I cackled.

"Payback is hell."

"How's the date?"

"You're such an ass," Dane assured me.

"What? Art walk no good?"

Long silence. "You knew it was this big romantic deal."

I was so glad he couldn't see me. "Did I?"

He was on the date I had set him up on with one of my co-workers, and I'd assured him that I would take care of everything. All he had to do was show up. True to my word, I had set up the date from heaven. I had wanted to show him something off the beaten track since he was getting a little jaded with dating and had ended up really outdoing myself.

They were on an art walk in Oak Park, through some Frank Lloyd Wright homes but also of other private residences where they were looking at personal collections. There were strolling musicians, a silent estate sale where trunks could be purchased that were possibly filled with treasures, or at least really old books that would look cool in a bookcase. There were different courses of meals in each home, starting with wine and cheese and ending with champagne or spiced cider. It had sounded wonderful and I had guessed at, but not asked about, the romantic component.

"I can hear you smiling," he accused me, his voice flat.

"You can't hear a smile." I chuckled. "Besides don't be such a stick in the mud. It sounded

wonderful on the web site.”

“Oh did it?”

“I’ve got hot air ballooning for you to do next.”

He hung up on me and I was still laughing when I heard the quiet cough behind me. I turned and a guy had slipped into the kitchen, hands in the pockets of his jeans, looking at me.

“Hey.” I smiled at him.

Slight smile like he was uncertain. “Rich said to come in here and you’d feed me even though I’m super late and it was really rude of me not to call.”

I chuckled. “Rich’s words.”

His grin was crooked and he had dimples. “Yeah Rich’s words.”

“Don’t let him make you feel bad. It’s not like he’s the poster boy for etiquette himself.”

He moved further into the room, closer to me. “I know, right. And it’s not like I could’ve called anyway. I mean I was in the bug room and—”

My brows furrowed. “Bug room?”

He chuckled, leaning on the counter. “You should see your face.”

“Sorry.”

The smile I was getting made his dark eyes glow. I had never actually seen chocolate brown eyes before, I was certain now that I had. His straight shoulder length hair, long lashes and eyebrows were all that same raven-wing black.

“So can I eat?” he asked because I was staring and not moving.

“Oh yeah—sorry.”

“No-no,” he said gently, reaching out to touch my shoulder to stop me from opening the refrigerator. “You can stand there and look at me all night if you want.”

I nodded, arching one eyebrow as I turned to get out the food I had just put away.

He laughed softly behind me. “What’s your name?”

“Jory,” I said as I put bowls on the counter. “You?”

“Kai.”

“And what do you do Kai that takes you to a bug room?”

His smile was wide as he passed me a plate from the cabinet next to his head. He obviously knew his way around Richard’s kitchen. They had to be close friends. “I work at the Field Museum and I was in the bug room where we keep these beetles that basically eat the flesh off stuff.”

“Are you sure you can eat?” I asked, squinting at him.

His laughter came from way down deep. “Yeah. Maybe you’d like to come with me sometime and see it?”

My eyes widened. “Go with you to the bug room?”

“Yeah. What do you say?”

“Okay.” I grinned at him. “Sure.”

“When?”

“I dunno. When do you want me?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow’s Sunday.”

“I know.”

I shrugged. “What time?”

“How ‘bout we get lunch? I know this great little Italian place we can have—”

“Actually I gotta have brunch with my brother then I can meet you.”

“You have Sunday brunch with your brother?” he asked sceptically, one brow raised.

“Yeah. Why?”

“No reason. That’s awesome.”

“Why is it awesome?” I chuckled because of the way he was smiling.

“It’s just nice. I like it.”

“Whatever man.” I smiled at him. “So we can go another—”

“I’ll meet you after lunch,” he said quickly, brushing passed my attempt to reschedule. “Do you know where the Field Museum is?”

“Yeah I’ve been there lots of times. The dinosaur is really cool.”

“Uh,” he groaned. “You so don’t wanna get me started on the damn dinosaur. All that money could have been directed into other research programs that—”

I put up my hands. “I’ll meet you by the store inside?”

His eyes twinkled. “Don’t wanna hear my usual rant?”

“No thanks.”

“Okay so...by the store at say one?”

“One’s good.”

He sighed. “Good. Can I get your number in case I get hit by a bus or something?”

“And how’re you calling if you get hit by a bus?”

“I’ll gasp out that somebody needs to call you before I die.” He smiled, his eyes locking on my mouth. “Is that okay?”

I stared into all that darkness. “It’s okay.”

He leaned on the counter, pulling out his cell phone. “Give it to me.”

We stood in the kitchen, me leaning against the sink while he ate standing up. I told him to go sit down in the living room but he preferred to stay where he was and talk to me. I asked more questions about the museum and he explained that with his doctorate in biology he worked in the Division of Mammals in the Zoology department. He had me laughing over the phone calls that came in from people in the city.

“This lady called the other day and described this animal to me over the phone and when I asked her what she thought it was she said she thought it was a yeti.”

“As in thee Yeti. The Abominable Snowman.”

“Yeah.”

I smiled at him. “And you said?”

"I explained that it probably wasn't but that maybe she should call animal control."

"Why?"

"I dunno. Maybe she's got a rabid Samoyed in her back yard for all I know."

I nodded. "I see."

"You have a great smile Jory."

I looked up at him. "Thanks. You too."

He took a shaky breath. "So tell me more about working at a PR firm."

I shrugged. "It's not that exciting."

"Okay. Tell me how old you are."

"Twenty-three. You?"

"Thirty-one."

I tilted my head as I looked at him. "I'm too old for you right? You like eighteen year olds?"

His jaw clenched. "No. Age doesn't mean anything. I've dated guys in their forties and fifties and guys younger than me. I go where my interest draws me."

I nodded.

"And you?"

"Same."

"Good."

I coughed softly. "So these beetles that eat flesh—what kind do that? Not like ladybugs right?"

He smiled at me. "No they're called Dermestid Beetles."

"Okay."

"Like you care."

"I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't interested. I have all sorts of odd pieces of knowledge in my head."

He reached out and touched the hem of my shirt. “If you have time tomorrow maybe after I show you the museum we could take a walk.”

“That sounds nice.”

His eyes flicked up to mine and locked there. “I wish it was tomorrow.”

“Yeah me too.”

“J!”

We both turned as Richard came into the kitchen.

“Carey’s here and he wants to go dancing instead of sitting around playing board games. Everybody else is in. What do you say?”

I looked at Kai. “Do you wanna go?”

“I don’t care as long as I get to hang with you.” He smiled quickly.

“Aww, that’s so sweet,” Richard said, giving me a look before he walked back out.

“That was very nice,” I assured him.

“Well thanks but so you know—I am a crappy dancer. You’re gonna cry.”

“You think?”

“Oh yeah,” he assured me, chuckling. “My sister Grace wouldn’t let me dance at her wedding because she was so scared I’d freak people out.”

I laughed at him as he sighed deeply and touched the collar of my shirt. “You look really good. Maybe you can take a look at my wardrobe and give me some pointers.”

“You look fine to me,” I said, my eyes sliding over his long, lean frame. He looked good in his pocket t-shirt clinging tightly to the sinewy muscles in his biceps, chest and abdomen. His faded 501 jeans fit well; his beat up hiking boots had seen better days—all of it giving the impression of a man that was both solid and strong. He wasn’t strikingly beautiful or the kind of guy you noticed instantly, he was the kind of guy that grew on you because in the two hours that we had been talking in the kitchen I had become a great admirer of his eyes, his shoulders, the veins in his hands, the way he smiled and the soft, gentle tone of his voice. He radiated a sort of soothing quiet that was comforting, like he was comfortable in his own skin.

“Yeah? I look okay?”

“You do.” I smiled at him. “What kind of music do you like?”

“Why?”

“There’s a jazz club by my apartment that’s really good if you maybe wanted to go listen to some instead of going dancing.”

“I’ll be honest, I haven’t had the opportunity to hear a lot of jazz but I would much rather listen to music with you then show you how poorly my body moves.”

“I’m sure your body moves just fine.”

He stared at me. “Why don’t we go now?”

He helped me clean Richard’s kitchen back up and when we left together there were a lot of catcalls and comments and Carey’s final “be careful you two!” was probably the most obvious. Out on the street, he pointed at an ancient Volkswagen van.

“Is that yours?”

“Yeah I know it’s—”

“It’s awesome,” I breathed out, walking over to it, peering in the windows. “What is this like a sixty-five? Sixty-seven?”

He chuckled behind me and I turned to look at him.

“Big aficionado of VW vans are you?”

“I just love old stuff period.”

He smiled at me. “You know you are not at all what I expected.”

“How’dya mean?”

“Jory you must know...I mean I go in the kitchen and there you are and you’re so... beautiful...and the smile and—and you just...and you like my old, ugly van. It’s amazing.”

“Why?”

“You look like you’d be the kind of guy that needs a guy with money.”

I snorted out the laugh. “I have my own money and what I don’t have my brother has. I’m good.”

He looked into my eyes. “Would you like to drive my piece of junk?”

“Really?” I was so excited.

He laughed out loud. “God you sound so excited. Hell yes. Come get the keys.”

I drove us to the jazz club across the street from my apartment and we talked and laughed and listened and he gave me a nod that let me know he liked both the music and the company. I offered him a cup of tea after the last set and he draped an arm around my neck as he crossed the street with me.

He liked my apartment, the wooden framed windows, exposed beams and the ceiling fans that looked like they were as old as the building itself. Content to sit on the counter and watch me make tea I asked when his last long-term relationship was. He explained about the two-year love affair that had ended six months ago with a veterinarian.

“What happened?” I prodded as I poured the water into the teapot so it could steep.

“He didn’t want to move in with me.” He sighed heavily. “I asked him to after three months and he said it was too soon but when we hit two years and he was still saying no...it became painfully obvious that he was waiting for someone better to come along.”

“Sorry.”

He shrugged. “It’s okay. He didn’t get that my love was a gift and if somebody doesn’t appreciate the value of being loved...not a lot you can do.”

“True.”

“And your last love affair as you put it?”

“It was three months ago but it wasn’t anything long term like yours. I thought it was gonna be but the guy...it turned out he wasn’t as into me as I thought he was.”

“No?”

“No.”

“How come?”

“I think it was hard for him since he wasn’t out ya know?”

“Oh yeah I do know. I’ve been there.”

“Tell me.”

“I dated this guy for six months and his family had no idea he was gay. His friends all thought he

was this big ladies man and—shit...what a mess.”

“Bad right?”

He laughed at me. “So much worse than bad. I mean he still calls sometimes and asks me if I can see me and can I just give him some time and...it’ll never change but he seems to have deluded himself into thinking that one of these days he’s gonna come out of the closet.”

“My guy’s a cop.”

“Oh shit! You know that’s so never gonna happen right?”

“I know.” I nodded, exhaling slowly. “It was just tough to let go of.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, reaching out to squeeze my shoulder.

I shrugged. “What’re ya gonna do.”

“All I wanna do is meet somebody and settle down and just be done with this whole dating mess.” He smiled at me.

And for whatever reason my libido turned off and my brain turned on.

“Jory?”

I stepped back and looked at him.

“What?”

“This is gonna sound really weird like crazy woo-woo weird but you gotta go with it, and don’t get mad, just open up your mind to the possibility that I’m not the end of your journey, but merely a signpost along the way.”

He scowled at me. “I knew you were too pretty to be sane.”

“I’m a big believer in signs.”

“I bet you do Ouija boards and Tarot cards too don’tcha?”

“Make fun if you like but I have the perfect guy for you.”

He grinned wide. “Actually Jory I think you’re the guy for me.”

But I wasn’t. We were in different places in our lives, which had nothing at all to do with our ages. I wasn’t ready to settle down with anyone else but Sam Kage and since that wasn’t

happening...but I knew somebody who was. I knew the exact man he needed to meet. “Will you just do me a favour and let me set you up on a blind date?”

“You’re seriously disturbed.”

“Please. You won’t be sorry and I think I—”

“If you wanna get rid of me just—”

“No-no-no, it’s not like that. Just c’mon Kai. If it doesn’t work out I’ll go wherever you want—do whatever—just—just—”

“Deal.” He smiled at me, holding out his hand. “Shake on it. You’re mine if it goes badly.”

I clasped the hand tight because there was no way in hell I didn’t have the greatest matchmaking skills in the history of the world. I would stake my life on it. I was Cupid in the flesh.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I WAS AT NAVY PIER with binoculars and a trench coat the following night. I was limping, because I had twisted my ankle playing racquetball with Dane that morning, but I was not going to let a little pain get in the way of my spy mission. I had set up Dr. Kai Akita, PHD with Dr. Nick Sullivan, MD and from the looks of things; the body language, the glances and the testing touches—it was going really well. Nick’s hand on his shoulder was allowed to stay, Kai’s fingers sliding over his collar was rewarded with a big smile and the proximity that they kept while walking were all very good signs. I was so pleased with myself I felt like I was glowing. As I leaned over the railing to try and see them as they walked toward the arcade, someone cleared their throat.

“Hey.” I smiled at Sam Kage as he scowled at me.

“What the hell are you doing out here?”

“I—”

“People are trying to kill you and you’re just—”

They were moving and I had to see. I raised a finger to shut him up and hobbled over to lean against the railing on the opposite side of the pier. I used the binoculars to make sure I didn’t lose them.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he asked again, louder, firmer, his voice next to my ear.

“Why can’t you ask a question without swearing?”

“Jory...I’m trying not to—”

“It should be perfectly obvious that I’m spying,” I said, cutting him off, watching as Nick’s hand went to rest between Kai’s shoulder blades. “God I should do this for a living.”

“What are you looking at?”

“Remember the doctor that liked me?” I asked as I watched them buy corn dogs.

“Yeah.”

“Okay so I set him up on a blind date with a guy that I met last night at my friend Richard’s house.”

There was a long silence and I thought he had walked away until I heard him breathe. “Wait now. You met a guy last night and he let you set him up on a blind date?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did a guy you met last night let you set him up on a blind date?”

I lowered the binoculars and scowled at him “Why is that important? The thrill of this moment is that I am a love god.”

“Is that right?” He smirked at me.

“Are you kidding?” I mumbled, raising the binoculars. “I’m Cupid, man.”

“Okay Cupid,” he said drolly. “What’s going on with your ankle?”

“Oh...I screwed it up playing racquetball with Dane. I gotta explain to him that he needs to pick on someone his own size from now on.”

“I see. May I ask another question?”

“Can I stop you?”

“Dane is what to you now?”

“How’dya mean?”

“Well I’m curious because he used to be called boss and now he’s Dane. Explain that to me.”

“Dane is my brother now.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. He likes running my life.”

“I’ll bet,” he said before sighing deeply. “He’s a good guy.”

“Yes he is,” I agreed, putting the binoculars down while I crossed through the crowd back to the other side of the pier. I couldn’t see so when I saw a bucket that was turned over behind a cotton candy stall I got up on top of it. I was just in time to see them stop for ice cream; Kai had just wiped some of it off Nick’s nose. It was too cute.

“You’re gonna fall off that and actually break your ankle idiot.”

I grunted.

“Seriously why does a guy you just met let you set him up on a date with somebody else?”

“Because he’s a keen judge of character and he could tell right off that I had the gift.”

“Bullshit.”

I shrugged. “Believe what you want.”

“Tell me.”

“I told him if he had a bad time he could have me.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You heard me.”

“Have you?”

“Yeah.”

“Define that.”

“I think it’s pretty self-explanatory.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah,” I said, watching them smile into each other’s eyes. “Awww.”

“So you’re saying if the blind date goes bad this guy—what’s his name?”

“Kai,” I said putting the binoculars down, unsure for a minute what the better course of action was. Should I let my ankle bear my weight for the second it took to get down or get down on it and let it hold me for that second?

“What are you doing?”

I looked down and he looked up and I was suddenly caught in the dark scowl. He looked really annoyed. “Could you move a little I need to get down.”

He reached toward me. “Lemme help you.”

“No thanks,” I waved him back. “Just move.”

“Fine,” he said, shoving his hands in his pockets, taking a step away from me. “So seriously—this guy Kai gets to what—fuck you or do whatever the hell he wants to you?”

“Yeah,” I winced, letting my ankle hold me for a second, stepping down onto my good one. “Shit.”

“And you’ll let him?”

I cracked a grin. “It’s just my ass man. I’ve done worse for less,” I assured him before I limped away, ducking between stalls, poking my head around the caramel corn and the hand dipped candy apples before leaning out from under the overhang to check on them as they stopped to get some bottled water. I was hoping I’d lost him.

“For crissakes Jory you—”

“God—why are you here?” I almost whined, turning to look up into his eyes.

His eyes narrowed. “I’m here with Dom and his girl Lily and Maggie.”

“Well I’m sure they’re waitin’ on ya,” I said flatly, hoping my dismissive tone would prompt him to leave.

I watched his jaw clench. “You know you—”

My hand came up to cut him off as I reached into the front pocket on my pea coat and pulled out my phone. I dialled and turned away from him to return to my spying. She answered on the second ring.

“Mother Goose.”

“What?”

“I thought we should have code names,” she giggled. “Since we’re undercover and all.”

My friends were all crazy. “Where are you?”

“I’m getting Indian Fry Bread. Where are you?”

“You’re eating again?”

“I’m at the pier. What the hell else do you do here?”

“Stop eating we’re on a stakeout.”

“Shut-up. Where are you?”

“By the little dance floor with the black lights.”

Her voice was muffled since she was eating and talking. “I’ll be right there. Don’t move anymore you’re gonna be crippled my tomorrow.”

“Fine. Hurry up,” I said before I hung up and replaced the phone in my coat.

“Who was that?”

I had hoped he’d taken the hint but he was still there.

“I asked you a question.”

“My girl Dylan,” I snapped at him.

“Who?”

“Bye detective,” I dismissed him, raising the binoculars, smiling wide as they sat down on a bench on the pier, facing each other.

“You know you should show me more respect.”

I grunted and moved away from him. I was going to raise the binoculars when he stepped in front of me.

“Maybe I should just take you home.”

“You have Maggie to take home,” I blurted out with more vehemence than I wanted.

“Wait—what?”

I shook my head. “Just never mind. Could you please leave me alone?”

But he didn’t move.

“What do you want?” I asked him, my voice sounding strained.

“You’re hurt, lemme help you.”

“No,” I snapped irritably, shifting around him, looking for the lovebirds. “I don’t need your help.”

“Clearly you do.”

I groaned loudly.

“Jory you—”

“There you are.” Dylan sniffled as she walked up beside me. She lifted my arm and leaned into my side. “Lean on me,” she ordered gently. “I don’t want your ankle to implode.”

I draped my arm around her neck and kissed her temple.

Her contented sigh made me smile.

“So how’s it going? Are you off the hook or what?”

I passed her the binoculars and pointed down the pier.

She put them to her eyes and smiled wide. “Oh yeah you’re safe. Good job love god.”

I glanced over at Sam “Thank you.”

His scowl could not have been any darker.

“Hi.” Dylan smiled at him suddenly. “You’re the detective right? I met you Friday night.”

He looked directly at her and I heard her sharp indrawn breath before she shivered. I understood. Hard to know what your reaction to Sam Kage should be. The man was menacing and alluring at the same time. He radiated danger and plain old raw sex appeal. The combination was intoxicating.

“You’re his new partner right?” Sam said gruffly.

“Huh?”

“Aren’t you Jory’s partner?”

“What?”

I bumped her to break the spell.

“Oh...yes,” she recovered, offering him her hand. “It’s nice to see you again.”

He shook her hand quickly. “And you.”

“We’re on a spy mission,” she smiled impishly. “Did he tell you?”

“Yes he did.”

“Are you here alone? Do you want to share a cab home with us?”

“No I have friends and—”

“His girl’s waiting on him,” I told Dylan. “He has to go.”

“Oh okay,” she nodded, her arm tightening around my back. “Well then we’ll see you detective. You have a nice night.”

He nodded.

“Could you give me a little of your weight please,” she snapped at me gently.

“I’ll crush you.”

“I think I weigh more than you.” She sighed. “Just let me take care of you. I’m dying to mother you.”

I rolled my eyes and we started to walk away.

“Why don’t you let me drive you guys home?”

Dylan stopped but I kept going.

She planted her feet.

I pushed her off balance, forcing her to take a step forward.

“What are you doing?” She was confused. “Stop nudging me.”

“Let’s just go.”

But she ignored me, turning instead back to Sam. “I thought you were out with your friends?”

“I am but we’re about to leave anyway. It’s no trouble and if his ankle’s bad like you said then I would be glad to help.”

“It’s not that bad,” I grumbled quickly.

“Are you kidding?” Dylan was flabbergasted. “The limping is getting worse not better.”

I sighed deeply. “We can catch a cab. It’s no problem. Thanks anyway.”

“Jory,” Dylan began. “Don’t be an idiot.” She looked over at Sam. “We would appreciate a ride Detective thank you so much.”

“Sure,” he said softly, walking over to us. “Maybe you should lean on—”

"Its fine," I said fast, stepping passed him.

"Jory," Dylan gasped, reaching for me.

"I'm fine," I told her, gritting my teeth as I strode down the pier. I was nothing if not stubborn.

Dylan ended up holding my hand as we followed Sam back to where Maggie was leaning against a railing watching Dominic and Lily play bumper cars.

"There you are." She smiled at him, her eyes soft. "Where did you go?"

"I saw some friends," he muttered, tipping his head toward Dylan and I. "They need a ride. Are you guys ready to go?"

"Oh yes." She smiled at him. "I've been ready for an hour. I've gotta work tomorrow."

"Okay let's go then."

"Are you going to stay at my place?"

My stomach lurched.

"Not tonight," he said coolly.

"Oh," she was disappointed. "Okay."

"Can I get a witness?" Dominic shouted out as he stalked over to us.

I smiled at him and when he reached me his hand came down heavy on my shoulder.

"I am actually very happy to see you," he squeezed tight. "I swear to God kid you're a lucky sonofabitch."

"Jory?" Dylan looked up into my face.

"I'll tell ya later," I assured her. "Dominic Kairov this is Dylan Greer my partner at Barrington."

He reached for her hand and they shook as a striking statuesque blond woman stepped up behind him. She was Lily Beck and he introduced both Dylan and I to her. It was only then that Maggie complained that she hadn't been introduced to either one of us.

"Maggie Dixon," she smiled at me as she took my hand. "You're thee Jory?"

"I'm just Jory," I told her.

“No you’re the one that stayed with Sam for a while right? The teacups are yours.”

“Yes.”

She nodded. “He won’t let me touch them.”

“You should just throw them out.”

She chuckled. “So not happening.”

“Let’s go,” Sam growled and everyone moved at the same time.

At the cars Dominic volunteered to take Dylan and me since he was closer but Sam shut him down hard. I got a slap across the back before he left and was made to promise to call if I needed him. I was surprised since I had never thought Dominic even liked me much less cared if I lived or died. I wondered at the change of heart.

Sam held the door open for Maggie and Dylan as I climbed up on the other side. Once we were all in Maggie started asking questions. She wanted to know all about what we did at Barrington. My phone rang so I got to let Dylan answer her.

“Hello?”

“Jory have I told you lately that you’re amazing?”

“Hey Nicky.” I smiled wide. “How’s it goin’?”

“So much better than good.”

“I’m glad.”

“He thinks we have a real connection. He said he can’t believe we’re in the same place in our lives.”

“See.” I sighed. “I’m gifted.”

“He thinks I’m gorgeous Jory.”

“You are Nicky. Tell me again that I was right.”

“You were right—so right. I’m sorry I gave you any shit at all.”

“Call me tomorrow.”

“I will. Goodnight my friend.”

I hung up and turned to smile at Dylan.

“Well?”

“I am the love god.”

She smiled at me. “Okay love god you’ve done your good deed for the year. We need to find a nice boy for you now.”

“Okay.” I reached across the seat for her hand and lifted the palm to my lips. “Whatever you say love.”

“I adore you.”

“Right backatcha.”

“Ohmygod,” Maggie cooed. “Could you two be any cuter?”

I chuckled and Sam asked where Dylan lived.

It turned out that Dylan was the first drop off. We hugged and kissed and I promised to call her in the morning if she needed to pick me up. On our way to my place Maggie suggested we stop and get something to eat. She was starving. I wasn’t asked; he just pulled over and parked the car before I could cast my vote.

Inside, he left us to make a call before we were seated. When the waiter came to lead us to the table, he was back. I went to take a step and my right leg cramped up. It had been taking most of my weight all day and it was tired.

“What’s wrong?” he asked me, hand on my shoulder, looking at my face.

“I think I’m gonna skip this and go home. I need to get my weight off—”

“You need to sit and ice your ankle and wrap it up. It’s not broken or you wouldn’t be able to put any weight on it at all but I bet it’s twisted really badly. You need crutches too.”

“I don’t have—”

“Easy to get. I have this thing I used when I tore my ACL tendon and meniscus, you put ice and water in, and you wrap the other part around your knee or whatever and it—”

“I think I have an ice pack.” I smiled, cutting off his rambling as I leaned around him to look at Maggie. “I gotta go it was really nice to meet you. I’ll see ya all right?”

“Jory why don’t we—”

I turned to go but the arm around my neck stopped me.

“Stop fighting me,” he said gruffly, pinning me against his body, fiddling with the collar of my coat. “You’re always fighting with me.”

I closed my eyes, let out a deep breath and leaned back against him.

“Let’s eat something then I’ll take you home and fix up your ankle.” His breath was warm down the side of my neck, the words spoken softly, gently, meant to soothe me.

“I—”

“I bet I even have extra crutches at my place.” His lips grazed my skin; he was that close to me.

“I can’t go to your place.”

“Why not?” His voice was so low, so deep.

“I just can’t.”

“That makes no sense.”

“I just...let go.”

“You’re shaking,” he nearly growled.

“Sam what’s going on?” Maggie asked suddenly.

“Nothing.” He sighed before he clutched me tighter. “Lean on me J.”

I had to let him help me to the booth. I gave him my weight and he wrapped an arm around my waist. He was careful, moving slowly, and I heard the deep sigh that came up out of him.

“Sam maybe we should run Jory to the hospital.” Maggie offered, her eyes darting between us.

“No,” he said flatly. There would be no argument.

At the table, he slid into the booth beside me after shedding his coat and picking up his menu. “What’re you gonna eat?”

“I’m not really hungry,” I told him, leaning back.

“You’re gonna hafta take something for the pain so you need food in your stomach.”

“I can just—”

“Take off your coat.”

I rolled my eyes but took off my trench coat, laying it down between us.

“Put it on the other side I’ve got no room.”

I moved it against the wall and took a sip of the water the waitress dropped off. After a couple of minutes he realized I was staring at him and turned to look at me.

“What?”

“Is there anything else?”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning you’ve been barking orders at me...is there anything else?”

His grin was lazy and sexy. “Nope.”

“Good,” I said, rubbing the bridge of my nose.

“You want pancakes?”

“No.”

“An omelette?”

“I’m really not hungry.”

He put his knee against mine under the table. “I don’t care.”

I tried to slide over but his hand was on my thigh instantly, holding me there.

“I’m feeding you, end of story.”

“You know Sam this whole macho bullshit thing you—”

His phone rang.

“Wait,” he said, putting up his hand as he pulled his phone from the coat lying beside him on the seat. “Hello. Yeah,” he said, standing up, hovering over the table. “I—hold on,” he pressed it to his chest so whoever was on the other end wouldn’t hear him. “Just eat something.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You’re always hungry.”

“I am not,” I snapped at him.

“Eat.” He ordered, his voice leaving no room for argument. Except from me.

“I’m not five Sam. If I say I’m—”

“If you don’t eat you’re gonna be sick so just eat.”

I scowled up at him.

“Don’t gimme the look J just fuckin’ eat.”

“Don’t swear.”

“Eat and I won’t.”

“That’s stupid,” I told him.

“Then I’m stupid, just eat!” He barked at me.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Eat!”

“No.”

“Jory if—”

“Don’t tell me what to do.” I cut him off.

“God,” he roared, and I was vaguely aware that the tables around us quieted. “Anything to fight with me! For crissakes baby just eat!” He yelled at me before he stalked away.

He was exasperated but I didn’t care. I opened the menu and started looking at it even though I was pretty sure I was going to kill him when he got back.

“Jory.”

There was no man on the planet as annoying as him!

“Jory.”

I leaned the menu forward and looked across the table at Maggie. I was startled by the expression on her face. “Are you all right?”

“No I don’t think so.” her voice was shaky. “Did he just call you baby?”

“What,” I said automatically which usually gives people the second they need to take back anything they maybe wished they hadn’t said.

“Did he just call you baby?” Deeper tremor in her voice the second time she asked.

“No,” I assured her.

“I think he did.”

“No,” I repeated, with more conviction.

“Yes...yes he did.”

And my heart sank because he had. I didn’t even think about it because between us, the two of us, it was normal. I was never usually Jory. I was J, or baby, or love. It had come out of him without thought and now Maggie was sitting across from me just stunned. “I’m sure it was an accident.”

She just stared at me.

“You know how sometimes you’re looking at one person but you say the name of somebody else because you were thinking about them or talking to them a second before and—”

“He called you baby.”

“Only because he was looking at you but talking to me.”

“He wasn’t looking at me.”

“Yeah but a minute ago he—”

“That would be nice theory except that he doesn’t call me anything but Maggie. Not Mags like Dominic does or Maggie May like Lily does or even doll like his brother Michael does. He has no pet names for me but you—you he calls baby.” Her eyes were riveted on mine. “Why is that Jory?”

“It just came out. It means nothing.”

“I think it means everything and explains a hell of a lot.”

“I—”

“I’ve had sex with that man one time Jory, just one time in four months and—”

I put up my hand to stop her. “Please don’t tell me about—”

“I want him so bad it’s eating me up,” she cut me off, ignoring my plea. “But he just wants to hold me and cuddle and—”

“Most women like that stuff.”

“I want that man to take me to bed and screw my brains out Jory and he won’t. He just won’t...” She trailed off, her eyes all over me. “And I’ve tried everything to...it’s embarrassing what I’ve tried.”

I had no idea what to say.

She coughed. “And now I see him with you. He watches you—he can barely keep his hands off you and that whole scene...you guys argue like an old married couple.”

“I don’t think—”

“And then the name...” She trailed off, studying my face. “How many times did you sleep with him?”

“You’re way off.”

“I think I’m right on target actually,” her eyes locked on mine. “Sam’s gay?”

“No.”

She nodded. “Then he was what—curious?”

“You’re so wrong you have—”

“Ohmygod,” her hand covered her mouth. “That’s why I can’t move anything or throw out any of that tea neither of us drinks...he didn’t just sleep with you he’s in love with you.”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Jory...I’m so jealous and you...you’re so lucky.”

“I don’t have to sit here and listen to you,” I said, grabbing my coat, sliding out of the booth.

“Jory you should stay—I’ll go.”

But I didn't look back because the tears had come fast, filling my eyes, slipping down my cheeks.

I took several deep breaths outside in front of the restaurant before I started hobbling toward the street to get a cab.

"What are you doing?" he growled behind me.

I made sure when he came around to face me that I turned away. "I'm going home. Go back inside and take care of Maggie. She's all—"

"Cause I called you baby."

My head snapped up and my eyes met his.

He looked tired all of a sudden. "I didn't even realize I said it until I got back to the table and she looked like she got slapped or something."

"I told her you—"

"I know. She told me what ya said. I appreciate it."

"I—"

He took a step closer and took my chin in his hand, tilting my head up. "It doesn't matter anymore. I'm fuckin' exhausted."

"Sam I—"

"Let's go."

I just stood there, staring at him.

"She went home," he gestured back at the restaurant.

"Why?"

His smile was sad. "'Cause when she asked me if I was in love with you I said yes."

All I could do was stare at him, up into his eyes.

"Actually I think what I said was God yes."

"Sam you don't—"

His hand closed lightly around my throat, his thumb sliding over my jaw. “Don’t be an idiot. Of course I love you how could I not?”

I stopped breathing.

His eyes were so soft as he looked down at me. “Come home with me. Let me take care of you. Please. I’m begging you.”

There was no one alive strong enough to say no to that. “Okay,” I nodded and he bent and flipped me over his shoulder.

“Don’t—put me down!”

“Your ankle’s bad,” he grumbled, slapping my ass hard. “Shut the fuck up the car’s right there.”

When he dumped me into the seat, slamming the door shut, I sat for a moment as he got in.

“What? What now?”

I rolled my head to look at him. “It’s just gonna end badly. It always does.”

“Nope,” he grunted, starting the car. “Not this time.”

“Why not?” I sounded weary.

“‘Cause everybody’s gonna know about you. I already told my folks so—”

“What?” I gasped.

“Hah!” he barked at me. “Didn’t see that coming did ya you cocky piece of shit... always think you know everything...and put on your goddamn seat belt!”

I put it on in a daze, staring at his profile.

After a few minutes of silence I asked him to explain what he’d said.

“About telling my folks about you ya mean?”

“Don’t be a jerk. Just tell me.”

“Yeah so I told my Mom all about us—all about you and she said she was glad I told her but that she already knew.” Quick exhale. “And I asked her how she knew and she said I was another person when you were around. She said that you bring out the very best in me.” He turned to look at my face. “What more can you ask for?”

I was stunned and speechless. His mother was okay with me, with him, with him and me?

“And my Dad said that as long as you were what I wanted—he was happy. He says he likes you and he likes me better when you’re around.” He smiled suddenly and glanced over at me, his eyes back on the road seconds later “Man I must be a real prick when you’re not with me.”

I finally breathed.

“My Dad told me that Maggie’s a nice girl and she deserves better than a man that’s in love with somebody else” He gave me a longer look the second time. “I would have to agree.”

I could barely control my excitement.

“So my family is okay, Rachel loved you and you know Jen is crazy about you too so... they’re good and even Michael was cool...I was scared the most about them but...” He was quiet for a minute and I could only imagine what was going through his mind. “I...it’s gonna be okay.”

“But Dominic and—”

“Yeah well that’s probably gonna be gone but I can’t—I mean I tried it their way. I tried to have the girl and be one of the guys and have everything be like I always wanted it but...it’s not good.”

I reached out for his hand and he took it instantly, lacing his fingers into mine, holding tight. We drove in silence, heading for his place, and I was happy just sitting there beside him. Content to just be with him however he wanted or would let me.

“I slept with Maggie and it was just bad,” he said his voice jarring after the long minutes of quiet. “She was into it and I could tell she was and I just...I wasn’t there. I thought I’d try... to make sure...I’m sure now.” He finished, squeezing my hand before he let it go.

“But—”

“And I know I was wrong,” he said, pulling over to the curb, parking the SUV in front of his building in his spot that no one else ever parked in. He was a police officer after all. “And I know I don’t deserve another shot,” he told me, unbuckling his seatbelt, turning in his seat to face me. “But you gotta give me one. You know you’re supposed to belong to me.”

I stared into his face and there was no realization or epiphany or anything else. It was simply the truth and I knew it because it hadn’t changed. I was stuck on him. I couldn’t move forward to someone else because he had my heart. No amount of logic or time or distance would change the fact that I was madly in love with Detective Sam Kage.

“If you send me away I’ll just keep coming back. I want you with me all the time.”

“And when were you gonna tell me all this? When was I gonna see you if I—”

“Tonight—tomorrow—I don’t know J. I would’ve come as soon as I got up my nerve to talk to you. It’s scary to think you’re gonna hear no and you’re so stubborn that—”

I raked my hands through my hair. “How could it ever be no Sam? I—”

He slipped his hand around the back of my neck and pulled me forward into the kiss. My lips parted as he slanted his mouth over mine. He held me tight; his hand fisted in my hair, and devoured my lips, biting, sucking, and hungry for me. I trembled in his arms and I heard the rumble of satisfaction as his hands ran all over me—my back, my ass, down my legs that he drew forward and wrapped around him. When he touched my ankle, the pain shot through me and I gasped.

“Oh-oh baby I’m sorry,” he soothed me, kissing me again, his hand on my throat. “Lemme get you inside and we’ll get this iced up.”

“Kiss me again,” I begged him, whimpering, leaning forward.

“Jesus you should see your eyes and your mouth... ” He trailed off, staring at me. “My beautiful baby...God I could just look at you all night.”

“How ‘bout you put me in your bed.”

“That too,” he promised. “And I will never let you go.” He leaned sideways and kissed me again, this time gently, slowly, like he had all the time in the world. “Oh yeah, you’re mine.” He smiled wide before he pulled me forward and hugged me tight. “I missed you.”

I couldn’t speak around the lump in my throat. I just laid my head on his shoulder, hugged him back and cried. The tears just rolled from my eyes.

“Aww babe don’t cry.” he sighed, pulled back, wiping at my eyes with his fingers. “Don’t move.”

I watched as he got out, walked around the front of the car and opened my door to look up at me. I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

His long exhale of breath. “I’m sorry I slept with Maggie. So sorry... please forgive me.”

I nodded, reaching for him and he lifted me down to stand in front of him.

“Did you...was there anybody—”

“No,” I cut him off, my voice barely there.

“No one in your bed since me?”

“No.”

The look on his face that he couldn't hide, the relief made me smile. "C'mon, let's go inside."

He basically tucked me next to him and supported my weight, keeping me from putting any pressure on my ankle. He kissed me in the elevator, in front of his door and grabbed me once we were inside his apartment. His hands on my face, he was smiling down at me as I stood there.

"You're very happy," I observed because it was obvious.

"I feel good," he confessed, scooping me up and putting me down gently on the couch. "Lemme get you taken care of here."

I sat there and watched him drag out a machine that he filled with ice and water. There were tubes that led to a wrap that he put around my ankle. He talked while he moved around, explaining about how he'd torn his meniscus tendon as well as his ACL while he was chasing some guy down an alley. He'd gotten twisted up in a fence, having the guy's partner push him back while his foot was planted. It sounded painful and he smiled in agreement. When I was reclined on the couch, my foot elevated on pillows, the wrap pulsing ice water around my ankle, staring at the fire he'd made, I felt really content. I had directed him in the process of making the tea and he was in the kitchen when the thundering knocking came from the front door. I thought I was going to jump right out of my skin.

"Calm down, it's all right," he soothed me, having come out of the kitchen to put both hands on my shoulders. "It's probably Dom."

And as soon as he opened the front door, Dominic shoved passed him and crossed the room to me. He looked furious.

"Goddamnit Sam what the fuck is going on?" he roared, pointing at me.

"How'dya mean?" Sam asked, smiling at him, closing the door gently behind him.

"Don't fuck with me!"

Sam nodded, walked over and took my hand. I couldn't stop staring at him.

"I'm keeping him Dom. I got no choice."

"Why?"

"I—"

"No wait, don't tell me just—are you kidding with this shit? Sammy." He was desperate suddenly and I heard it in his voice. "You can't be a cop like this. There's no way that you're gonna give it all up for a fuckin' piece of faggot ass?"

Sam dropped my hand and charged over to his friend. He grabbed his jacket tight, his knuckle's white. "You don't get to say that shit in front of Jory. You wanna be gone—go but you don't get to be here in my house and fuckin' insult him. That's not gonna happen."

They stared holes in each other before Sam shoved him back.

"You're not gay Sam. I would've known that. There's no way I wouldn't know that."

He sighed heavily, raked his fingers through his hair. "Listen...I tried it with you and my family and the guys and Maggie and everybody else and no Jory. It was fucked up and I felt like shit every single day. I can't do that anymore Dom—I can't do it just because it'll make everybody else comfortable. I can't."

He looked at Sam and then me and back to Sam. "And I can't be your partner anymore Sammy. Not like this. I can't watch you throw away your career over some fuckin' faggot you picked up and—"

"Get out!"

"You better put in for a change of partner tomorrow Sam! Tomorrow!"

"Get out!"

Dominic stormed out the front door, throwing it open, letting it slam against the wall and vibrate to a half close. I watched Sam walk over and close it gently, click the deadbolt and then turn off the light so that only the fire and the light above the stove illuminated the room.

"I'm so sorry," I said softly. "I can—"

He walked to me; dropping to his knees beside the couch, letting me reach for him, pull him close, rest my chin in his hair.

"Sam maybe I should—"

"It's like I thought it would be J." He sighed deeply, clutching me tight, lifting his head to kiss my throat. "There are no surprises with him. My family was a surprise they've been amazing. I can't expect anymore...it's enough how it is."

"But—"

He chuckled, kissed my jaw, my chin and then my lips. "Baby if what I do in bed is something he cares that much about—I don't know what I can do. Would I throw away our history if the roles were reversed?" He thought a moment. "I dunno...I would hope not but who knows? I'm not gonna sit here and pass judgment on him—be a hypocrite 'cause it's something I might have done I'm just gonna let him go."

“Maggie must’ve called him like seconds after you left her.”

“Probably.”

“You’re not mad at her?”

“What’s to be mad at? It was gonna come out sometime it’s just faster than I thought.”

“And tomorrow? What happens when Dominic tells everybody about us?”

He leaned back and looked at me like I was nuts. “Are you kidding? He’s not gonna tell anybody. He’s just gonna let me request a partner change and leave it at that. Me being gay isn’t as bad as him not knowing and being my partner all this time. It’s gonna stay quiet until I say something. He’d never say I was gay, people would think he was too.”

My relief made me shiver. “Oh thank God. I can—”

“J,” he said, cupping my face in his hands, smiling at me. “I hafta tell my captain and we’ll see what happens after that. For right now, I just wanna be here with you and not think about it.”

I nodded.

“Can I sit with you?”

I lost it. The tears came in a flood.

“Oh baby,” his voice was like honey as he lifted me up and settled me back down so I was leaning against his chest. He draped his arm over my shoulder, gently rubbing circles over my abdomen. The other hand stroked through my hair, petting me, both movements meant to calm and soothe me. “Don’t cry everything’s gonna be okay.”

“You should be losing your mind.”

“Why?”

“One day you’re straight and the next you’re gay...Jesus Sam most guys would be flippin’ out. You seriously should be just freaking out.”

“I’ve had time to work through it,” he chuckled and I felt the laughter more than I heard it as he kissed my temple, at the same time running his hand over my throat, down under the collar of my sweater to touch my bare skin. “I’ve bounced back and forth with you enough times to know that with you around I’m good.”

I shivered. “You know I love you right?”

“Yes J I know.”

I took in a deep breath and closed my eyes.

“I love you Jory.”

I could have died happy right then and there.

* * * *

WE DECIDED THAT SINCE we were at his place, he would pack a bag and we would drive to my apartment and he would leave from there in the morning. He had offered to just throw me over his back and carry me but I was determined to get the crutches he had loaned me to work. They were slightly too big even though he had shortened them to the smallest they could go but he assured me they were workable. So I was making my way to my building with him beside me yawning dramatically.

“Could you stop that?” I groused at him.

“What?” he teased me.

I tried to scowl but he looked so good with the smile in his eyes, the way his lip curled up in the corner, the day old stubble, and his hair sticking up in places. He was rumpled and tousled from being in bed with me, having proven to me that he could be careful when he made love to me. He had wrapped my legs around his waist and supported my weight in his lap without once touching my ankle. I had insisted that we consummate our back-together status over his objections.

“I don’t wanna hurt you,” he said when I had slid down so my head was in his lap.

“You won’t,” I said, reaching up to touch his face, my fingers sliding over his jaw. “But I gotta have you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Please.”

“Okay baby,” he said, his voice low and husky.

I let him ease me out of his lap and watched as he unwrapped my ankle, releasing me from the machine. He had an *Ace* bandage and he was methodical when he put it on, checking to make sure it wasn’t too tight, massaging the cramp from my other calf, working his strong hands up both legs to my thighs. When I lifted up off the couch, my back bowed for him, he picked me up and carried me to his bed. I was pinned under him and when he kissed me, I moaned loudly.

“I wore a condom with Maggie J, I swear I did.”

I smiled up into the eyes now dark with passion. “And so what?”

“I went and got tested after and I know it doesn’t show up that fast but I’m clean and—”

“And so what?” I repeated. “You just want me to let you—”

“Yes—please...let me.”

I stared up into his eyes and I saw his jaw clenching, heard the shaky breath, saw the hard swallow.

“Baby I swear I—”

“I don’t trust anyone like I trust you Sam.”

The look on his face that I had never seen before, the look of love—surrender and aching and happiness all at the same time—I was so pleased with him—with the man I would spend the rest of my life with.

“I’m gonna be so gentle baby.”

“Don’t be that gentle,” I teased him.

And the kiss I got curled my toes, it went through me so fast and so hard, racing heat that made me cry out.

“The sounds you make when you’re happy,” he growled against my mouth. “You kill me.”

I was burned up with my desire for him and him for me. Impossible to deny the connection between us as tangible as it was. His skin on mine was scorching.

“Hello.”

My head snapped up and I realized I had been daydreaming.

“I’m gonna grab you if you don’t hurry the fuck up,” he threatened me, his brows furrowing. “It’s freezing out here J.”

I tried not to smile as I hobbled passed him.

“I hope you have something to eat up there because I’m starving.”

“I don’t actually. Why don’t you run and get some Cuban food and meet me upstairs. Gimme the bag.”

He snorted out a laugh. “Yeah right, like you can use crutches and carry a bag. I’ll meet you up there. Whaddya want?”

“Just rice and some chicken is good.”

“Okay,” he said, leaning forward, kissing my forehead before he left.

At the stairs I realized that Sam carrying me was probably the best-case scenario. It looked like Everest instead of the two-flights that it was. I was resting at the top of the first flight when I heard Sam whistling behind me.

“Need help yet?”

“Screw you Kage.”

He walked around in front of me, dropped his shoulder and threw me over his back.

“Sam!” I complained as he did what he always did and slapped my ass hard. “Put me down. The blood is rushing to—”

“Nope,” he cut me off, bouncing me on his shoulder to prove his dominance, carrying me and my crutches up the next flight of stairs. When he deposited me in front of my door, I immediately reached up and wrapped my arms around his neck to draw him down to me.

He deepened the kiss, having his way with me, completely in control. I knew he loved that I was submissive, intoxicated with wielding his power over me. It was the role he understood and why we fit together so well. The essential make-up of the man I was not asking to change. He was the dominant partner, the alpha male; I was his mate simple as that.

“What’re you thinking about?”

“Where’s my food?” I teased him, hugging him tight.

He clutched me close, one hand in my hair, holding me against him, the other running up and down my back. The contented sigh was long, like he could finally breathe.

“The place is closed on Sundays. We’ll have to scrounge up some food. I’ll cook you something.”

I grunted and he pinched my ass.

“Open the door.”

When the door swung open it took me a minute to realize what I was looking at. I had only ever seen an apartment ransacked in movies. I never imagined what it would look like in real life.

“Oh shit,” Sam breathed out and his gun was in his hand before I was even aware that he was carrying one. “Stay here while I check the rest of it J.”

“No just—” I reached for him but he slipped into the dark apartment and down the short hall to my bedroom. I leaned inside and flipped on the lights, illuminating the living room and kitchen as he came out, replacing the gun in the holster under his leather jacket. Funny that it had taken him only seconds to check the entire apartment, there was no getting around the fact that it was tiny.

“It’s all clear,” he told me. “Whoever was here is long gone.”

I nodded, shivering hard.

He wrapped me up in his arms and pressed me against his big hard body. “Its okay baby you just won’t be staying here. Let’s get your stuff packed up okay?”

“No Sam I can’t just let somebody scare me out of my—”

“Yes you can,” he said, tipping my chin up so he could look down into my eyes. “I won’t allow you to be here. It’s not an option. Besides, I would’ve been moving you in tomorrow anyway. I don’t plan to sleep without you ever.”

“But Sam it’s too soon. We need time to—”

“No we don’t J. You aren’t gettin’ any time so do whatever you hafta do in your head ‘cause you live with me starting now.”

“But—”

“I’m gonna pack up your shit then I’m gonna call it in. Sit down while I do that.”

“Sam—”

“There,” he pointed at the loveseat. “Sit down and look pretty.”

“Sam—”

“It’s a furnished apartment J. What do you even have here that you’d need to move?”

“That’s not the point. I—”

“I can put you in the seat if you’d prefer.”

I went and sat down as he walked back to my bedroom. “Lucky you picked me up at the pier huh?” I asked the empty room, raising my voice so he could hear me. “What if I’d been home?”

“Yeah well ya weren’t,” he called out from the other room.

“Yeah but what if I was?” I yelled back.

“But ya weren’t!” he shouted and I could hear that he was verging on a roar. I understood where the anger came from. He was terrified of losing me.

I was content even as I sat in the middle of my gutted apartment. He loved me. I was good.

* * * *

HE ENDED UP TAKING me to get a steak because he said I needed the iron. I looked pale he told me and so I was fed a filet and a loaded baked potato with a Greek salad on the side. I had Key Lime pie for dessert and a cappuccino and was promised all sorts of carnal pleasures when he got home. I took issue with the end of the sentence, *when he got home*, but wasn’t allowed to argue with him as he tucked me into his bed with the remote for the TV and a hot cup of Chamomile tea. He had to go supervise the crime scene and explain why my clothes had been removed along with my laptop and my books. No amount of whining or cajoling or begging was going to keep him from being there while the crime scene guys went through my place. I wanted him home with me and he wanted to know who had been in my apartment. He changed the subject by telling me how smart I had been not to buy a real bed. Now I had nothing to put into storage or sell or give away. I didn’t realize until I had all my things back at Sam’s that I had never put any money into the apartment. It was a place to live and as much as I loved it, as happy as I had been to be there, it was still just a stop on the tour. My place was with Sam and his apartment felt like going home. He was right—I belonged there.

I got a long, hot kiss before he left and he propped up my ankle and hooked me back up to the ice machine. He showed me how to turn it off after an hour and unwrap my ankle. He’d wrap it back up in the Ace bandage when he got home. I argued that he should stay with me and he ordered me not to open the door for anybody. Period.

“What about your Mom?”

“What?” He stopped at the door to look at me, clearly annoyed.

“Can I open the door for your Mom?”

“Yes,” he said quickly, turning to go.

“How about Dane?”

“Oh for crissakes Jory you know what the fuck I mean!”

I chuckled and he shot me a look before he stalked down the hall.

“Bye!” I called out to him.

He came back and leaned down and kissed me, this time tenderly, slowly, breathing me in. When he pulled back, I leaned with him as far as I could.

“Just sit here and rest. Stop bein’ a brat.”

I scowled at him and he left. I heard the front door shut and then the clicking of several locks. He wasn’t taking any chances. My phone rang seconds later.

“Hi.” I sighed, nestling down into the bed.

“I’m gonna drive you to work in the morning and pick you up after. From now on you go nowhere without me. You understand?”

“I understand,” I sighed. I loved it when he was possessive and told me what to do. Nobody else had ever cared besides Dane. The two men in my life who—“oh shit.”

“Oh shit what?”

“I gotta tell Dane about you.”

“And that’s bad?”

“It’s kinda bad.”

“Why?”

“He thinks I’m wasting my time with you.”

“I’ll talk to him. Gimme his number.”

“Are you kidding?”

He laughed softly. “Baby I know you’re afraid of Dane Harcourt but believe me—I’m not.”

I wasn’t convinced of his sanity. Not afraid of Dane? “Okay.”

He repeated the number back to me and told me to watch TV or start my novel.

“You’re hysterical,” I grumbled. “Just come back soon.”

“I will baby. I love you.”

Words so casually spoken that tore right through me. “I love you too.”

And when he hung up I closed my eyes and grabbed his pillow. It smelled like him and I was content to lie there in the warm apartment and wait for my man to come home.

* * * *

I WOKE UP AND realized the room was dark. I was under the covers and when I shifted I hit a mass of solid heat. Sam was beside me sleeping soundly on his stomach. I rolled over, draping my good leg over the back of his thighs and read the digital display on his nightstand. It was just after four in the morning. I had no idea how long he’d been in bed but from the chill in his legs I couldn’t imagine long. He had to be exhausted. He usually slept in pyjama bottoms but he was naked. I couldn’t keep my hands off him.

“I’m glad you’re home,” I whispered before I kissed the spot between his shoulder blades.

He grunted but didn’t move.

I rolled off him, onto my back and stared at the ceiling in the darkness, trying to make my body calm down. I wanted him but he was tired and I had to kill my motor. When he shifted, turning toward me, his hand going to my abdomen, I froze under his touch. I had butterflies in my stomach along with the familiar tensing, heat was racing through me. It was his fault. I craved him.

“Why are you awake?” he asked softly, his hand sliding down my bare skin, slipping under the waistband of my sweats, inside my briefs to touch me, wrap his fingers around me.

I groaned, arching up into his hand.

“Your skin is so hot J.”

“Please,” I begged him, moving, sliding in and out of his fist. “Please baby.”

He rolled off the bed and I heard him fumbling around, as I pulled off my clothes, stripping naked as fast as I could. A drawer opened; there was the pop of a cap and then his hand on my thigh, dragging me forward, my bent legs resting on his arms, his lubed fingers slipping inside me gently as his other hand closed around my cock.

“You missed me.”

I moaned out his name and I felt him tense before he slid deep inside my body. I wasn’t prepared for the laughter that came instantly.

“Why’re you—”

“You just feel so good. I’m such an idiot.”

“Sam?”

He pushed in again, burying himself in me and I cried out, clutching at him, wanting him closer, deeper, the sensations exquisite and wanted.

“God J, why would I ever be so stupid to let you go when I love you so goddamn much, and it feels like this being in bed with you? Jesus I’m an idiot.”

I pulled him down for a kiss as my orgasm built.

“You’re in love with the village idiot,” he breathed against my mouth.

“You’re not an idiot anymore,” I assured him, my back bowed, barely breathing as I quaked and bucked under him.

I felt his hand slide over my stomach, touch the muscles clenching there.

“No I’m not,” he agreed, setting a pounding pace that brought gasps from me instead of words. “Everybody’s gonna know you’re mine.”

Which was all I ever wanted.

“I missed you so bad.”

When I moaned, he clutched me tight and I thought, just for a second, that I died. Surely it wasn’t possible to feel that good and still be alive. He told me I needed to get used to it. He wasn’t going anywhere and making love to him was going to be exhausting.

I was ready for the challenge.

CHAPTER EIGHT

H E HAD CALLED ME and told me to wait at work for him, so I was still there at seven-thirty when he walked in and collapsed onto the overstuffed loveseat in the corner of my office. I stood there looking at him, watching as he raked his hands through his hair and slowly let his head roll to the side to look at me.

“Talk to me.” I said gently, walking around my desk to sit on the edge of it.

“Jesus what a weird day.”

I was reverent because I knew what he had been up against, the end of his partnership. “It was hard huh?”

“You could say that,” he breathed out. “And you could say surreal instead if you wanted to.”

I stared at him. “Can you explain that?”

Heavy sigh as he stretched out his long body, his fingers laced behind his head, his feet out in front of him. “Well for starters this morning I went right in to talk to my captain and ask him for a new partner, but before I could even explain why, before I can even get out a word about you, he makes a call and I have to go meet with IAD.”

“What’s—”

“Internal Affairs Division, they check out cops. That’s their deal.”

“Okay. So what’d they want with you? Surely Dom didn’t tell them about—”

He shook his head. “No baby. They weren’t interested in me. They wanted to know about Dom.”

I stared at him.

“Remember when you said his place was really nice...well I guess I didn’t know but it actually is. Turns out he’s been on the take since like day one. He’s the leak in the department. He’s the one that told Roman where to find Brian. He’s the one that told them where to find you.”

“Oh shit.”

“Oh yeah.” He gave me a hint of a smile. “That little home invasion he had, you remember you were there, well it turns out that that was the work of one of the guys who pays Dom off wanting to send him a message.”

“By doing what? Killing him?”

“I have no idea I just know now from meeting with IAD who they were.”

“Is Dom still working?”

“No he’s got put on leave pending a full scale investigation.”

“What did your captain say?”

He exhaled deeply, closing his eyes for a long minute before opening them only to stare at the ceiling “It was so weird...I mean he was just so thrilled I asked for a new partner today. I guess he’s been telling IAD I was clean but because of Dom they would have gone on investigating me too but since I... it makes me look like I’m innocent and—”

“But you are.”

“Yeah but it could’ve been so bad. And it still is ‘cause now that I’m basically on the outside and I can’t talk to Dom...he’s under investigation and they pulled him in so he knows and Jesus what a day.”

“Did everyone look at you like you were a narc?”

“No. I was his partner, everybody’s lookin’ at me like I knew he was dirty but I was loyal to him. They figure it finally got to be too much so I requested the change, nothing else. Everybody figures I was good for keeping his secret just wanting out ya know? I’m getting hero treatment.”

“So where does that leave you?”

“That leaves me pretty well off. Anything Dominic says about me nobody’ll believe and tomorrow I get my new partner, Ricky de Silva. He’s moving over from homicide.”

“You know him?”

“I know of him and he’s a good cop. We talked today and he said he’s excited to work with me. I’ll bring him by here tomorrow to meet you.”

“Why?”

“‘Cause if he’s got a problem I need to know right off, ‘cause ya hafta be a hundred percent honest with your partner. I made the mistake of not telling Dom what was going on with me. I won’t do that again.”

I crossed the room and stepped between his legs. He reached up for my hand, tilting his head so he could look up into my eyes. I wanted to comfort him. “I’m sorry you—”

“And I got to have lunch with Dane.”

Time stopped.

He grinned at me. "Didja hear me?"

Obviously not, "I'm sorry what?"

He chuckled dryly. "You heard me. I had lunch with the big man."

"You did?" I croaked out as he pulled me down into his lap, my legs folded on each side of his thighs, straddling his hips.

He patted my ass before he settled his hands on my hips. "Yes I did baby and it was gruelling lemme tell you. Only for you would I sit through that shit."

"Why? What?"

"He's good ya know? I give him credit. I might ask him to sit in next time I question a witness."

"Oh," I sympathized, cupping his face in my hands, lifting his chin up so I could bend and kiss him.

He parted his lips for me and I slipped my tongue inside his mouth, tasting him.

"God yes," he groaned. "I so deserve this after the fuckin' day I had."

I smiled against his mouth as he pulled back to look up at me.

"We get to have dinner with him tomorrow."

"With Dane?"

"Yep."

"I'm so sorry," I chuckled, kissing his eyes, the bridge of his nose, his brows, his cheeks and his lips as he smiled wickedly.

"Its okay baby." He sighed heavily. "It's a package deal. I don't get you without him and since I'm keeping you, I gotta deal with Dane Harcourt."

"You sound so thrilled."

"He's an arrogant sonofabitch," he passed judgment. "And he's fuckin' possessive and protective and today he was just...he's so worried I'm gonna hurt you and he...he threatened me and I just felt like—"

“You wanted to kill him?”

“I wanted to thank him.” He smiled up at me. “Cause he took such good care of you.”

“Awww Sam.” I kissed him again. “That was nice.”

“He’s gonna sell the apartment for you J and give you the money. He said it was yours.”

“We’ll see. I’ll talk to him about—”

“You can get it all straightened out tomorrow.”

“Why couldn’t we see him tonight?”

“Tonight he’s going to see Carmen. Is she hot?”

I smiled at him. “It’s an opera.”

He pinched my ass hard. “I know that jerk I’m not a total idiot.”

I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around his neck, burying my face in his shoulder. “I love you.”

“I know,” he said, clutching me tight, his hands smoothing up and down my back. “This is the only thing that kept me going all day.”

I drew back to look down into his face.

“Knowing that I’d have you at the end of it.”

The words that came out of his mouth were amazing.

“You’re vibrating.” He smiled at me with the lopsided grin I loved, the one that short-circuited my brain

“What?”

“Your phone dumbass.”

I grunted, sliding out of his lap. “Nice.”

“Come back.” He reached for me.

I turned away and answered. “Hello?”

“Coward.”

“What?”

“Sending that poor man here alone to eat with me and discuss his intended future with you. Tsk-tsk.”

“I didn’t send anyone anywhere,” I told Dane. “I would have gone with him.”

“That would not have been advisable. It would have been impossible for me to keep my objectivity had you come along.”

“Like you were objective.”

“I was.”

I smiled into the phone. “He says it was brutal.”

“I was polite.”

“You know what you think...it means everything and he—I—”

“You love him, I know.”

“Is this where you tell me if it goes bad the next time you’re not gonna be there to help me out?”

“I don’t care how many times it gets screwed up, I will be there.”

Everybody in my life was amazing today. “Yeah?”

“I would however like you to consider the wear and tear on your heart. You don’t have to act like an idiot simply because you are one.”

“That makes no sense and you’re being kind of an ass right now.”

He grunted.

“Dane I—”

“Listen,” he sighed. “Tomorrow the Reids are in town from Texas. I expect you with the Detective or without to be at my apartment at seven sharp. We’re having drinks and then we’re going to dinner at The Dancing Bull at eight.”

“Okay.”

“Repeat what I said.”

“Oh for crissakes I heard what you—”

“Did you?”

“I’m not five Dane. I heard you and I was actually paying attention.”

He grunted like he didn’t believe me.

“I was, drinks at seven, dinner at eight. I got it. Dancing Bull, so I know what to wear.”

“Wear one of the suits I bought you at Christmas.”

“I’m not a Ken doll ya know.”

He laughed at me. “Oh the hell you’re not. Make sure the Detective wears a suit as well.”

“I will.”

“Does he own a suit?”

“God you’re a snob.”

“No, I just want to know what to expect.”

“We’ll both be properly attired,” I assured him.

“Excellent.”

“Is that all?”

“That’s all.”

“Hey, did you get lucky the other night after the art walk?”

“That question is both crude and obnoxious.”

I smiled into the phone.

“Good night,” he said quickly.

“Good night.”

“Well?” Sam asked when I looked over at him. “What did the great man have to say?”

“We have to have dinner with him tomorrow night.”

“I already told you that.”

“It won’t be just us.”

“I know, his birth parents. I already told you that too.”

I smiled at him.

“Sounds like it’ll be a blast.” He smirked at me.

“You’ll get introduced to someone as my partner for the first time. Are you ready for that?” I stared into his eyes and waited.

“I’m ready,” he said, getting up, motioning me to him. “Get your stuff I wanna go.”

When my courier bag was packed and I met him at the door, he took it from me and tucked it under his arm before wrapping the other around my neck, drawing me in close to him.

“I’m your guy J. You call me whatever you want.”

The man definitely knew what to say.

* * * *

AS WE DROVE THROUGH downtown I looked at the strangers walking outside my window and wondered, as I always did, about different people’s lives.

“Ask you a question?”

“Of course.” I yawned, turning to look at him.

“What would make you want to stay home with me instead of going out and getting laid by a different guy every night?”

I felt myself scowl.

“Don’t gimme the look just answer the question. ‘Cause when I was twenty-two J— ”

“I’m twenty-three.”

“Whatever. When I was twenty-three I was fuckin’ wild. I used to hit the club every night or the bar and I never took home the same person twice.”

“You were a big time player,” I passed judgment.

“Yeah I was. I was twenty-three. You’re supposed to sow wild oats so you don’t try and recapture your youth when you’re like fifty or whatever.”

“I see.”

“I have a theory that guys that go through a mid-life crisis just never really got to be young the first time ya know? Like my Dad—he was insane before he met my Mom but he got it all out and he never had a mid-life crisis. He never had to buy a Porsche or get a divorce and date blondes the same age as his daughters. I think that comes from being crazy when you’re supposed to.”

“Okay.”

“So my question to you is this—aren’t you gonna miss going out with your friends or—”

“I can still go out with my friends,” I assured him. “If you want to go dancing with me, or to the movies, or out to dinner, or come along with me for game night you can—you’re invited. If you don’t I’m not gonna beg you. You have your friends and I have mine. They might not ever mix.”

“You’re still gonna go out?”

“Why not?”

“To the club to—”

“I may wanna go dancing Sam. I enjoy it. If I wanna go and you don’t wanna go with me then I’ll go alone. But I have some really good friends that get me. They know me and if I say I’m with you they’ll respect that. When you meet them you’ll understand.”

He let out a deep sigh. “I just don’t want you to resent me a few years down the road ‘cause I kept you from doing whatever you wanted to do.”

I put my hand on his thigh and he immediately covered it with his, sliding his fingers between mine. “I’ve been on my own a long time Sam and I’ve slept with my share of strangers. I don’t wanna do that anymore. I don’t need a trick I need a home.”

“Trick?”

“You know like a one night stand or whatever.”

“Okay and I’m a top right?”

I looked over at him. "Are you kidding?"

"No why?"

"Sam what's with you and Gay 101?"

"I'm just asking 'because I don't know.'"

"Okay for the record you're a top."

"And that makes you what?"

"A bottom," I said like he had ridden the short bus to school.

He nodded.

"We could mix it up if you like." I grinned slyly.

"No I don't think so. I like everything just how it is."

"Oh I bet you do," I said, looking out the window.

"You don't?"

"Don't be an idiot." I sighed, turning to look at his profile. "You know I'm good with us."

He kept his eyes on the road. "I know you are."

"You know I have a lot of friends that have open relationships."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning they live with someone but still sleep around."

"And?"

"And so you know... I'm not built that way."

"Good'cause it ain't gonna be that way. You belong to just me."

I looked away so he couldn't see me smile.

"Look at me."

I turned to find his eyes on mine. I hadn't realized he'd pulled over.

"I just want you to be sure this is what you want J 'cause after this we're gonna go with this bein' permanent. I mean I've got my mind made up but you gotta be on board too."

I understood that this was how he worked. There was the wrestling with the problem, then the resolution, the yes or no on a decision, followed by the buy-in from all parties involved. He liked a rock-solid foundation before he moved forward. After this there was no going back.

"I'm on board Sam."

He reached for me; his hand around the back of my neck and pulled me forward to kiss me breathless. I had to push back to take in air.

The smile was wicked, very pleased with himself.

"You look very happy," I said, my voice soft so it wouldn't crack on me.

"'Cause I am," he assured me, running the back of his fingers up and down my throat before suddenly settling back behind the wheel, easing the SUV back out into traffic. "Let's go eat I'm starving."

* * * *

WE ENDED UP AT a deli where we both ordered sandwiches stacked to the sky and took them to go. He told me how frustrating it was that in all the mess of my rifled apartment that there was not one fingerprint, piece of hair or any other tell-tale piece of evidence to suggest that there had even been an intruder. Professionally done was an understatement and when I pressed him for a guess as to who it could have been, he had nothing he wanted to share. I knew better, even in the short time we had known each other, than to push. I was going to ask some more questions about his new partner when his phone went off. I was surprised when mine rang a second later.

"Hello?"

"Jory?"

"Yeah."

"Jory, its Jen."

"Oh." I glanced over at Sam who was listening very intently to whoever was on the other end. "Hey how are you? I had no idea you had my—"

"Jory, I need you and Sam to come to my house right now."

"Are you—"

"I'm okay, I just need some support." She was close to tears; I could hear it in her voice. "I told Mitch and he just left and...then I called Kurt and...could you just come?"

"Course," I soothed her. "We'll be right there."

"Thanks. I'll see you soon."

"Sure," I promised before she hung up on me.

"Who was that?" he asked, yawning.

"Jen," I said fast. "How 'bout you?"

"My Mom," he sighed deeply. "She wants me to go to Jen's."

"Perfect." I smiled at him. "That's where Jen wants us to go too."

"We're not going." He shot me a look.

"Oh the hell we're not," I retorted, thinking he was kidding. "Jen needs us. We're so going."

"We're not and that's final," he assured me.

I nodded slowly.

* * * *

AS WE ROLLED UP in front of Jen's house in La Grange, I immediately opened my door.

"Wait!" He growled at me.

I turned my head and gave him the most exasperated look I could manage.

"You know what," he pointed at me. "You're lucky I even gave in and drove your ass over here."

"Gave in?" I snapped back before I climbed down and slammed the door shut as hard as I could. I turned for the house.

"Will you wait!" he roared at me as he came around the front of the car.

I limped to the fence and leaned as he came up beside me, his hand heavy on my back.

"Jesus you're so fuckin' stubborn."

I grunted, realizing that I should have been using the crutches. My ankle was still really sore.

“Can I help you please?”

I shrugged and he drew my arm up over his shoulder and tucked me in against him. I was surprised when he bent and kissed my temple.

“What was that for?”

“You’re a pain in the ass J but your heart’s in the right place. And seeing you all pissed off is really cute.”

I scowled up at him. “I’m not cute.”

“Yeah ya are,” he kissed the bridge of my nose. “And your face gets all flushed and your nose scrunches up, it’s adorable.”

I rolled my eyes and decided to ignore him.

“I love you.”

Which basically undid me. Righteous indignation stood no chance in the face of his warm eyes and crooked grin, the dimples that only showed when he smiled and the way he looked at me. And his words, he killed me with his words.

“Cat got your tongue baby?” He leaned down and kissed me, breathing me in, clutching me tight.

I clung to him and when he pulled back I could only stare up at him.

“I feel so good.” He sighed deeply, before he grabbed me and threw me over his shoulder.

“You know how old this is getting,” I groused at him, swatting his ass.

“I like it.” He shrugged and of that I had no doubt.

When we hit the porch the door opened and Regina Kage was standing there framed with light from behind her. Instead of reaching for Sam, she reached for me, taking my hand, drawing me inside the house.

“Jory, it’s so good to see you.”

I smiled at her as she opened her arms. It was so much better than I had ever imagined. I grabbed her so tight she squeaked and then hugged me back, smoothing her hands down the back of my hair, rubbing circles between my shoulder blades.

“Thank you for coming. Jen really needs the support.”

She let me go and went to Sam, wrapping her arms around him as I limped toward the living room.

Jen was sitting on the couch with Rachel beside her. Michael was in the opposite chair watching football with his Dad. There were sandwiches on a tray on the coffee table along with chips and dip and paper plates. All eyes were on me as I stepped into the room.

“Come here by me,” Jen said quickly, patting the space beside her.

I shed my jacket and was almost around the coffee table when Thomas stood to face me.

“Jory.”

“Sir.”

“Listen,” he began slowly, his voice low. “You understand this is not the choice I would make for my son...but neither have I ever seen him be the way he is when you’re with him. I want to be his friend Jory not just his father. I can’t have what I want and not give to him in return.”

I couldn’t stop staring at him. Sam’s parents were amazing. I understood what unconditional love looked like at that moment.

“The fact that you came when Jen called you...that says a lot too. Family’s important Jory, they have to love you no matter what.”

I nodded.

“Yes?”

“Yessir.”

He patted my shoulder. “Good boy. Go ahead,” he gestured to the couch.

I glanced over at Michael and he gave me the head tip.

“Jory.”

“Michael.”

“Good to see you. We missed you for the holidays.” He sighed, eyes back on the TV. “Boy did we.”

“Yes we did,” Rachel smiled up at me, reaching for my hand as she stood to give me a hug. “Sammy was such an ass...I felt so sorry for that poor girl Maggie.”

“Yeah,” Jen snorted out, smiling through her tears. “He was so obviously not into her.”

“She was clingy and needy.” Rachel shivered, giving me a final squeeze before she let me go. “I offered her a Valium.”

Jen laughed before burying her face in her hands. When I sat down beside her she turned into me and I wrapped her in my arms, holding her tight as she sobbed.

“What happened?”

“She told Mitch about her and Kurt.” Rachel sighed, patting her sister’s back gently. “And guess what,” she looked me in the eye. “He’s been banging his accountant for the last six months.”

“No way.” I was stunned.

“Oh yeah way.” She shook her head. “So he was so relieved that he’s giving her everything in the divorce, the house, the car, their assets...he just wants out.”

“And the girls?”

“He wants joint custody but that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Then,” I drew out the word, making it a question, looking at Rachel. “Why all this?”

“Kurt,” Rachel said softly. “He’s going to stay with Rita. She forgave him and they’re going to give it another chance.”

“But I thought Kurt loved Jen?”

“Apparently he loves his social class more.”

“I don’t understand.”

Jen pulled back to look up into my face. “Jory, Kurt was poor when he married Rita. He works at her father’s company. He’s the Vice President, his father-in-law is the President. The cars and the boat and the membership at the goddamn country club are all through her. She owns him and I forgot about that. He likes traveling and expensive clothes and his gadgets and everything else that her money buys.”

“Oh sweetie,” I sympathized, kissing her forehead, easing her back into my arms. “I’m so sorry.”

“When push came to shove he wanted to be rich more than he wanted to be in love.”

“He was probably thinking of his kids,” I assured her. “If she’s that rich I’m sure she could afford to—”

“Please Jory,” she sniffled. “His kids are away in boarding school. He doesn’t even see them.” She wheezed out, her tears nearly choking her. “No it’s just the money. He likes his status; he’s not going back to being just like the rest of us.”

“I’m so sorry honey.”

She clutched me tight.

“Jennifer.”

We both looked up at Sam.

“Fuck them all. You’ll find the guy for you. Just focus on your kids right now and we’ll all be here for you.” He motioned for her to go to him. “C’mere.”

And I was so proud of him, watching him hug the life out of his sister. The sigh that came up out of her spoke to the importance of his words. For whatever reason, what he thought and said being the mirror that she saw her reflection through. That he loved her and believed in her helping more than any other comfort.

“Thank you for coming Jory,” Rachel whispered, leaning across the small space that separated us. “It means so much.”

“It’s Sam that she needed.” I gestured to the brother and sister hugging tight.

“Yeah,” she nodded, looking me in the eye. “But when you’re not around he isn’t this guy. My Mom says that’s what happens when you’re in love; the other person brings out the very best in you.”

I stared back at her.

“When you’re with him Sammy is amazing. I never had much use for him until you came with him that one Sunday. I finally got what the big deal was...and then you disappeared. Don’t disappear again Jory.”

“No I won’t.”

She nodded, leaning back. “Good.”

It was a nice couple of hours, Sam’s family treating me like I belonged. He and Michael talked football and Thomas joined in, at ease with his sons. I promised Jen that on those weekends that the girls spent with their Dad that she could come and sleepover at my place. Rachel said that she had

big plans for her sister and I said we could go dancing. I wanted her to meet Dylan and Chris. She said she was looking forward to it.

Sam took a call and afterwards he said that we had to go. All the women hugged me and the men ignored me, which I took as a good sign since they were completely engrossed with what the Packers and the Broncos were doing. They grunted a goodbye to Sam and he promised his mother that we'd be there for Sunday dinner.

"I'll bring my brother," I told her.

"Oh!" She was thrilled. "I would love that Jory. Please do bring him."

I swore I would even as I wondered how I would accomplish it.

"Who was on the phone?" I asked Sam when we were back in the SUV.

"Christ we left those sandwiches in here," he grumbled, rolling down the window.

"Sam who—"

"It smells like sauerkraut. How can you even—"

"Who was on the phone?"

He sighed heavily. "Maggie."

"Okay. What does she want?"

"She wants to talk to me."

"And so you're going to go talk to her?"

"I owe her that much J."

"Do you?"

"I think so yeah."

I nodded, turning to look at the street.

"Don't you think so?"

"No."

"Don't be an ass."

“I’m not.”

“I’ll drop you at home.”

“Fine.”

We didn’t talk the entire way to my place and I got out of the car the second he stopped it. I didn’t even bother closing the door. I was moving as fast as I could to the front of the building when a heavy hand clamped down on my shoulder.

“Just go already.”

He turned me around to face him. “Listen, Maggie’s just lookin’ for some closure and I’m sure an explanation. She deserves that J.”

“Sure.”

His hand went to my chin tipping it up so he could look down into my eyes. “I’m coming home to you.”

I nodded.

“Knock it off, quit bein’ a brat.”

I exhaled deeply as he smiled into my eyes.

“Gimme kiss.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck, and pulled him down for a kiss that I wanted him to remember while he was talking to his ex-girlfriend.

“Maybe I should come up first,” he said when I finally pulled back, his voice gravelly as he spoke into my hair. The way his fingers were digging into my back, the way his lips were sliding down the side of my neck let me know that I had the reaction I was looking for.

“No,” I said, looking up at him. “Go and see Maggie. Just get back as soon as you can.”

He nodded, staring at my mouth. “I’ll be back soon. Don’t go to sleep.”

I chuckled. “I won’t.”

He gave me a final kiss on the forehead before he darted back to the car. I smiled when he peeled out. I was almost to the door when I heard my name called. Dominic Kairov was the last person I expected to see but there he was, stepping out of the shadows by the side of the building.

“Dom? What are you doing here?” I asked as I walked over to him.

He smiled sheepishly. “I wanted to talk to Sam and tell him I was sorry about everything. I wanna see if he can forgive me.”

“Of course he can,” I assured him, gesturing for him to follow me inside. “C’mon it’s freezing out here. We can wait for him together.”

“What’d you do to your ankle?”

I chuckled, “racquetball with Dane.”

He grunted behind me. “I guess you’re not so lucky after all huh Jory?”

“No, I think my luck only runs to out running contract killers.” I smiled.

“Maybe not.”

And I had a sudden chill, as I understood that maybe being alone with Dominic Kairov was really stupid.

“I think your luck’s done Jory.”

When I looked over my shoulder he grabbed the back of my coat and his hand covered my face. I couldn’t breathe and the smell was awful and then there was nothing but darkness as I felt my body turn liquid.

END OF BOOK TWO

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MARY CALMES

Mary Calmes lives in sunny Hawaii with her two lovely children and her long-suffering husband who supports her absolute need to write or die. And while the Yaoi Manga books confuse him,

he just goes with it. Working as an assistant manager at a copy shop pays the bills and her Co-workers are always fun and interesting. Someday, maybe, she can stay home and do that which she has always loved since she wrote her first short-story in the seventh grade. Oddly enough, it too was about two men. Some things never change.

<http://marycalmesbooks.blogspot.com>