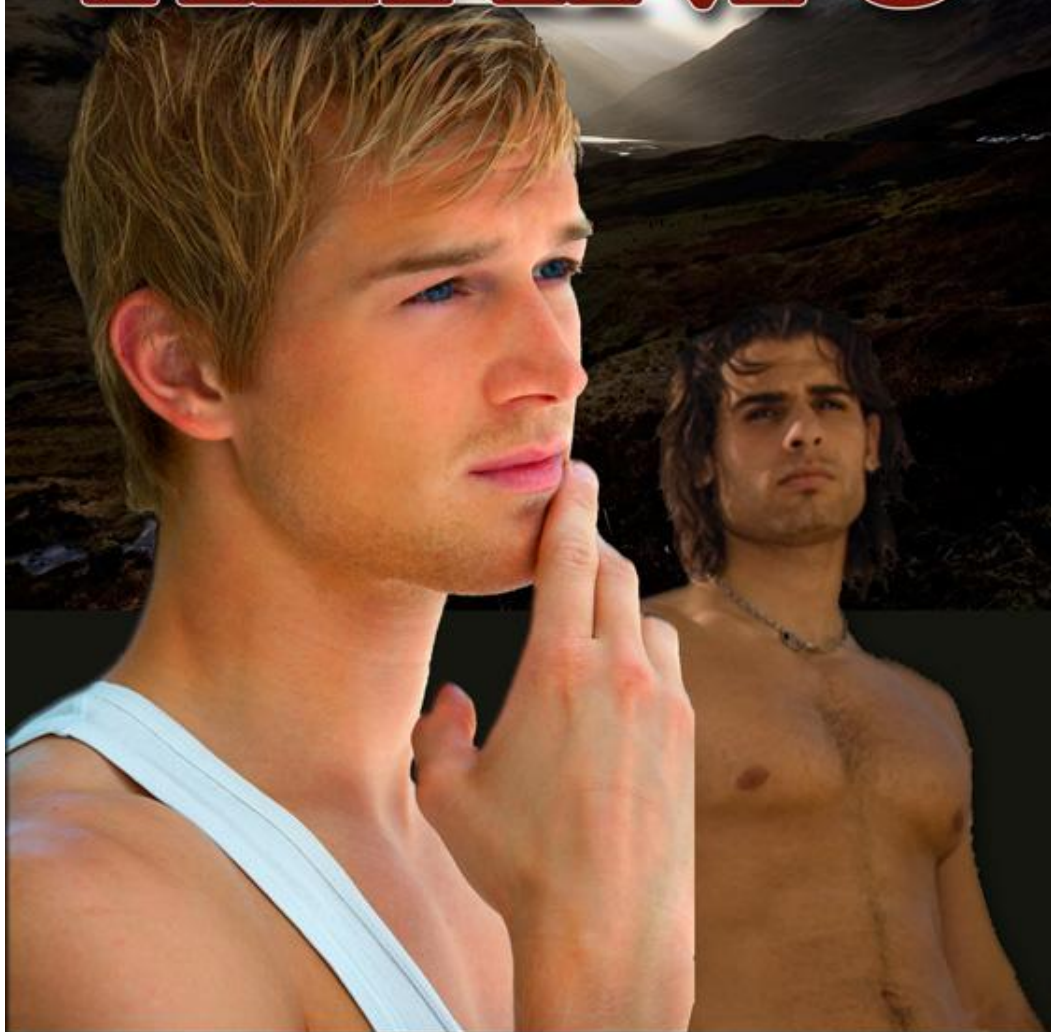


ROMANCE UNBOUND PUBLISHING

# WICKED HEARTS



CLAIRE THOMPSON

*Romance Unbound Publishing*  
Presents

# Wicked Hearts

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# Chapter 1

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“I’m bored. Whose life can we destroy today?”

Reese laughed, aware Hank was only half kidding.

“Can I get you anything else, Mr. Seeley?” The waiter wore the white shorts and dark blue polo shirt that were the staff uniform at the exclusive Denver country club. Hank eyed the young man for a few seconds before responding, and Reese knew he was assessing the guy’s orientation and potential in bed.

“No, thanks. We’re done.” Hank stood, tossing his linen napkin to the table. When the waiter had gone, Hank said, “Let’s go back to my place.” This was code for, “Let’s have sex.” Reese wasn’t in the mood.

“Sorry, I have to swing by the office and pick up some stuff for my call on Monday.”

Reese was a salesman for Strata Systems, a Denver software company that designed applications for computerized robots used in the manufacturing industry. He’d only been there a few months, and it was the first job he’d had where he showered before work instead of after.

Hank grunted, clearly annoyed. “I liked your old job better. You had predictable hours.”

*And you had more control.* Aloud Reese said, “You kidding me? I’d way rather be sitting in nice restaurants schmoozing guys in suits than sweating my ass off on a construction site. And I don’t miss being forced to listen to a bunch of macho assholes trying to one-up each other on how much pussy they got that weekend.”

“Just don’t let me catch you blowing the boss for that promotion. You know I’m a very jealous guy.”

“I’ll remember that when he offers me the promotion.” For all their easy banter, Hank really was a jealous guy, or at least a possessive one. Since the beginning, the pattern had been established—Hank had claims on Reese he’d yet to shake off.

It wasn’t the first time Hank had complained about Reese’s new job, but Reese knew there was a lot more to it than just a career change. Hank resented Reese’s efforts to better himself without any help from the Seeley family. Since Reese was seventeen, he’d been beholden in one way or another to Hank’s family. Now things were changing. Reese was making them change.

For the first time he felt like he had a career, instead of just a job. He liked working at Strata Systems. No one in the small, progressive company had a fixed schedule. He could come and go as he pleased and the business was an interesting one. Not to mention, the owner, Bob Sanchez, was openly gay.

In fact, that was how Reese had got the job, or at least a shot at an interview. He'd met Bob at the party of a mutual friend. Reese had mentioned he was looking to find a new career, something with more potential for advancement, and the rest, as they say, was history.

It wasn't all smooth sailing. He worked on commission and had yet to build up much of a clientele. As a result, the money he'd saved while working in construction had steadily dwindled, leaving him nearly broke, though he'd be damned if he admitted this to Hank.

"You can just drop me at my place. I'll take the bike."

"No. I'll go with you," Hank announced.

Reese's impulse was to refuse. He didn't want Hank horning in on this new thing in his life. But he knew if he protested, Hank would only become more determined. The inevitable power struggle wasn't worth it, Reese decided with an inward sigh.

Hank's driver was waiting outside the club in his Mercedes Benz SL65 AMG. Reese would have much rather been on his motorcycle—alone. Once they were settled in the backseat, Hank returned to his earlier theme. "We haven't made a good bet in a while. I'm in the mood for something nasty."

Reese responded out of habit more than interest. "Oh yeah? What's in it for me?"

Hank appraised Reese, lifting the corner of his mouth in a sardonic smile. "What's always in it for you? The power of the conquest, the knowledge you can get any guy you set your sights on. Oh, and of course, I'll make the pot sweet."

Despite himself, Reese found himself asking, "How sweet?"

"Depends what we come up with. It's been a while. You need a challenge."

It was a game they had played for years. It turned Hank on to watch Reese seduce other men, not because he cared for them, but because he could. It was understood between them that Reese was always the one to make the play. It was beneath Hank, in a twisted way. He controlled the strings and Reese danced to his tune. That was the real crux of the matter—power.

For years Reese had gone along, caught in the net of obligation, debt and desire that had formed the framework of their relationship these many years. He couldn't deny that their sex was infused with an added intensity after Reese had hunted and captured his quarry for Hank's cold amusement.

But lately Reese was growing tired of the game. The glitter of seducing and then discarding guys, just because he could, had begun to tarnish. But it was more than that. He was trying to make something new—something that didn't include, or at least wasn't controlled by this man who had been the one constant in his life over the past twelve years.

He glanced at Hank, who was regarding him from beneath his lashes, his strong, cruel mouth pursed in thought. He was handsome, with even features and a firm jaw, but his eyes were like dark, wet stones, flat and cold.

In spite of himself, as he always did, Reese felt the power of Hank's gaze. He forced himself to look away. "Count me out on this one, Hank. I'm getting too old for that shit."

Hank laughed. "Twenty-nine is too old to get someone into bed? Last I checked, you were in perfect working order, my friend." He squeezed Reese's thigh with thick, blunt fingers, his hand edging toward Reese's crotch. Reese shifted, turning toward the window.

As if sensing Reese's resistance, Hank added, "I'm feeling expansive. But you'll have to earn it, my friend. Five thousand bucks."

"What?" Reese turned from the window to stare at Hank. The bets always carried a monetary prize for Reese, but usually only a few hundred bucks, a thousand at the most. Five thousand dollars sure would come in handy, with the rent due and Reese's bike in desperate need of new tires. It would give him the cushion he needed while he built up his clientele at Strata.

"You heard me. Five thousand bucks to do what you do best."

"What's your twisted brain up to now?" Reese asked, trying to keep his voice light. If only Hank hadn't dangled that kind of money in front of him, damn him.

"You know," Hank said, staring out the window with studied nonchalance. "The old offer still stands. You could move in with me while you're getting yourself established in your so-called career. Better yet, you could quit that lousy day job and spend your time devoting yourself to me 24/7. I've always wanted a live-in sex slave." Hank laughed to show he was kidding, but Reese knew he wasn't.

"Yeah, that's just what I want to be when I grow up, your personal whore. Me and the houseboy could share the servants quarters."

"Oh no," Hank said, lifting an eyebrow. "As personal whore, you'd sleep in *my* bed." Again the outward joke continued, but in fact Reese knew that was just how it would be. Hank had asked Reese to move in with him several times over the years, assuring him a life of luxury and ease, but the price was far too high.

"Not gonna happen," Reese said with finality.

"Whatever," Hank shrugged with practiced nonchalance. "Back to the wager at hand. I want to come in and see what we've got to work with at this job of yours."

"Oh, no you don't." Reese interrupted. "This bet will not involve anyone I work with. I just got this job. I'm not going to fuck it up." Inwardly he sighed, watching the proffered five thousand dollars rapidly receding.

"Relax. I'm not gonna make a scene or anything. Just a casual stroll around the place. I'll pick the guy, you get him in bed and you win the money. Easy as pie for a stud like you."

"And if I lose?"

Hank cocked an eyebrow and offered a small, cruel smile. "You lose, I get your ass. You agree to be my personal sex slave for a solid week." Reese was silent, appraising the offer. When Hank said sex slave, he meant it. Hank had a thing for whips and chains. He'd tried over the years to get Reese involved, but Reese wasn't hardwired that way. Occasionally he'd let Hank tie him up, but it had never turned him on. Hank found other guys for that kind of play, which suited Reese fine.

Was the bet worth the price? Easy money, if he could pull it off. The odds were good he'd win. Reese knew he was good looking. He knew how to turn on the charm, too. He could be what others wanted him to be. He could reflect them back at themselves, even if there was nothing behind his smile or his words.

He scanned the men in his office in his mind, trying to think who Hank might pick. He might choose Gary, who was over fifty and had grandkids. The odds had to be somewhat reasonable or it wasn't worth the risk. *Jesus, you're going to do it.* Quashing any lingering hesitation, he said, "No one over fifty and no women."

"Deal." Hank's grin was sly and Reese knew in that moment he'd lost whatever edge he'd had. Nothing had changed between them. Maybe nothing ever would. "The usual rules apply—you provide me with the recorded proof of the deed, with the guy's face clear enough to identify."

Reese nodded, thinking of the hidden camera Hank had bought him a few years back to record just such a scene for their shared amusement. It no longer seemed quite so amusing to Reese, but he shrugged. Worst came to worst, he would lose the bet. He could deal with a little bondage for a few days.

They entered the large, one-story building, with its high ceilings and huge skylights. Reese glanced across the open room, looking from space to space. Bob didn't have offices in his building, but rather what he termed "creative spaces" set along the perimeter of the room for the programmers and marketers, with a large central area in the middle for hanging out and brainstorming. The building was always open in case a creative urge or sudden breakthrough propelled one of the developers to their computer.

Reese moved toward his space, Hank behind him. Once Reese had collected the files he needed, Hank said, "Take me on a tour. Let's see what's out there." Some people glanced up at Hank as they passed, but, as he'd come in with Reese, they simply nodded or smiled and went back to their business.

Reese followed him through the room, apprehension prickling his skin. Hank walked slowly, casting his appraising eye over the twenty or so guys at their desks, clustered in the free space or playing pool in the game area. When he got to the farthest corner of the building, Hank pointed toward a desk that was partially obscured by a silk screen. Hank moved closer. The guy didn't look up.

"Who's that?"

"Jeff somebody." Reese scanned his memory for the guy's last name. "Hartman. Jeff Hartman."

*Not him*, Reese silently prayed. Jeff Hartman was geek extraordinaire. He'd never said a word in Reese's presence, except to stammer painfully when asked some technical question by another developer. Reese had him pegged as one of those idiot savants who could barely put two words together, but could write the code to program a robot to do anything from building a car from the ground up to designing a telescope for use on a space shuttle. He was the kid in junior high whose lunch money you stole.

They stepped away and Hank asked, "Straight or gay?"

"No idea. He probably doesn't know either."

They headed around the rest of the building, moving slowly toward the front door. As they walked, Hank asked questions about a few of the other men, and Reese answered them as best he could. He could still say no, he told himself, he could always say no.

Neither spoke as they climbed into Hank's car and Hank directed the driver to Reese's place. As they eased into traffic, Hank said, "I choose that geek in the corner with the long hair. You have until Saturday. That should be plenty of time to get even the shyest social misfit into the sack."

Reese didn't respond. For the first time, he considered Jeff Hartman as a potential conquest. He supposed he wasn't hard on the eyes, with longish dark hair and a slender build. He dressed in old T-shirts and holey blue jeans that made him look like a college kid. He didn't have a clear read on Jeff's sexual orientation, but that wouldn't be too hard to figure out, if he took the bet, that was.

They pulled up to Reese's small rental house in a modest neighborhood. "So, we have a deal?" Hank said, as Reese started to climb out.

*Five thousand dollars...* "Yeah. What the hell."

As he started to close the door, Hank called out, "Oh, and Reese?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't fall in love."

"No chance of that. I don't even know what the word means."

The sad thing was, he really didn't.

~\*~

"Damn it. Why does this thing keep crashing? Is there a memory leak?"

"Pardon me?"

Jeff jerked his head up in surprise, unaware anyone had been nearby. Reese Armstrong stood there staring down at him, tall, tan and perfect, with white teeth flashing in a wide, sunny smile.

"I-I-I was j-j-just..." *Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.* Jeff pressed his lips together, closing his eyes for a second and practicing his relaxation techniques.

Reese Armstrong had never spoken to him before. Until that moment, he hadn't realized the new salesman even knew he was alive. He'd noticed Reese, that was for damn sure. How could he miss him, with that shock of blond hair, those broad shoulders and the dimple in his square chin?

Reese was one of those guys who radiated energy. There was a constant air of risk and bravado about him, as if he were always on the edge of something exciting. You wanted to be near him, drawn in spite of yourself to his magnetism.

In the past when Reese had a technical question, he talked to Stan or Gabriel, leaving Jeff in his quiet corner, which suited Jeff fine, thank you. But he was here now, and Jeff needed to pull himself together, and fast. He opened his eyes, focusing on slow, deliberate speech.

"S-sorry. This one piece of code's been k-kicking my ass." *Better. Slide through the words. Slow, measured speech.*

Reese looked impressed. "Man, I don't know how you programmers do that stuff. It's like a secret language. I wouldn't know where to begin. And *you* – well, you're the whiz kid straight out of grad school, putting the old guys to shame, so I hear."

Jeff felt his face heat and he ducked his head, pleased in spite of himself at the cocky salesman's compliment, whether or not it was sincere. "Thanks," he said softly, resisting a sudden, crazy urge to push away the hair falling into Reese's eyes.

"You know," Reese said, stepping around the silk screen that partially shielded Jeff's desk from the rest of the space, "as sales rep, I was thinking maybe I should get a better understanding of how the product is developed from the ground up. You know, how you get from the specs we bring you guys to the final product that does what the customer needs. I guess I'm saying I'd like to understand the creative process better."



Jeff stared at Reese, tongue-tied. Reese smiled, looking deep into Jeff's eyes as he dropped his hand to Jeff's shoulder. In spite of himself, Jeff's cock stirred, which in turn made him blush.

He resisted the urge to pull away, instead taking a deep breath and waiting. Reese gently squeezed Jeff's shoulder. "So I was thinking. If you had time for lunch one day, maybe we could —"

He stopped himself, removing his hand from Jeff's shoulder to slap his forehead in what struck Jeff as a contrived show of having a sudden idea. "Hey, how about today? Would you like to grab a bite? My treat, of course. You could help me understand what you do. What do you say, Jeff? Lunch at Tony's Bistro? One o'clock suit you?"

The way he said his name sent a ripple of erotic tension through Jeff's body. It was as if Reese held the word in his mouth like a kiss, stroking the sound like a caress. The "no thanks" that had begun to form in Jeff's mouth evaporated.

*He knows my name. Reese Armstrong, the unapproachable and forever out of reach Reese, knows my name.*

Jeff could barely hear himself over his racing heart. "Yeah, okay. I g-guess that would be all right."

Reese smiled warmly. "Great! Catch ya' later."

Jeff turned back to his computer, trying to ignore his lingering erection. He stared at the lines of code, but all he saw was Reese's warm smile.

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"If you like seafood, the grilled swordfish with coriander lime butter is excellent." Years under Hank's tutelage had taught Reese well about haute cuisine. As he spoke, he reached across the small table, grazing Jeff's hand as he pointed toward the item on Jeff's menu.

He moved his finger over the menu, again touching the other man's hand. "The lamb with shiraz honey sauce is a good choice." If Jeff were straight, he'd have definitely pulled away by now.

Jeff didn't pull away.

Reese watched his face. Jeff was looking down at the menu, a faint flush creeping over his cheeks. Reese bet if he could see his crotch, he'd see a bulge there. But he didn't need such concrete proof. Jeff was definitely interested. Forget about taking a whole week — at this rate he'd have the guy in bed by tonight.

The waiter appeared at the table and Reese pulled back, opening his own menu. Pad in hand, the waiter recited a litany of specials. "Do you need more time or...?"

"I'll have the swordfish," Reese said, "and a glass of sauvignon blanc." He looked toward Jeff, who was still staring hard at his menu. "Jeff?"

He looked up and Reese noticed for the first time that his eyes were gray — a clear luminous gray, fringed with dark lashes. “Oh. Um. I’ll have a hamburger. Medium rare. And a c-c-coke.”

Reese repressed the derisive laugh that rose in his throat. He should have saved his money and taken this loser to McDonald’s.

After the waiter disappeared, Reese fixed Jeff with a friendly, open gaze and flashed a dimpled smile. “I appreciate your taking the time to have lunch with me, Jeff. I’ve been meaning to invite you since I first joined Strata, but you always look so busy at your computer. I hated to interrupt you.”

“You have?” Jeff sounded so genuinely surprised that, in spite of himself, Reese laughed.

“Absolutely, I have. I’m fascinated by what you do. Not to mention,” he dropped his voice, adding a seductive note, “you’re a very good looking man.”

The guy was so easy to read it was laughable. Flattered, then confused, then hopeful, then excited, all within the space of seconds. Perfect. He had him right where he wanted him.

Then something Reese hadn’t expected happened. The raw ache of emotion playing over Jeff’s face fell away, replaced by an impassive, stony expression. When he spoke his voice was neutral, even guarded, and the nervous stutter had returned. “You wanted to t-t-talk about programming. About the development end of the software? Wh-what would you like to know?”

Aware he’d overplayed his hand, Reese adjusted his strategy. Leaning just close enough to show he was interested, but not too close to threaten, he asked a series of questions designed to put Jeff back into his comfort zone.

As Jeff began to expound on his topic, his expression eased and the stutter vanished. By the time the food arrived, Reese actually found himself interested in what the guy was saying. Imagine taking a series of simple and complex commands and feeding them into a computer, and with them making an inanimate piece of machinery come to life and execute the most complex and delicate of maneuvers. For a moment he was almost envious of the geek’s passion for computer code.

Then he recalled the wager.

“We broke up, you know.”

“I’m s-s-sorry?”

Time to reel him in. “Me and Aidan.” Reese allowed a touch of sorrow to turn down the corners of his mouth and a look of pain to flicker in his eyes before he looked down at the table, recalling the fictional Aidan’s cruel treatment.

He glanced up at Jeff long enough to see the compassion in those serious eyes. "I was with him for over a year. I thought he was the real thing. You know, a life partner. The *one*."

"What happened?" Jeff asked softly.

Reese drew a hand over his forehead, pushing his bangs back and letting them flop forward again. He felt almost guilty at Jeff's intent, caring expression. Allowing the smallest of sighs to escape, he offered, "I don't exactly know. I mean, one day he was in love with me. The next he was sorry, but he'd met someone. Someone new. I never really understood the concept of a broken heart until that happened."

He put his hand to his chest and moved in for the kill. "I guess it's true what they say. That time heals all wounds. It's been four months. Life goes on. Next time I'm gonna be more careful. I don't want a player. I don't want a guy who's been around and done it all. I want to meet someone real. Someone honest and kind. Someone like...you."

Reese caressed Jeff's face with his eyes for a few seconds and then bit his lip, looking down. He was listening for the small, sharp intake of breath. He was waiting to feel Jeff's hand slip timidly over his own, to hear his surprised but grateful encouragement of the shiny, new seduction Reese was offering him.

Instead he heard Jeff's chair scrape back as the other man stood. He looked up in surprise. "Thanks for the m-m-meal." Jeff gripped the back of the chair for a moment, pressing his lips together and closing his eyes. Maybe he was going to suggest they meet later. But when he opened his eyes, all he said was, "I have to go now."

Reese watched in stunned surprise as Jeff Hartman walked away.

## Chapter 2

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*Reese's lips were insistent against his, his large, strong hands roaming over Jeff's body. "I want someone sincere. Someone honest and kind. Someone like...you." Reese moved lower, kneeling in front of Jeff, cradling his balls while he lowered his hot mouth over Jeff's cock. "I've wanted this for so long, Jeff. For so long..."*

Jeff caught sight of himself in the full length mirror attached to the door of his small bedroom. He was sitting naked on his bed, his cock trapped in his left hand. His dark, straight hair fell over his eyes and he needed to shave.

He closed his eyes, letting Reese's image slip back behind his lids. He guessed Reese to be in his late twenties. He had the sculpted look of someone who worked out. When he'd touched Jeff's hand while pointing to something on the menu, Jeff had nearly jumped out of his skin, barely containing a ridiculous impulse to bend down and lick Reese's knuckles.

Though he knew it was lust, pure and simple, that hadn't stopped him from wanting to press his lips against Reese's throat, to feel the sexy blond stubble with his tongue. He had wanted to run his fingers over Reese's skin, to feel the beat of his heart, that heart Reese claimed had been broken. Who in their right mind would leave Reese Armstrong?

*You did, you idiot. He couldn't have been more obvious if he'd taken your cock out of your pants and sucked you off then and there. And you, coward, you walked away.*

Yes. He'd walked away. For a second, he'd seen the sincere, earnest look in Reese's eyes replaced by something cold and hard, and it had sent a shudder of warning down Jeff's spine.

Reese was after something, and until Jeff figured out what it was, he wasn't about to let himself be blindsided by the guy's charm and charisma. Since Reese had joined the fast-growing company, Jeff had watched him from the sidelines. He'd seen the easy smiles, the jaunty walk, the sleek, sexual confidence the man oozed like sap from a maple tree.

*I want someone sincere. Someone honest and kind. Someone like...you."*

A part of Jeff wanted to believe him; ached to believe him. Imagine being with Reese Armstrong, the man who had suffused his fantasies since the second he'd sauntered into Strata Systems, though only when he was masturbating, never when he was rational.

Jeff watched himself in the mirror through slit eyes, pretending it was the blond god watching, his own cock hard in his hand, his tight ass spread and waiting for Jeff to fuck him hard. Jeff groaned, fisting his cock as he shuddered and jerked into his hand.

He sat still as stone for several seconds, his mind for once blissfully blank. Turning his head, he caught sight of the digital clock – 2:42 AM. With a sigh, he reached for the washcloth he kept nearby and wiped his cock and sticky fingers. Dropping the cloth on the floor, he turned off the bedside lamp and fell back against the pillows, praying he'd fall asleep before dawn.

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"How's the seduction going?"

"Hello to you, too," Reese said into his cell phone.

"I bought a new toy, just for you. It's a pony tail. It'll be fun to shove it up your ass and make you prance around the house, once I win the bet."

Reese snorted. "When I win, I'll take the cash in tens and twenties."

Hank laughed. "You gotta deliver first, babe."

"You'll have your video, don't you worry, and by Sunday morning. The wheels are in motion. We had lunch on Tuesday."

"Lunch does not equal wild, sweaty sex recorded on video. What's next? Dinner and a show? At this rate, you'll seduce him by, what, next month?"

Reese grunted into the phone, forcing a confidence he didn't feel. "Relax, ye of little faith. It's only Thursday. I've got it all mapped out. Guys like him take a little finessing. You don't just slam them up against the wall, jerk their pants down and tell them to bend over."

"Too bad. I'd *love* to watch that."

"Yeah, I know you would, you sick bastard. Listen, gotta run. I have another call coming in." Reese clicked the phone shut and stared morosely out the window at the majestic view of Longs Peak rising dramatically over the eastern plain.

*Why am I doing this?* Usually the men Hank chose for their little games were players too – guys who understood the game, even if they didn't realize they were being taken at the time. Jeff was such an innocent. It seemed almost unfair.

Reese realized the irony of his newfound conscience. Hank and he had been playing this game for over a decade. He could still recall with vivid clarity the first time he'd set eyes on the brooding, sexy Hank Seeley, though he'd done his best to ignore him at first.

Back then, as he usually did when placed in yet another foster home, Reese had fallen in with the wrong crowd – tough boys who skipped school, smoked pot and stole

cars for fun. Hank, of course, had nothing to do with those boys, or anyone else for that matter. He rarely spoke in class and never hung out with anyone.

He always seemed to find a seat next to or near Reese in class, though he never spoke directly to him. Yet, even back then Hank had exuded a kind of unspoken power, a certain sureness that made him seem older than the rest of them. It was like he had a secret none of them would ever know.

When he stared at Reese in class, which he often did, Reese could feel his eyes boring into him. It was like Hank could see into his thoughts—like he knew what no one else at the time did—that Reese was gay, despite the macho jock image he projected to keep himself safe.

He wanted to approach Hank on several occasions, but didn't quite dare. Instead, about two weeks into his new school, adopting the tough-guy tone of the boys he hung out with, he finally dared to ask, "Who the fuck's that?" He pointed to Hank, who sat alone at a table in the lunchroom, seemingly deep in the pages of a book.

Ray Sipos, the natural leader of the group by virtue of his size and belligerence, volunteered, "That's Seeley. Hank Seeley. He's a stuck-up little prick. His dad's some millionaire or something."

"Yeah," said another, "Seeley thinks his shit don't stink because he's got money. He's a faggot, is what he is. He stares at guys in the locker room."

"We should teach him a lesson and make him squeal," Ray added. The other boys at the table guffawed.

Reese said nothing to this, instead asking, "If he's so rich, what's he doing here?"

"I heard he's been kicked out of every private school in the area. He's got issues with authority." This was offered by Tim, a short, plump boy who hung on the edges of Ray's group, barely tolerated. All eyes turned to him at this bit of knowledge and he flushed, adding, "That's what I heard from Cindy Nolan. She talks to the guy."

Reese probably never would have talked to Hank Seeley, if it hadn't been for the hailstorm. He was walking home from school one afternoon when the skies turned gunmetal gray and then opened, unleashing a torrent of blinding rain and hail.

As if on cue, a small, sleek sports car had pulled up alongside him, Hank at the wheel. Without speaking, he'd opened the passenger door and simply waited. Reese had climbed in, and that was the beginning.

With patience and a certain almost clinical approach, Hank systematically taught Reese all the basics and then some. They had sex as often as possible, usually in the pool house behind Hank's home, occasionally, when Hank could convince him, in various unoccupied spaces on the high school campus grounds.

It was during such a tryst, two months into their relationship, that the defining event of Reese's life occurred, a horror he could still barely bring himself to think about.

Hank had been there, though he was out cold when it happened. But after, pulling strings as it seemed only the very wealthy are able, he'd saved Reese from himself, and since then he and Hank had been tangled together, by hook or crook.

During those early years, Reese confused gratitude and fear of loss for love. Early on, he had made a few faltering attempts to express that love, or what he thought passed for love, but Hank would only laugh. "There's no such thing. The sooner you figure that out, the better off you'll be." Based on his own life experience, Reese was inclined to agree.

Love, Hank asserted, was something invented by sentimental saps as a means of control. What mattered were power, loyalty and sex.

For years, Reese had believed this too. Since the death of his parents in a car accident when he was eleven, he'd seen very little in this world to make him think love existed. Lust, power, fear of loneliness—these were emotions he could understand and embrace. Desire, for as long as it lasted, which was never long.

Though both Hank and he dated other guys, it was understood they would always return to each other, sharing stories of their conquests and subsequent dismissals of countless men over the years.

Jeff was proving to be more of a challenge than he'd anticipated. What had gone wrong at lunch? He'd run over the conversation a dozen times, but couldn't put his finger on where he'd lost him. To top it off, Jeff had disappeared. He didn't go back to the office after lunch. Nor, when Reese returned yesterday from his client visit, was Jeff anywhere to be found.

Could he have gotten Hartman all wrong? Was he straight, after all? Hank had chosen the guy. Maybe he had inside information he wasn't sharing. Hank had ways of finding things out. Money, as Hank was fond of saying, talked. Maybe he'd rigged this whole thing in order to have Reese at his beck and call for a solid week.

He had been kidding about that pony tail thing, hadn't he? Reese shook his head. *Focus*. Yes, he needed to focus on the task at hand. Approach it like any other problem that required a solution. What he needed was to think like Jeff—get inside the geek's head.

He closed his eyes, recalling every nuance of Jeff's words and body language over lunch. The guy had been nervous, until he got him into his comfort zone of computer code and programming language. But it wasn't the nervousness of a straight guy being hit on by a gay one. Jeff had been attracted to him, he was sure of it.

At the same time, Jeff didn't trust him. Reese had brought his considerable skills to bear to put the guy at ease, but it hadn't worked. He was operating from the negative now—he needed to redeem himself in Jeff's eyes.

To repair the damage, he'd need to put himself in Jeff's shoes, in his Converse sneakers and tattered T-shirts, and then ask himself the question – what would make a guy like that trust a guy like me? He drifted, letting his mind sort through ideas and possibilities without trying to control their direction.

All at once, Reese sat up straight, his eyes blinking open. Pulling at a desk drawer, he extracted the company directory and flipped through it, drawing his finger down the alphabetical listing until he found what he was looking for. *Jeff Hartman, 224 Hamden Avenue, Apartment 4...*

~\*~

When the doorbell rang, Jeff was dressed in workout shorts, shirtless. He'd been lifting weights for the past thirty minutes, and he was sweaty, his hair disheveled. He glanced at his watch. Who was stopping by at five-thirty on a Thursday evening? The pizza he'd ordered two hours earlier had already been delivered and consumed. In the nine months since he'd moved to Colorado he hadn't made any real friends to speak of – not the kind who just drop by.

Deciding to stop speculating and go see, Jeff set down the barbells and headed across the room toward the front door. When he looked through the peephole he caught his breath and recoiled as if struck.

What the hell was *he* doing there?

The doorbell rang again. "Jeff? You in there? It's Reese. Reese Armstrong."

"Coming," Jeff called, hurrying back to his bedroom to grab a T-shirt. He returned to the front door, took a deep breath, and pulled it open.

The dark blue of Reese's linen button down shirt was striking against tan skin and the honey-gold blond hair falling over his forehead. His eyes were the color of the sky at dusk. The shirt was unbuttoned enough so Jeff could see the tuft of dark blond at his sternum. His long, strong legs were encased in faded blue denim, instead of the usual finely tailored trousers Reese wore at the office.

What was Reese Armstrong doing on his doorstep? What was this guy's deal, anyway? Hadn't Jeff made it clear he wasn't interested in whatever game Reese was playing? Except, if he were honest, he *was* interested. Very interested.

"What're you doing here?" As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he realized how rude they sounded. He felt his face grow hot.

"I wanted to see you. I hope that's okay."

Jeff could feel the hard ache of his cock as he stared at the handsome man in his doorway. He prayed his loose shorts would hide the telltale bulge.

Reese was watching him, his head tilted and a hint of a smile playing at his lips. "You going to invite me in?"



Flustered, Jeff stepped back, pulling open the door. "Sure," he said, hoping he sounded nonchalant. "Come in."

"Thanks." Reese stepped across the threshold. "Look, I'm really sorry to come barging over like this. I just—I just wanted to apologize."

"For what?"

"For the other day. At lunch. I was—it was stupid."

What was the guy's angle now? Jeff was confused, but held his tongue.

"Mind if I sit?" Without waiting for a response, Reese strode toward the sofa on the opposite wall.

As much as to give himself a chance to get his bearings as anything, Jeff offered, "Can I get you a beer or something?"

"Sure, that'd be great. Thanks."

Jeff went into the kitchen, trying to comb his messy hair with his fingers as he went. The sweat was drying beneath his T-shirt. Hopefully he didn't stink.

The evening had taken on a surreal cast. The unattainable Reese Armstrong was sitting on his sofa, waiting to share a beer with him. What the hell was going on? Grabbing two cans of Coors from the fridge, he returned to the living room.

Reese was leafing through a magazine he'd found on the end table beside the sofa. He looked up and smiled, patting the sofa beside him. Jeff moved toward him, as if he were the guest in his own apartment. He sat, holding out a can of beer to Reese, who took it, popped the top and drank nearly the whole thing in one long gulp.

Setting the can down, he turned to Jeff, his Paul-Newman-blue eyes settling on Jeff's face. Jeff waited, sipping at his own beer, glad to have something to hold in his hand. Reese stared at him another few seconds and then leaned back, lacing his hands behind his head and staring up at the ceiling.

"There's no easy way to say this, so I'm just going to dive in," Reese said, his eyes still focused upward. "I invited you to lunch because you intrigue me. You're so quiet at the office. To be honest, I didn't even know you were there at first. I mean, I heard about the whiz kid, the brilliant new programmer who was taking Strata to another level."

Despite himself, Jeff flushed with pleasure at this comment. He knew he'd impressed Bob Sanchez, who had doubled his salary within the first six months, but he hadn't realized the non-programmers knew much about it.

"I guess I'm out of the office a lot, which partially explains it. Plus, you have to admit, you aren't exactly Mr. Social Butterfly. I mean, I don't know if I've ever seen you at one of the impromptu happy hours."

Jeff didn't deny this. Getting drunk and eating crappy finger food with near-strangers at five in the afternoon had never been his idea of fun. He didn't respond, however, except by a nod.

Reese sat forward, fixing his eyes on Jeff. "When I asked you to lunch, well, I guess it was pretty obvious I was interested in more than your brilliant mind. But that's where I want to apologize. In my clumsy efforts at seduction, I discounted your innate intelligence, your ability to see the player hiding behind the bid for sympathy."

"What?" Jeff blurted, stunned the guy had admitted to what he had suspected. Vindication warred with disappointment and confusion. What game was Reese playing now?

Reese hung his head for a moment and Jeff felt almost sorry for him, though he said nothing more. Reese turned finally to face him. His hand dropped to Jeff's bare thigh and damn it all, Jeff's cock hardened from the touch.

He started to pull his leg away, but Reese held on. "Please. Hear me out. I'm trying to tell you I'm sorry. I'm trying to tell you *why* I'm sorry. Let me explain and then you can kick me out or whatever you want to do."

Jeff stilled, Reese's hand burning his skin, his blue eyes pleading. Something in Reese's face went beyond his words and Jeff found his heart melting, despite his earlier resolve. "I'm listening," he said softly.

"There's no Aidan."

"Pardon?"

"No Aidan. No love lost, no heart broken. I made it up because I was trying to reach you. Because for the first time in my life, I think I've met someone who isn't going to lie down and spread his ass cheeks for me, just because I smile at him.

"I know I must sound like a pompous dick, but I guess it's come so easy to me over the years, I forget sometimes that other guys are real people. I come up with ways I can win them over, and then go for it. I made up Aidan because I thought if you felt some sympathy for me, you might look past the posturing and see the real man inside.

"It was a dumb ass thing to do. The irony is, I meant what I said. I really do want to meet someone like you. Someone who isn't just out for what they can get. I shouldn't have lied to you. I apologize. Truly."

Reese bit his lip and looked away, though not before Jeff saw the shame wash over his face. His heart thawed a little more, though a small voice in his head warned him this could just be another in a series of ploys.

"Why me, Reese? I mean, c-c-come on." Jeff paused, refusing to stutter, not now. He took a long, cleansing breath and pushed on. "Why focus on me, of all people, the geek, the loser?"

The look of genuine surprise on Reese's face almost made Jeff laugh and yet another layer of ice melted around his heart. Could Reese really be that good an actor, or was he actually sincere?

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Reese emphatically asserted. "Loser! No way! You're a fucking MIT graduate. You're brilliant. I've always been attracted to smart men. It's like an aphrodisiac to me. But it's more than that, Jeff." Gently he squeezed Jeff's leg, his expression so utterly sincere Jeff finally knew he must be telling the truth.

In a quiet voice that radiated with muted intensity, Reese continued. "There's something about you. Something I want to explore. I can see the pain in your eyes. What happened to hurt you? How can I fix the hurt? How can I make it better?"

Jeff sat stunned. How had he known? Jeff never spoke about it, not to anyone. Tom Shepherd had swept into Jeff's quiet, controlled life as an academic, turning his world upside down and completely capturing Jeff's heart in the process.

After a whirlwind love affair that lasted only three weeks, Tom left for Africa with a group called Volunteers for Peace, promising to return in a month. A month became two and then three, during which Jeff learned through the grapevine that the volunteer program had long ended. He heard rumors he tried to ignore that Tom had headed off to Europe, seen in the company of jetsetters more interested in party life than good works.

When Tom did finally come sweeping back into Jeff's life, Jeff confronted his lover with what he'd heard. But Tom had answers for everything, soothing Jeff's hurt with an onslaught of sexual attention and devotion. Jeff gave in to Tom's considerable charms. Who knows how long he would have labored under the illusion that what they had, even if it was temporary, was real?

It was the night before Tom was to leave, this time for India, with promises he would return soon to Jeff's arms. "Do you have to go," Jeff said, hating himself even before the words were out and angry at Tom for forcing him into the role of pining lover.

Tom had smiled gently, shaking his head. "You know me, Jeff. I'm a gypsy. But you'll be with me, in my heart." After he made love to Jeff, he sent him away, claiming he still had to pack before his early morning departure.

When Jeff returned later that night, hoping to surprise Tom with a new backpack for his trip, the lights were out in Tom's studio apartment. Not wanting to disturb him, Jeff started to leave the backpack beside the front door, a note wishing Tom a good trip tucked inside. It was then he saw the door was ajar. Surprised, he pushed it, causing it to swing open.

Inside he could hear whispering and muted laughter. Confused, he stepped inside. The laughter turned to groans and sighs, accompanied by the creak of bedsprings. Jeff

stood rooted to the spot, a dawning horror washing over him as he realized what he was hearing.

The next morning when Tom appeared at Jeff's graduate housing to say goodbye, Jeff had meant to say nothing. He would just let Tom go and forget about him. But when Tom reached for him, Jeff found himself blurting, "Are you sure you're in the right place? Shouldn't you be with whoever you were fucking last night?"

Instead of denying it or at least having the grace to be embarrassed, Tom had shaken his head with a small, condescending smile. "Jeff, Jeff, always the romantic to the bitter end. I didn't plan what happened last night. An old friend happened by. One thing led to the next. It's no big deal."

"No big deal? One minute you're in bed with me, whispering how you'll miss me, the next you're fucking some guy who just *happens by*? I thought we had something special!"

"We did. We do. But it's not like we're married, for god's sake. Surely you can't be so naïve to think I'm seeing no one but you? You know I can't stand someone who's clingy. Maybe it's good this happened. I'm beginning to see just how needy you are. It's really not an attractive trait, Jeff. You might want to work on that. Good luck to you."

And with that, he was gone.

Tom hadn't been his first lover, but he'd been the first to capture Jeff's heart. Beyond the heartbreak of loss, the casual ease with which Tom had cast him aside had made his humiliation complete.

Even when time and reflection allowed Jeff to admit maybe there had been more lust than love at work on his side as well, the pain of his humiliation remained. It would not, he promised himself, happen again.

When the chance to move from Boston to Colorado had fallen into his lap, he'd accepted the move as fate—he'd make a fresh start and meet someone new. And this time he'd think with his head instead of his heart and his cock.

But somehow, once the walls were raised, he found it hard to lower them, not yet ready to risk the bruising of his heart. Instead he retreated into a kind of emotional deepfreeze. No one, until now, had penetrated the walls of ice.

He realized Reese was watching him and he felt the heat rise in his cheeks. He found himself wanting to tell Reese about Tom, but he kept silent, instead losing himself in Reese's gaze. Reese reached out, touching his face with one finger.

"I have to kiss you," Reese whispered, his voice husky.

Jeff leaned forward, drawn in spite himself to the handsome man. As their lips touched, all thought of Tom flew from his mind like a mist burning away at break of day.

# Chapter 3

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“What’s with you tonight?”  
“Huh?” Reese turned distractedly toward Hank. They were lingering over dessert and fine brandy at a very expensive restaurant Hank had chosen.

“You got a cold sore or something? You keep touching your mouth. And I don’t think you’ve heard anything I said for the past thirty minutes.”

“What?” Reese dropped his hand from his lips and focused on Hank. “No, I don’t have a cold sore, for god’s sake. And yeah, I heard you. You were telling me about your latest investment in the Internet porn industry.”

“That was fifteen minutes ago. Just now I was talking about what our next bet should be, once you deflower the innocent Mr. Hartman. The heart man. Get it? He’s got a heart. We don’t.”

Reese startled at these words. *We don’t*. Until recently, he would have readily agreed. Hearts were made to be broken—better to dispense with them altogether. So why was he offended by Hank’s inclusion?

Reese slipped back into his reverie. That kiss—he could still feel it. It made no sense, and yet there it was. He couldn’t seem to stop reliving that single, chaste kiss.

He’d planned more, of course. Lips would part, tongues would touch, hearts would pound, hands would roam, cocks would rise. When he had Jeff panting and yearning, he’d stop the action. He’d pulled away, saying they should wait. They were rushing. They had to slow down.

He’d had his lines ready: *Jeff, I want you, but not this way. Let’s take our time...* That way, when he returned to finish the job on Saturday night, Jeff would be begging for it.

But something had gone wrong. Or not wrong, exactly, but certainly not according to plan. When their lips had touched, something deep and aching had burst open inside Reese, leaving him nearly breathless with a confused, unfocused longing.

It was like he’d been shut off until that moment, the key to ignite him long since lost or stolen. Jeff’s kiss—that tender press of closed lips against his own, had lit something within Reese that both thrilled and terrified him.

Irony of ironies, Jeff had been the one to pull back. Reese could see he wanted it—even without the blatant evidence in his shorts, a fire had kindled in Jeff’s eyes,

something deep and powerful that beckoned to something inside Reese, making him forget for just a moment who was in control.

"You're doing it again. Jesus. What is *with* you tonight?" Hank's tone was exasperated.

Reese dropped his hand from his lips and shrugged. "Sorry. Maybe I'm coming down with something."

"Oh, no you don't. You're planning a way out with the computer geek, aren't you? Don't think I don't know it." Hank rubbed his hands together gleefully. "Well, it won't work. I don't care if you have the plague. Tomorrow night you either fuck the guy and bring me the proof, or report to my doorstep, naked and ready to serve."

"You'll have your proof," Reese muttered, though he had no idea if he would be able to deliver.

"Let's go to my place."

Reese appraised Hank, thinking how to get out of it. It was an underlying rule of the relationship—when Hank sprang for a really good meal or took Reese out to an exclusive dance club, afterward Reese paid him back with a night of hot sex at Hank's place.

The arrangement had suited Reese well enough in the past. Hank was handsome in his own, dark, brooding way. He wasn't as tall as Reese's six feet, but he was sturdy and strong, with a thick cock that was always hard for Reese. They would have sex on fine sheets, champagne chilling beside the bed. And in the morning, they would be served breakfast on the deck by Julio, Hank's handsome houseboy.

But Reese just wasn't in the mood. Maybe he really *was* coming down with something. Whatever it was, he needed to shake it, and fast. He was letting Jeff get under his skin. That just wouldn't fly. No way was a single kiss going to throw him off his game.

With a jauntiness he didn't feel, Reese quipped, "Not tonight, dear. I have a headache."

~\*~

"Hello?"

"Jeff? It's Reese. I hope I didn't call too early?"

"No, no," Jeff lied. He'd been up late, unable to sleep, as usual.

The day before he'd been so happy when he woke up, excited at the thought of seeing Reese. They could go to lunch. They could sort out whatever bright beginnings awaited them. But Reese hadn't been at the office when he arrived, and as the minutes turned to hours, Jeff could no longer concentrate, glancing constantly around to see if Reese was in his space.

Reese never showed, and a casual inquiry to his secretary late in the day revealed Reese was with clients all day and wouldn't be in.

Whatever happiness had risen in him as a result of their confusing, intriguing time together the night before evaporated under Jeff's obsessive speculation about just what had happened, and what was happening now. Was Reese purposely avoiding him? Had the heat Jeff had thought he'd felt from Reese just been his own desire reflected back at him?

"I did call too early, I can tell. You were sleeping, weren't you?"

"What time is it?" Jeff stifled a yawn.

"Eight-thirty. It's a beautiful day. I was wondering, I mean, if you weren't busy. We could go for a hike or something. I've packed a picnic breakfast."

"Wait. What? Where are you?"

There was a pause and then, "Actually I'm in the parking lot of your apartment building. I'm on my motorcycle."

Jeff couldn't help the broad grin that burst over his face, and was glad Reese couldn't see him. Maybe Reese misinterpreted his silence as disapproval, because he added in a somewhat defensive tone, "Hey, I was out anyway. You know. I like to get outside on the weekends. If you're busy, that's totally cool."

"No, no." Jeff leaped from the bed, an energy he hadn't felt in some time shooting through his limbs like caffeine and cocaine combined. "I just need to jump in the shower. You want to come in? I won't be long."

"Sure. I can make you some coffee or something."

"It's a deal."

While Jeff showered, he realized he hadn't stuttered, not once, during the entire phone conversation or when he'd let Reese into the apartment and gotten him set up in the kitchen.

A sense of disbelief washed over him. Was he still in a dream, or was Reese Armstrong actually in his kitchen at that moment making him coffee? That's what friends did for each other. Friends or even...lovers.

Jeff snorted to himself. One closed-lipped kiss did not lovers make. Besides, did he even *want* Reese for a lover? As nice as he was turning out to be, Jeff was no fool. For whatever strange reason, this guy, who had completely ignored him since first splashing onto the Strata scene, was suddenly into him. That did *not* mean he'd be into him next week, or even tomorrow. Like Tom, he probably had plenty of other guys waiting in the wings.

Well, forewarned was forearmed. He would go into this thing with eyes wide open. What was the worst that could happen? They'd spend a day hiking. Maybe something would come of it – maybe it wouldn't.

Jeff rinsed the soap from his body, eager to return to Reese. He grabbed a towel and dried and dressed as fast as he could, shaking back his wet hair and tucking it behind his ears. When he returned to the kitchen, Reese was sitting at the table, a mug of coffee in front of him, a second mug set across from him.

Jeff sat. He stirred cream and sugar into his coffee and took a sip. Reese was watching him, a small, enigmatic smile on his face. "So what do you say? Do you like to hike. I have a second helmet if you want to take the motorcycle."

"I do like to hike. I haven't done much of it since I've been here. Motorcycle, huh?"

"We could take your car if you're more comfortable with that." Jeff thought of his twelve-year-old Corolla with one mismatched door and shook his head.

"No, I'd like to go on the motorcycle, if that's okay."

Reese smiled and nodded, showing the dimples in his cheeks, and Jeff's heart did a flip-flop. Would he wake up in a minute, alone as always?

At the park, they took a fairly easy trail. To Jeff's relief, the erection he'd gotten from riding behind Reese with his arms around his waist subsided as they climbed the gently sloping path. The air was still cool and crisp at that hour of the morning, though the July sun would make them plenty warm as it rose in the summer sky. They walked in silence, listening to the bird twitter and the rustle of chipmunks and marmots hurrying out of their way.

Toward the end of the trail, Reese stopped suddenly, whispering, "Look."

He pointed toward a small copse of quivering aspens. Standing still as statues were two deer, a doe and a buck, powerfully graceful and elegant. Only the slightest movement of their white, uplifted tails gave evidence they were in fact animate creatures. Jeff's foot caused a twig to snap and all at once the pair came alive, dashing away into the woods.

They continued their climb, stopping after a while to rest on a wide, flat rock near the top. It looked out over the plains and more mountains beyond. Reese took off the backpack he'd been carrying and busied himself with setting out a blanket. Jeff stared at the breathtaking panoramic view, while stealing glances at the handsome man who'd actually planned all this just for him.

*What game is he playing?*

He pushed aside the question. Damn it, he was done being so fucking careful and reserved. Couldn't it just be possible that Reese liked him? That Reese wanted to get to know him better? Was it so hard to believe he might actually think Jeff was good



looking and interesting enough to want to spend a morning with? Did there always have to be some dark ulterior motive?

Reese was the first guy since Tom that Jeff found himself actually considering for something more than a casual fling. He was the first man to get past the carefully constructed fences of reserve and caution that were designed to keep Jeff safe from pain.

*Okay, so accept that he's in the door, Jeff told himself, and just go with it. See where this leads. Don't analyze it into fucking oblivion. Your problem is you think too much. This is not a string of code or a programming puzzle to solve.*

Reese opened his backpack and pulled out a slightly squashed white paper bag. "Food for the gods," he announced, pulling two huge chocolate cupcakes from the bag.

"That's breakfast?" Jeff laughed. "I thought you were supposed to pack trail mix and complex carbs when you went hiking."

"These aren't just any cupcakes. They're from Angelo's Bakery and you've never had anything more delicious in your life. Trust me on this." He held out a cupcake, top heavy with thick, dark frosting.

Jeff bit into moist, delicious chocolate cake with the best butter cream icing he'd ever tasted. Reese was watching him intently, clearly waiting for his reaction. "This really is great," Jeff managed between bites.

Only when he'd pronounced his approval did Reese take a bite of his cupcake. "I told you. Wait'll you get to the whipped cream center. Food of the gods, I tell you."

When they'd eaten every bit of the huge confections and licked their fingers clean, they sat in companionable silence a while, drinking bottles of water and admiring the view. Reese shifted, moving closer and all at once the atmosphere between them became charged with something more electric. Reese's shoulder touched Jeff's and he leaned close.

Jeff's heart began to beat high in his throat.

Reese turned to face him. "I have a confession to make. When we kissed the other night. It was...amazing. I felt something I've never felt before. I don't know how to describe it. A connection, a *knowing*. Like we knew each other in another life or something crazy like that. Like we were meant to be together."

Jeff was stunned by this revelation, so similar to what he had felt. He'd tried to tell himself he'd only felt that way because he was lonely. He had been flattered at Reese's unexpected attentions. He was feeling vulnerable because of memories of Tom.

Now he admitted, "I felt it too. I felt the same way."

Longing radiated like an aura between them, creating a shimmering heat of desire. Leaning closer, Jeff closed his eyes, his lips tingling in anticipation of Reese's kiss.

"Melissa, get back on the path! Jordan, that's tundra you're trampling on!" A loud male voice jerked them apart, shattering the mood. Jeff twisted around to see a man and a woman and two plump, squealing children scrabbling up the path.

Reese shook his head, his expression rueful. They grinned at one another. Reese began to pack up and Jeff moved to help him. Their fingers brushed as they both reached for something and their eyes met. Jeff started to stand, but Reese gripped his arm, keeping him down on the blanket.

The noisy family receded along the path. "They're gone," Reese said in a throaty voice.

He leaned toward Jeff. "Where were we?"

Their lips touched. Reese moaned softly against Jeff's mouth as their lips parted and tongues entwined. Inflamed, Jeff reached for him, pulling him closer with a hand on the back of Reese's neck.

Reese responded in kind, gripping both sides of Jeff's face, his kiss more insistent. They fell back together against the blanket, stretching their bodies against one another. Jeff could feel the hard press of Reese's erection against his stomach, and his own against Reese's thigh.

Reese slipped his hands beneath Jeff's T-shirt, sending spirals of electricity through his body as he rubbed and stroked Jeff's bare back. Jeff took the same liberty, touching the supple skin of Reese's back, feeling the strong muscle bunching beneath it.

He gasped when one of Reese's hands slipped past the loose waistband at the front of his jeans, stroking his rigid cock over the cotton underwear. Jeff groaned and shifted, afraid he was going to come like a teenager from the friction.

When Jeff shifted away, Reese withdrew his hand and rolled onto his back. He was breathing hard, his eyes glittering in the sunlight. "You're right," he gasped. "You're right to pull away. I want you so fucking much, Jeff. But not here. Not like this."

He waved vaguely toward the trail, and Jeff realized with a sudden jolt of horror that someone might have seen them. That family could have come back down the path while they were rolling around on the blanket like animals in heat.

He pushed at the hair that had fallen into his face and took a deep breath. "Man. You're right. I don't know what the hell got into me. I never do p-p-public displays of affection." *Shit. Deep breaths. Smooth, slow speech...*

"Hey, it was totally mutual, I assure you." Reese grinned down at his own very obvious erection and looked back at Jeff. "It's getting hot. Want to walk back down?"

"Yeah." Jeff got to his feet, at once relieved and hugely disappointed. He'd wanted that kiss to go on and on and on...

As they walked down the trail, Reese's words came back to him and he stole a glance at him. Had he really meant what he'd said, or was it just a way to get Jeff off him?

*I want you so fucking much, Jeff.*

Jeff had made a hard and fast rule for himself since he'd scraped his heart against Tom's casual betrayal. He would take his time. He would not fall into bed with a guy the first night. Period.

But this wasn't their first time together. They'd been to lunch. Then Reese had come over for a while on Thursday night. So this was really their *third* time together. Jeff grinned at himself, well aware he was looking for a way around the rule.

But after all, weren't rules made to be broken?

# Chapter 4

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*You're a bastard, Armstrong. Don't do it.*

The thought startled him. Why not do it? It was a win-win, any way he looked at it. He'd get to fuck Jeff, who, to his surprise, he had to admit really turned him on, and he'd make a cool, easy five thousand on top of it.

Hank didn't need to know he'd enjoyed it, and what Jeff didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

Would it?

Reese had to admit, this was definitely the strangest situation he'd ever been in. He'd allowed Hank to involve him in this sort of game before. Up until now, he'd told himself it didn't matter. Up until now it hadn't mattered. But somehow, this time, it was different.

Jeff was different.

He'd expected a nerd who couldn't talk about anything except computer code and old Star Trek episodes. The stutter had fit right in with his expectations. So had the small, cluttered apartment littered with empty pizza boxes, and bookshelves crammed with comic books, science fiction paperbacks and esoteric tomes nobody without an advanced degree could hope or want to decipher. Even his looks had fit the stereotype—the pale skin of someone always glued to their computer, the over-long, unkempt hair falling into his face while he worked, the ratty clothes of a college bum.

Definitely not Reese's type. Normally he went for guys older than himself. Guys with money and social standing who knew how to dress and what to order on the menu. Guys who didn't blush and stammer when you looked at them.

So why couldn't he get Jeff out of his mind?

Reese prided himself on living in the moment. Even when he was seeing someone, he rarely gave them a thought when he wasn't with them. But ever since that first kiss in Jeff's apartment, he'd been off kilter, as if a magnet was messing with his internal radar and throwing him off course.

Something about Jeff kept distracting him. He both liked and mistrusted it. What was going on? It would be good to fuck him and get it over with. Hopefully, once he fulfilled the terms of the wager, he could put it, and Jeff, behind him, pocket the cash and move on.

Reese had left Jeff at his place after they'd returned from the brief hike. They agreed to meet for dinner at an Italian place that was within walking distance of Reese's neighborhood. He'd bring Jeff home afterwards and the seduction would begin in earnest.

He looked around the bedroom with reasonable satisfaction. He'd put fresh sheets on the bed, vacuumed the carpets and cleaned the bathroom. He had two bottles of champagne chilling in the refrigerator and the hot tub—a gift from Hank—heated to perfection. He would make sure Jeff was completely relaxed and receptive before he claimed his prey.

Reese showered but decided to skip the shave, aware the two-day dark blond stubble on his cheeks and chin gave him a rugged, sexy look. He selected a soft caramel brown cashmere sweater over jeans. Normally he would have worn light wool trousers with the cashmere, but he wanted Jeff of the holey jeans and faded T-shirts to feel as at home as possible.

He stared at his bed, imagining Jeff, naked and writhing beneath him, unaware his every move and sound were being recorded for someone else's amusement. A strange, niggling feeling slithered its way into his consciousness. What the hell was he doing? Maybe he really had a shot with this guy. Was he going to blow it by doing something stupid?

He liked Jeff. He was surprised at how much he enjoyed being with him. He was so different from the men Reese usually surrounded himself with. His shyness and innate modesty, traits Reese usually would have disparaged, were somehow endearing in Jeff.

What the fuck was going on? Hank would laugh his ass off if Reese ever admitted to these ridiculous sentimental feelings. Was he losing his touch? He stared at himself a moment in the mirror over his bureau and slowly shook his head, shaking away the image of Jeff at the top of the mountain, his silver-gray eyes shining as he stared into Reese's.

Reese Armstrong was impervious to love. Nobody could get past his armor. It's what kept him sharp, what kept him safe. Love was sticky and messy. Love was for fools. The wager had been made, and the goods, by the end of the evening, would be delivered.

As he headed out of the bedroom, he flicked the switch beside the door that would turn on the motion sensors in the camera hidden in the smoke detector. It would record directly to his DVR. He closed his eyes, imagining the expression on Hank's face when he handed him the video.

Life was good.

So why did he feel so bad?

~\*~

After dinner, Jeff drove Reese the short distance to his house. Jeff had enjoyed himself at the restaurant, a family Italian place without the pretension of the bistro they'd had lunch at earlier in the week. The food was good and their talk easy and friendly. Jeff had felt more relaxed than he could remember, though probably the half bottle of wine he'd consumed with the meal hadn't hurt in that regard.

They took a short walk along the tree-lined streets of Reese's neighborhood, quite a cut above where Jeff lived. Turning up a stone path laid along the side of a small but well-tended lawn, Reese unlocked the front door of a white one-story house with red shutters and a matching red door. He gestured Jeff inside.

The house was tidy and comfortably furnished, with large, airy rooms. Jeff was embarrassed, thinking of his place and what Reese must have thought of it.

He could have afforded to live much better than he did. He'd taken the small, cheap apartment when he'd first arrived in Denver, telling himself he'd find something better once he was certain he was staying. For the first time, he thought he might be ready to make Denver his home.

After retrieving a bottle of champagne, an ice bucket and two glasses, Reese led Jeff out to the back deck. They sat on low, comfortable deck chairs, sipping cold champagne and admiring the view of the mountains glowing purple and orange in the twilight of the setting sun.

"Wanna get in the hot tub?" Reese suggested.

"I haven't got a bathing suit."

"That's all right, neither do I."

Jeff watched, mesmerized, as Reese stood and pulled the soft sweater over his head. His mouth actually watered as he stared at the broad, muscular chest.

With his eyes on Jeff's face, Reese unbuttoned his jeans and slid them down his tan legs. He was wearing a black thong, his thick cock pointing upward toward his hip beneath the fabric.

Taking the ice bucket with the champagne, he sat on the edge of the hot tub, dangling his legs in the water. "Come on," he urged. "The water's perfect. Bring your glass." He waved his own, reaching for the champagne to top it off.

Taking a breath, Jeff slipped out of his things, moving quickly toward the other side of the tub. He left on his underwear, not a sexy thong, but practical cotton briefs. Setting his glass carefully on the rim of the tub, he lowered himself into the hot, frothing water.

"This feels great," he said, letting the water jets pummel his back. Reese reached for Jeff's empty glass. Without asking, he refilled it and handed it to him. Jeff knew he didn't need any more to drink, but he took it anyway. He remembered hearing it wasn't a good idea to drink in a hot tub, but the champagne was delicious, and what the hell?

They sat across from each other in silence for a while. The sky had deepened to a dark royal blue and a few sparkling stars were sprinkled over it. Reese looked so hot, his muscular arms stretched out along the rim of the tub, his skin ruddy from the rising steam. He was watching Jeff, his head tilted, his gaze appraising.

"What?" Jeff said, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

"I want you."

Jeff swallowed, his cock tingling. Was this it? Were they going to make love tonight? Did he want that? Was he ready? Was Reese the kind of guy who wanted you only as long as he didn't have you?

A voice in Jeff's head answered emphatically. *Yes. That's exactly the kind of guy he is.*

His cock ignored the voice. "I want you, too," he said softly.

Reese stood and reached behind the tub, pulling up two towels. He held one out to Jeff. Without a trace of self-consciousness, Reese pulled off the wet thong before wrapping the towel around his lower body, giving Jeff a glimpse of his thick, long cock. He stepped out of the tub and headed toward the back door of the house.

"Coming?"

Jeff hoisted himself onto the side of the tub and climbed out. He pulled off his wet briefs, glad Reese wasn't watching him. Quickly he wrapped the towel around his body, grabbed his clothes and followed.

Reese led him straight to the bedroom. He stopped abruptly in the middle of the room, so that Jeff nearly bumped into him. He could feel the heat still emanating from Reese's skin. He could almost taste the kisses they'd shared earlier that day.

Turning toward Jeff with narrowed eyes, Reese dropped his towel. His cock sprung forward, beckoning like a divining rod. He backed toward the bed, holding out his arms.

The insistent, warning voices that had been whispering all week in Jeff's head were entirely silenced at last, drowned out by the rush of raw need. He moved forward, every fiber of his being alive with desire.

~\*~

Reese fell back against the bed, savoring the hungry look in Jeff's eyes. Yeah, it was obvious Jeff wanted him. The thing was, he wanted Jeff too. He wanted him too much, and he knew it.

He pushed away the thought. He'd sort out the emotional crap later, and toss it in the garbage where it belonged. For now, he just wanted to possess this man, with his dark, tousled hair falling into his face, his pale skin gleaming in the light of the rising moon.

Reese reached for the lamp beside the bed. It wouldn't do if there wasn't enough light for the hidden camera to record by. Leaning up on his elbows, he stared at Jeff, willing him to drop the towel.

Jeff's lips were pressed together and he was breathing hard through his nostrils, which were slightly flared as a result. When he shook back the hair from his face, his eyes seemed to be burning with an internal fire. His hands trembled as he let the towel drop from his narrow hips.

Reese raked his eyes over the strong, lean body, stopping at Jeff's cock, which was every bit as long and thick as his own, the tip glistening with pre-cum. He met Jeff's eyes and dragged his tongue suggestively over his lips.

Jeff just stood there, staring hard, a flush rising over his cheeks and throat. Reese sat up, his legs hanging over the end of the bed, ready to get the game in play. He'd warm up the shy guy with a blowjob that would knock his socks off, if he'd been wearing any.

Reese started to slip off the bed when Jeff suddenly sprang forward. Leaning over Reese, he pushed him back down, his grip on Reese's shoulders unexpectedly strong.

Reese allowed himself to fall back, surprised but curious as to what Jeff had in mind. At least the statue had come to life. He expected Jeff to go straight for his cock, but instead Jeff knelt on the bed beside him, his eyes moving hungrily over Reese's body.

Reese reached again for him, thinking to pull him down, but Jeff resisted. "No," he said, his voice husky.

"What the—" Reese began, but Jeff cut him off by placing three fingers gently over Reese's lips. Jeff shook his head slowly, a small smile lifting the corners of his mouth. Intrigued, Reese remained silent, wondering what the hell this guy was doing.

Jeff traced Reese's jaw line with his finger, moving it up over his lips and following the line of his nose. He touched Reese's eyelids, forcing him to close them. When Reese started to open them, Jeff again touched them and Reese understood he wanted him to keep them closed.

Okay. He could play this game, whatever it was, for a little while longer. As long as the night ended with his cock buried in Jeff's ass, the bet would be satisfied. If it took them a while to get there, so much the better.

He felt Jeff's lips grazing his cheek. Eyes still closed, he turned his face toward Jeff, ready to be kissed, but Jeff's mouth didn't find his. Instead it moved down toward his throat, leaving a trail of tiny, soft kisses along Reese's skin.

Jeff's hands moved over his shoulders, the palms smoothing his chest, leaving circles of heat along his skin. Reese's ignored cock was twitching and he reached for it, thinking to stroke it while he waited for Jeff to get down to business.



He opened his eyes in surprise when Jeff's caught his wrist, stopping him from touching himself. "No," Jeff whispered. "Let me. Just lie there."

Fair enough. He'd let Jeff get him nice and hard before he took over. Jeff touched his eyelids again and, obediently, Reese closed his eyes, though he allowed a small, superior smile to cross his lips. Whatever Jeff thought he was doing, it all came down to fucking in the end.

The unexpected tug at his left nipple caught him by surprise. The almost painful nip of teeth was quickly replaced by a tongue, warm and soft. The other nipple was given the same treatment, and then Jeff began to glide down Reese's abdomen with his tongue, wet and silky against Reese's skin.

*Ah, now we get down to it*, he thought eagerly. His cock was straining upwards and he squeezed his muscles to make it lift in invitation. But no hot mouth closed over it. Instead, Jeff skirted by his cock, raining soft kisses along Reese's upper thighs. His touch felt good but damn it, Reese wanted his cock sucked.

He reached for Jeff, pulling at his hair to guide him where he wanted him. Again Jeff's grip, surprisingly strong, closed around his wrists. He released Jeff's hair and sighed.

After another minute or so, he urged, "Come on, baby. Do me."

Jeff, who was kneeling beside him, looked up at him, his cheek resting against Reese's thigh. His eyes were soft, his smile tender. "I don't want to do you, Reese. I want to make love to you."

Reese lifted his head to stare at the younger man, and for once, no clever quip or smartass retort came to mind. "Okay." The single word sounded inane even to his own ears. Jeff must think he was an idiot.

But Jeff just smiled wider, a radiant smile, pure and open. In spite of himself, Reese smiled back, his heart catching in a way he wasn't familiar with.

Jeff shifted, positioning himself so he was crouched between Reese's legs. Placing a hand on either thigh, he dipped his head down toward Reese's cock. Reese lay back against the pillows, sighing in anticipation.

He felt Jeff's warm breath against his balls and then a swirl of tongue dancing lightly over them. Gently Jeff sucked the delicate sac into his mouth, enfolding Reese in pleasurable sensation. His cock was throbbing now, aching for Jeff's touch.

Jeff gripped the base of his shaft and touched the tip of his tongue to the head of Reese's cock. Reese groaned, thrusting his hips up to force his cock deeper into Jeff's mouth. Jeff pressed him back against the bed and continued to tease him, licking in small circles around the crown and sliding his tongue lightly along the slit.

He reached behind Reese's balls, capturing them in a tight grip that forced Reese's cock to point upward toward the ceiling. Finally Jeff closed his lips over Reese's cock, but only the crown.

Frustrated, Reese again reached for Jeff's head. This time, Jeff permitted it. Taking the cock into his throat, Jeff suckled the stiff shaft, sending spirals of radiating heat through Reese's body. Jeff's fingers were still curled around the base of his shaft, keeping Reese's cock rigid and the skin pulled taut.

Jeff pulled back, letting Reese's cock nearly fall from his lips before lowering his head again, his tongue sliding hot and wet along the shaft until the head was lodged in the back of his throat. The sensation was incredible and Reese knew if Jeff kept it up, he was going to come.

That wouldn't do. The bet was that Reese fucked Jeff, not that Jeff blew him. Though he loved what Jeff was doing, he forced himself upright and Jeff moved back, looking at him with a quizzical expression.

"I want you," Reese said, his voice throaty with a desire that wasn't feigned. "I want your ass."

"Shh," Jeff said, smiling softly, though his eyes still burned with an inner fire. "Take your time. Slow down. We have all night, don't we?" Not waiting for an answer, he lowered himself again over Reese's cock, licking in lazy circles until he'd again taken the length of it into his mouth.

Reese groaned and fell back again, helpless against the heavenly caress. "Fuck," he whispered, his balls tightening. He was going to come and it felt too damn good to stop Jeff again. The rush of an orgasm threatened to engulf him and he shuddered.

Jeff pulled away and Reese cried out in frustration. "Don't stop! I'm nearly there."

"I want to keep you there, Reese, for as long as possible." Jeff stroked Reese's thighs, moving his hands down between them and spreading them apart. Crouching lower, he again lapped at Reese's balls, sliding his tongue lower to the sensitive skin of the perineum.

"Yeah," Reese whispered. Jeff moved lower still, touching Reese's tight hole with the tip of his tongue. He circled the sensitive pucker and pressed against the entrance. Reese lifted his legs, putting his feet flat against the bed to give Jeff better access.

Jeff put his hands on either side, spreading Reese's ass cheeks. He pushed his tongue in deeper, thrusting it in and out like a cock. Reese groaned, pushing against the welcoming invasion.

Jeff reached for his cock with one hand, encircling it with strong, sure fingers. Reese shuddered, his balls aching, seconds away from coming. Timing it precisely, Jeff let him go again. He slid his tongue along the crack of Reese's ass, circling his balls and licking upward along the shaft until he reached the head.

Over and over, Jeff brought Reese to the edge of orgasm, pulling him back from the brink just before he tumbled over. Reese lost track of time. His mind shut down. He was pure sensation and aching desire. He was sweating, his body trembling, his breath coming in gasps. Never before had he relinquished control to this degree.

Even with Hank, back in those early days when everything was shiny and new, Reese had always held something back. The defenses he'd built to keep himself safe had been in place so long, they were a part of the very fabric of his being.

Yet somehow this guy was unraveling the threads, untwisting the knotted cords that had kept the rest of the world at bay for so long. Who the fuck was this guy? How had the sexual balance of power flipped so completely between them?

Pure, perfect physical sensation finally overrode the incessant whirring of Reese's fevered brain. *Stop, oh god, don't stop, fuck, yes, yes...* He was going to die, but what a perfect little death...

"Please," he finally managed. "I...want...I need...to fuck you."

"Yes," Jeff whispered, relenting at last. He pulled away, allowing Reese to reach with trembling hand for a lubricated condom. He tossed it to Jeff, who tore open the wrapper, rolling it over Reese's swollen, rock-hard cock.

Jeff knelt beside Reese on his hands and knees, his offering clear. Reese's heart was thudding in his ears and he could barely lift himself into position. Jeff's tiny hole was hiding between muscular cheeks. Eagerly, Reese pulled at them, nudging the head of his cock against the tight entrance.

He considered adding additional lubricant to ease his passage, but he was too far gone to do so. Jeff had teased him nearly beyond endurance. He had to have him—now. Pressing forward, he pushed too fast past the ring of muscle, causing Jeff to draw in a sharp breath.

Reese stilled a moment, giving his new lover a chance to get used to him. When he felt Jeff's muscles ease sufficiently, he moved forward, guiding himself into the hot clasp of Jeff's ass. Jeff pushed back against him, taking his cock deeper.

Reese leaned over him, resting his chest against Jeff's back, wrapping his arms around Jeff's chest as he moved his hips, thrusting gently in and out of the perfect heat. He was surprised to find himself kissing the back of Jeff's neck while he fucked him. But it felt good; it felt right to kiss this man who had just spent over an hour driving him nearly out of his mind with pleasure.

*I want to make love to you.*

No one, Reese realized, had ever made love to him before.

All at once, the climax that had been rising and receding too many times to count under Jeff's skillful touch, erupted in a steady gush of shuddering ecstasy. Reese cried out, slamming hard against Jeff, who fell beneath him at the impact.

They remained joined as they rolled in unison to their sides, Reese's arms locked around Jeff. They lay still for some time, neither one moving or speaking. Reese's labored breathing slowly eased, his heart resuming its normal beat. A curious surge of emotion washed over him, feelings he didn't understand or accept.

He tried to pick out the strands of emotion and identify them. One of the feelings was gratitude. Gratitude? For what? Jeff was the one who should be grateful. Reese Armstrong didn't fuck just anyone.

Gratitude...he couldn't deny it.

And what else? There was something else at play. It was...how to describe it? It was like a strange, rising joy. A happiness just to be lying with this man, holding him close, smelling his warm skin, feeling his body yielding against his own, listening to the soft whisper of his breathing. It was more than happiness. He lay quietly, pondering the new, confusing, even frightening feelings.

Turning his head, he glanced upward, his eye falling on the hidden camera. He had completely forgotten the camera. He had forgotten the bet, but now he remembered. A bet was a bet, and he did love to win.

But at what cost?

Jeff shifted and rolled over, pulling Reese toward him. Having gotten what he was after, normally Reese would have called it a night. Then he saw Jeff's face, suffused with tenderness and burning desire. As Jeff leaned forward to kiss him, Reese felt his heart let go, like fingers letting go of the side of a boat and dropping through layers of water.

# Chapter 5

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“Hang on a second.” Reese pulled away from Jeff and got out of the bed. Walking toward the door, he flicked a switch beside it, though nothing happened that Jeff could see. Without explanation, Reese returned to bed.

“Where were we?” He reached for Jeff, who moved into his arms. They lay quietly and Jeff realized Reese was hovering near sleep. Though Jeff’s cock remained stiff as a board, Reese had to be pretty wiped out.

Jeff hadn’t meant to mount the full-scale seduction. He hadn’t planned to take over and seize erotic control. It had just happened. All the fear and trepidation, all the worries about Reese’s sincerity or lack thereof, about whether he would stammer at some crucial moment, or come the second Reese touched his cock, vanished the moment he’d stared down at the naked man holding out his arms.

He didn’t know why or how, but something had happened between them, some kind of shift. Something that circumvented reason or intellect. Something that rose above the more mundane emotions like fear or envy, or even lust. Jeff had felt the overpowering need to explore every bit of Reese’s body. To taste him, to feel his skin, to make him tremble and beg.

For the first time in Jeff’s sexual life, he’d been in total control. With every other man he’d been with, including Tom, he’d followed his lover’s lead, tailoring his behavior and reactions to theirs.

But not this time. This time he had taken just what he’d wanted with a power and authority he hadn’t known he possessed. It was as if he’d been taken over by a kind of sexual madness. He’d staked his claim, if not on Reese’s heart, at least on his body.

Had Reese felt it too? Or did he just allow Jeff to worship his body, taking it as his due? Even as this thought passed through his mind, Jeff knew it wasn’t like that. Reese hadn’t been a passive consumer of Jeff’s favors. They’d been intimately connected in a way that was deeply personal. Jeff had felt every tremor, every shudder and gasp, even the beating of Reese’s heart, as if they were his own.

“Hey.” Reese’s voice was low and tender.

Jeff pulled back so he could see Reese’s face. His eyes were shining and Jeff was captivated by the emotion in Reese’s face. He leaned close again, closing his eyes as their lips met in a kiss. Reese opened Jeff’s mouth with his, slipping his tongue inside.

They kissed until their lips were chapped, and then they kissed some more. Reese reached for Jeff's cock, catching it in his large hand and stroking upward, his mouth still on Jeff's. Jeff moaned against him and Reese increased the pressure and tempo on his cock.

All his pent up desire was released with Reese's persistent caress. As good as it felt, he couldn't hold on another second. "Oh, god," Jeff cried, pulling back from the kiss to catch his breath. "Ooh..." He held the word as his body began to shudder, hot spurts of cum shooting from his throbbing cock. Reese continued to stroke him until his balls were empty.

Jeff rolled onto his back, his heart thumping high in his throat. When he could move, he turned his head toward Reese, who was watching him with a bemused expression. Glancing downward, he saw the sticky ejaculate on the bed between them, and on Reese's fingers.

"Sorry," he mumbled, embarrassed. "It just snuck up on me."

Reese grinned. "No big deal." He licked the cum from his fingers, his eyes on Jeff's as he did so. Leaning down, he dipped his head toward Jeff's spent cock and licked away the drops that still trickled from the head. His touch made Jeff shudder in aftershock and sigh with pleasure.

*You see, a voice in his head whispered. You were wrong about Reese Armstrong. He puts on that swaggering façade to hide his true, loving nature. He just needed the right man to bring out the goodness. He just needed you.*

The old Jeff would have laughed out loud at such a preposterous thought. There was no way in hell someone like Reese Armstrong would be interested in someone like him for more than a one-night-stand. But the old Jeff seemed to have left the premises, and a new, confident man had taken his place. Why shouldn't Reese want to be with him? Why not?

He had no idea what would happen now, or where they would go from here. All he knew was, if he could spend the rest of his life right here, in this one moment, with this one man, it would be enough.

~\*~

*Reese was swimming in cold water beneath a dark, starless sky. He was exhausted and trying desperately to stay afloat. Something kept pulling at his legs, its grip relentless. Reese tried to kick it off, but the grip only tightened, dragging him down below the murky surface. He kept his eyes open, desperately trying to see his assailant.*

*It was Jeff, only not Jeff – this nightmare Jeff had bared teeth and a twisted expression, like a vampire waiting to suck the life blood from him. He leaned toward Reese, his fangs bared, morphing as he did into Ray Sipos, whose corpse-like visage stared with wide unseeing eyes.*

*Reese struggled wildly in the demon's grip, but he couldn't move. His lungs were bursting and terror oozed over him like slime...*

Reese sat bolt upright in his bed with a gasp, his heart beating like a drum. It took him a moment to realize he'd been dreaming. *Ray Sipos. Jesus.* He hadn't thought about him in years, at least not directly. With a conscious effort, he willed the nightmare from his mind. His head ached and his mouth felt like it was stuffed with cotton.

He looked at his watch. It was one-twenty in the afternoon. He reached for the bottle of water beside his bed and took a long drink, the nightmare still hovering like a ghost on the edges of his consciousness.

He hadn't meant to fall asleep after Jeff left that morning. For that matter, he hadn't meant to let Jeff stay the night. It was rare that he let a lover stay over, and certainly not the first time.

The first time.

Did that mean there would be other times?

What the hell had happened last night?

He had planned to fuck the guy, plain and simple. Yes, he was attracted to him, so what? That should have just made it easier to stick his dick where it needed to go to collect on his bet.

So what had happened?

He lay back against the pillows, his mind moving over the events of the evening. Dinner had been pleasant, with a sizzling undertow of sexual possibility. Unlike the guys Reese was used to hanging out with, Jeff didn't brag about his latest conquests, or gossip about who was or wasn't doing what to whom. And when Reese spoke, he felt Jeff's total focus and attention. Jeff was actually interested in what he had to say, not merely waiting for a lull so he could jump in and talk about himself.

He'd been confident of how the night would go. Once he got Jeff completely relaxed with booze and the hot tub, he'd seduce him in short order and send him on his way. Yeah, he liked the guy, but so what? That didn't mean anything. Anything at all.

Until they'd made love.

Reese closed his eyes, remembering. They'd made love again sometime near dawn, this time Jeff penetrating Reese. Jeff had spooned Reese, wrapping strong arms around him as he entered Reese from behind, nuzzling his neck.

What would Hank think if he knew Reese had let Jeff stay the night? He'd remind Reese, with the contempt ripe in his voice, that sure, their new thing seemed nice now, even wonderful, but Reese knew how it would go. Jeff would want to see him all the time. He'd want to talk on the phone every day. He'd want to know where Reese was when they weren't together. He'd become clingy and needy. The sex would become

boring and predictable. He would be suffocated, dragged down, drowned in Jeff's insecurities.

The imaginary Hank was right. Who the fuck needed that?

It was good Jeff had left first thing in the morning, claiming he had to finish some programming for a project due on Monday. Things had been entirely too intense between them. Reese needed some time to figure out just what the hell had gone down. If Jeff thought they were now having a relationship, he had another thing coming.

The phone rang and Reese let it go to voicemail. "Reese. Pick up, you coward. The morning has come and gone, and I haven't heard a word from you. I'll expect you here in an hour, ready to be my personal slave for the rest of the week. I told you that you wouldn't be able to get into that geek's pants. He probably doesn't even have a cock, but only a computer-generated simulation of the real thing." Hank laughed at his own joke. "Get your ass over here. Bye."

Reese sat up, putting his feet on the floor. He showered and dressed, slipping his phone and wallet into his pants pocket. He glanced up at the fake smoke detector, wondering if the movie now captured on his DVR conveyed the intensity of the experience.

Once downstairs, Reese turned on the TV and retrieved the DVR remote to access the video. It was all there, from the moment they entered the bedroom until he'd flicked off the switch. "Jesus," Reese whispered softly, watching the scene unfold as if it were two other people. His cock hardened as he watched the image of Jeff lean over him, dark hair sweeping Reese's stomach as he swallowed Reese's cock.

The thought of Hank watching this and making fun of it, as he surely would, irritated the crap out of Reese. He fast-forwarded through the action. To fulfill the terms of the bet, all Hank needed to see was the penetration. None of the rest of it was any of his damn business.

Reese found the portion of the video he would need to prove his seduction, and copied it onto a memory stick. Slipping the stick into his pocket, he flipped open his cell phone and punched the speed dial.

"'Bout time you called. I've got my whips and chains ready. You'll look extra hot with a bit gag in your mouth." Hank said.

"Have those tens and twenties ready," Reese snapped, hanging up before Hank had a chance to reply.

~\*~

Jeff realized he hadn't moved for the last ten minutes. He was staring blankly at his monitor, the symbols on the screen nothing more than a thousand lines of gibberish to a mind focused elsewhere. He closed his eyes, abandoning any pretense of work. He'd



been sitting in his space at Strata Systems since early that morning, but he'd accomplished next to nothing.

He'd awakened before Reese, whose back was to him, his arms wrapped around a pillow. Jeff lay quietly for a while, watching Reese sleep, admiring the strong curve of his shoulder and listening to the sound of his breathing.

A feeling of wonder stole over him. He was in Reese Armstrong's bed! The night had been amazing. He had never craved another man's body as much as he had Reese's. He had been consumed by him, completely enveloped in the moment. Nothing had existed outside of their lovemaking.

Jeff had watched Reese sleeping. His face looked younger in repose, the long golden lashes sweeping his cheekbones, his mouth curved in a gentle smile. When he opened his eyes, would the smile remain? Would he reach for Jeff, whispering how wonderful it was that they'd found each other?

Who was Jeff kidding? Whatever they'd shared the night before, no way would it mean anything in the morning to this guy who could, and did, have his pick of men.

They'd both had plenty to drink during dinner and after, and Reese had been horny. But now, in the cold light of morning, would he welcome a stranger in his bed? Jeff couldn't bear the thought of Reese waking and turning to stare at him in incomprehension, or worse, dismay.

Goaded by these unwelcome thoughts, Jeff had slipped quietly out of the bed, careful not to disturb Reese. He'd made his way to the bathroom to use the toilet and wash his face and hands. When he returned to the bedroom, Reese was awake, his tan, strong body barely covered by a bit of white sheet over his groin.

"Hi," Jeff said, feeling suddenly shy, though his cock stirred at the sight.

Reese had nodded his greeting, saying nothing. If he had held out his arms, Jeff would have gone to him. If he had said anything, given the smallest sign that he wanted Jeff to stay, he would have climbed back into bed and made love for the rest of the day.

But Reese only watched him with opaque eyes, his expression closed.

"I have t-t-to go. I have p-p-programming to do," Jeff stammered, inwardly cursing his nerves.

Even then he would have stayed, if Reese had asked him. He hadn't. "Okay. Later," was all Reese said, his eyes sliding away.

Jeff stared at his computer monitor, frowning at the memory of the morning. Where had the warmth gone? Why was he so attracted to a man who could turn on and off his emotions like a faucet?

In the light of day, he couldn't deny the power rush he'd experienced from reducing the cocky, arrogant Reese Armstrong to trembling, panting lust. No question,

the sex had been phenomenal, but was sex enough to base a relationship on? Apart from his sexual attraction to Reese, was there enough of a foundation to move forward?

Maybe he needed to figure out his own heart before expecting more from his new lover. He would give it time. He wouldn't press or push. He sensed that would only make Reese more skittish. No. Jeff was nothing if not a patient man. He would wait and see what the future held, if indeed it held anything at all.

~\*~

"Come on. Hand it over." Hank sat beside his pool, which was dappled with golden coins of sunlight. Julio appeared, a pitcher of frozen margaritas and two glasses filled with ice on a tray. He set them down beside Hank and went back inside.

"What?" Reese slid onto a lounge chair, watching as Hank filled the glasses. Now that he was here, the reluctance that had been building bloomed into full flower. Granted, Jeff would never have to know what he'd done, and yet to share it, even just the small section he'd saved for Hank, felt like a betrayal. Somehow, this time was different than the others. Maybe because, for the first time, he cared for the man he was about to expose.

Then he noticed the fat envelope on the table beside Hank. Five thousand tax-free dollars.

What the fuck was wrong with him lately? Hank would accuse of him of losing his balls. And really, what was the real harm? It's not like Jeff and he were a couple. They'd spent one night together. Big fucking deal.

That morning when Jeff said he had to go, Reese's first impulse was to beg him to stay, but his mouth had refused to move. He couldn't find his voice. Maybe that was a good thing. Maybe it had saved him from getting too close, too fast, to a guy he had no business being with in the first place.

Hank handed him a glass and Reese sipped at the tangy slush. He closed his eyes, wishing this strange, new, nearly constant sense of confusion would leave him.

He hadn't been confused last night in Jeff's arms. He'd been at once on fire and at peace. It was a curious but powerful combination. Would it be that way again, or was it just because it had been so new?

"Reese, you're doing it again."

Reese had almost forgotten where he was, or why he had come. "Huh?" He turned toward Hank, who was scowling at him.

"You're ignoring me. You're off in la la land again. What the hell's been going on with you this past week, anyway?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"No?" Hank eyed him again, but Reese offered nothing more. Still scowling, Hank held out his hand. "Okay. Whatever. Hand it over. You want your money, I get the goods."

Reese could feel the memory stick poking in his pocket. "You know, this is kind of lame..." he began, not sure himself where he was going with this.

"What is?"

"This whole betting thing. You know, it's kind of sleazy when you think about it."

Hank stared at Reese for a few seconds, his expression blank. Then he began to laugh. "Are you fucking kidding me? Isn't it a little late for these kind of touchy-feely sentiments?" He made a show of looking under Reese's chair and behind him. "Where's the real Reese Armstrong, and who the hell are you?"

"Shut up, Hank." Reese looked away.

"A bet's a bet." Hank's voice was soft and dangerous. "Did you fuck him or not? Did you record it or not? If you did, what's the big deal? Let's watch it together. You can give me a blow by blow." Hank sniggered and Reese hated him at that moment.

"You're afraid, that's it. You haven't got the balls to admit you didn't make the grade. Maybe the great seducer of men has finally lost his touch? Who would have thought one lone geek could hold out against the great Reese Armstrong?"

Goaded beyond toleration by Hank's obnoxious taunting, Reese stood and pulled the memory stick from his pocket, tossing it on the table beside Hank. "There's your proof."

Hank picked it up, turning it over and over in his hands, as if examining a precious jewel. He looked up at Reese, squinting into the sunlight. "You delicious bastard," he said with a crocodile's smile. "You had me fooled." He laughed, the sound loud but hollow in Reese's ears. "I should have known. No one escapes your net, not when you put your mind, and your cock, to it." He laughed again. Reese did not laugh with him.

Hank stood, fingering the memory stick. "Let's go and watch it. We'll use the big screen."

"No," Reese said sharply, wishing he'd never come. If only he could rewind the last few minutes. He should have lied. He should have said he hadn't succeeded. Fuck the money. Who gave a shit what Hank thought?

Hank regarded him with half veiled eyes. "Fine," he said, "I'll watch it alone. When I see your dick up that geek's ass, you'll get your money."

"Hank. I've changed my mind. I don't want —"

"Oh, no you don't. A bet's a bet." Pocketing the money envelope, Hank disappeared into the house. With a sigh, Reese followed him, trying and failing to ignore the sickening feeling that he'd just made the biggest mistake of his life.

# Chapter 6

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Monday morning managed to arrive at last and there Jeff sat in his space at Strata, trying to pretend he wasn't waiting for Reese to appear. What a dumb move, to get involved with someone he worked with. How awkward if and when things didn't work out. And for all he knew, their brief affair had already reached its end.

Somehow Jeff had made it through the rest of the weekend. At least ten times, he nearly made the call, practicing in his head what he would say.

*Hey, I was just thinking of you. Thought I'd call and say hi. Want to go out for a beer or something?*

*I was waiting for your call. Why didn't you call?*

*Hey, thanks for the incredibly hot sex. Want to do it again?*

*Hi, Reese. It's Jeff. You know, the geek you fucked last night. Oh, you don't remember?*

*Hi Reese. Sorry I left so early. I had to meet one of my many other lovers. I'm sure you understand.*

He checked his phone obsessively, making sure it was fully charged, the ringer on. No missed calls. No messages. What was the protocol in this kind of thing? Who should call first? Was Reese waiting for his call? Was he, too, wishing and wondering when Jeff would get in touch?

Yeah, right. Jeff's initial instinct had been right. Reese was nothing more than a one-night-stand kind of guy. Jeff was probably no more than a memory by now, the only trace of his existence a used condom in the trashcan.

How would Reese behave when they saw each other in the office? How would Jeff react? He'd be damned if he let Reese see it mattered. Shit, the guy was probably doing him a favor. Who needed the complication of getting involved with someone at work?

All at once Jeff's ears pricked to the sound of Reese's deep, rich voice. He was in the office! Nerves started creeping over him like little insects and he reached for his Dr. Pepper, taking a gulp to steady himself.

He forced himself to focus on his monitor, trying to lose himself in his work. A tricky bit of code actually drew him in, and he was able to pry the fingers of his obsession with Reese loose enough from his brain to allow him to focus.

"Hey."

Jeff jumped at the sound of Reese's voice. He looked up to see Reese's handsome face over the top of the silk screen that gave Jeff some privacy from the rest of the office.

"Hey," he replied, his heart suddenly clutching in his chest.

"Is this a good time? You look really busy. I could come back —"

"No!" Jeff cut him off, aware of the blush creeping up his cheeks. "I mean, it's a good time. Perfect, in fact. I was just thinking of taking a break."

"Cool." Reese moved around the screen, settling into the chair in front of Jeff's desk. Leaning forward, he spoke in a quiet voice. "Did you have a good rest of the weekend?"

"Sure," Jeff lied. "I had a lot of stuff to do."

Reese nodded. "Yeah, I figured, when you left so early and all..."

For the first time it occurred to Jeff maybe Reese hadn't wanted him to leave. Had he spent a similar kind of day, worrying and wondering where they went from here? Jeff almost laughed out loud at the preposterousness of that thought. Like Reese Armstrong ever worried about a thing.

"Hey, wanna grab a coffee or something?"

"Sure." Jeff's heart did a crazy flip flop and he realized he was grinning. Forcing his face into neutral, he pushed back from his desk and stood. Reese stood as well. Jeff was dressed in a black T-shirt that said  $1+1=10$  in white, and his usual faded jeans and black Converse sneakers. Reese was wearing a starched yellow shirt with pale blue stripes and dark blue trousers, his jacket slung casually over one shoulder. He looked like something out of a GQ magazine, posing for the camera, a smoldering look in his eye.

Jeff was aware they were being observed as they walked together through the building. How long before their relationship became the stuff of office gossip? The idea wasn't altogether displeasing, but at the same time it was a little disconcerting.

They walked to a small diner a block over from Strata Systems. Once they settled into a booth, Reese grabbed one of the huge, plastic-coated ring binders that served as a menu. "Have you had breakfast? I'm starving." He rubbed his face with his hands and ran his fingers through his hair. Offering a sheepish grin, he said, "I wasn't exactly hungry when I woke up this morning. I had too much to drink last night. I like tequila, but it doesn't like me all that much, not the next morning, anyway."

Jeff was silent as he absorbed this unwelcome information. His mind immediately went to whom Reese had been drinking with, and what they'd done afterward. Mentally he shook his head, refusing to go there.

Unaware anything was amiss, Reese smiled brightly at him. "They make this great French toast with blueberries. I'm gonna get some. How about you?"

"Just coffee for me, thanks," Jeff said. The waitress came over, filling their mugs. Jeff watched her eyeing Reese surreptitiously, though Reese, still scanning the menu,

seemed oblivious. Once she took the order and left, Reese began to make small talk about Strata's latest clients and products.

While Reese talked, Jeff tried not to stare at the hollow of his throat, remembering his scent and the taste of his skin. He tried not to recall moving his mouth and hands over Reese's bared body, or taking his rigid, silk and steel shaft between his lips. He almost succeeding in blotting out the salty-sweet taste of Reese's cum.

He kept waiting for Reese to say something, anything, that would indicate he remembered they'd actually made love and spent a night together, but Reese kept his banter superficial. Had it meant nothing to this man? Was Jeff now supposed to forget it had ever happened?

Unable to control himself a second longer, Jeff burst out, "So what the hell happened between us, Reese?"

"Huh?" Reese looked nonplussed.

"Saturday. Or have you already forgotten?" Reese's expression darkened, though with anger or pain, Jeff couldn't tell. He wished he could grab the words and stuff them back into his mouth. Damn, he'd promised himself he wouldn't do this. Cool, calm and collected, not demanding explanations or promises of something more.

"I haven't forgotten," Reese said softly. "You're the one who left."

"You didn't ask me to stay," Jeff retorted with more force than he meant to.

Reese lifted one eyebrow, his grin sardonic. "Did you want me to? Was that just a ploy then, saying you had work to do? Maybe you want to send me the script in advance next time, so I know my lines?"

Flames licked Jeff's face and he lifted his coffee mug to hide it. *Next time*. Did that mean there'd be a next time? Had he misread Reese yet again? Was he ever going to figure out what really lay beneath that confident, cool exterior? "No, that's not what I m-m-meant." *Fuck*. Jeff closed his eyes, taking in a slow, deep breath.

He felt Reese's hand slip over his, his touch firm and cool. He opened his eyes to find Reese's gaze fixed on him. "Relax. I was just teasing you. Look, I had a great time with you. When I woke up and you were standing there saying you had to go, I wasn't gonna force you to stay. That's not my style."

The waitress arrived and Reese pulled his hand away and sat back. She set down a large platter heaped with thick slices of French toast sprinkled with powdered sugar, plump purple blueberries on top. She set a smaller plate piled with crisp bacon beside it.

Jeff watched as Reese put butter and syrup on the French toast and then cut a large bite. The bagel Jeff had had four hours before was pretty much history, as far as his stomach was concerned, but he'd been too edgy to think of eating when they first sat

down. Now his mouth was watering. He took a sip of his coffee, wondering if he should order something.

"I'm never going to eat all this," Reese said suddenly, as if reading his mind. "Would you mind taking some? We can use this butter dish." He dumped the packets of butter into the bowl that held tiny cups of cream for the coffee. Without waiting for Jeff's response, he slid a slice of the French toast onto the plate along with two pieces of the bacon.

Pushing the plate across the table toward Jeff, Reese grinned and shrugged. "Sorry. I can't stand to waste anything."

"Actually, that looked so good, I was thinking of ordering some myself."

They smiled at one another for a beat and then another. The tightness that had been in Jeff's chest since he'd left Reese Saturday morning eased, at least a little. His heart picked up its pace, his cock stirring, the French toast forgotten.

"So," Reese said. "You busy tonight?"

~\*~

After the impromptu breakfast, Reese left Jeff at the office to make his round of calls. He drove along I-25, his mind in a fog. "What the fuck are you doing, Armstrong?" he said aloud. "You violated rule number one of the Armstrong code of relationships." Rule number one was never to be the one to make initial contact after the first time having sex. He'd not only made initial contact, he'd invited the guy out a second time.

This affair was supposed to end Saturday night. He had won the bet, and had the money to prove it, so why was he still interested in the computer geek who sat in the corner? *Face it*, he told himself, *you're beyond interested*.

No one had ever touched him the way Jeff had. No one had ever kissed him so tenderly, or looked at him so ardently. He was used to guys who lusted after him, who were greedy for his body, hungry for his cock. Jeff had been all that, but there was something much more complex and compelling at work. Jeff had been out there, raw and vulnerable, the radiance of his adoring smile leaving no doubt as to his feelings.

That should have put Reese off. Hank's voice was mocking in his head, warning that if he didn't watch it, the geek would be using the L word. He could almost see Hank sitting beside him in the car, putting his finger down his throat in an imitation of making himself vomit at the very thought.

Love.

Did it perhaps exist after all? Had Hank and he spent their lives denying something that might, just maybe, be more real than the games they played?

Beyond Jeff's obvious infatuation, there was a power that spoke directly to some secret place inside Reese, a place he hadn't known he'd possessed. For the life of him, he couldn't get Jeff out of his head.

He hadn't watched the video clip with Hank, afraid his face would give away his feelings. He'd never hear the end of it if he admitted to Hank that the night had turned into something more than a conquest.

Instead he'd visited in the kitchen with Julio, who was making Hank's favorite, chocolate mousse. Hank came into the room a few minutes later, a scowl on his face. "Congratulations," he said dryly. He waved the envelope toward Reese, who moved forward to take it. The term *blood money* whispered through his mind, though it didn't stop him from pocketing the cash.

"You did it. You deflowered the nerd. Tell me, were you gentle? Did he cry?" Reese didn't join in the raucous laughter that followed. He glanced at Julio, embarrassed, but Julio was busy whipping cream, acting as if he hadn't heard a word.

"Make us more margaritas and a plate of nachos," Hank instructed Julio. "We'll be on the deck."

"Sure thing, boss," Julio replied, already reaching for fresh limes.

The first couple of drinks only served to make Reese want to talk about Jeff. Several times he nearly confided in the one man he shouldn't about his strange feelings for the guy. He almost mentioned how unusual those silver gray eyes were, and how smart Jeff was on the computer. He almost gave away that no one, certainly not Hank, not even in the beginning, had affected him the way Jeff had.

By the fourth drink, however, Reese had imbibed enough tequila to sufficiently numb his tongue and blur his thoughts. He let Hank convince him to stay the night, aware he was in no condition to ride his bike back to his own place. But the thought of sex with Hank, after the amazing night spent with Jeff, turned him off completely. He'd pretended to be even drunker than he was, feigning sleep to avoid it.

Reese opened his car window, enjoying the breeze, Jeff's wide, serious eyes and strong naked body in his mind. Though he'd only just left him, he had to admit he couldn't wait to see him again! He felt like a kid with a new toy he couldn't wait to get home to. He wished he had someone he could tell. He couldn't remember the last time there had been someone in his life he liked enough or was excited enough about to want someone else to witness.

Surely there was someone he could call, just to say, "Hey, I met someone." He racked his brains as he drove. As he ran through the list of men he knew, he realized there wasn't one who was really a friend. He'd had sex with them all, but he never shared anything beyond his body. He wasn't even sure he knew how to, when it came



down to it. He could talk a good game, but did he have what it took to keep a guy like Jeff interested in him?

He was keenly aware of the irony of this train of thought. Hank would laugh him to Buffalo and back for caring in the slightest if Jeff was interested in more than his cock. He himself wouldn't have thought it could matter.

But it did.

*Don't let me fuck this up. Not this time,* Reese whispered, not sure who he was entreating.

~\*~

Monday evening Jeff looked around the small living room, frowning with dissatisfaction. Until now, he hadn't cared that his bookshelves were little more than planks set on cinderblocks, or that his secondhand sofa was worn and faded with age. The place had just been somewhere to crash when he left work.

What a recluse he'd become since fleeing Boston and starting this new life. He'd gone out a few times with some of the people from the office and the occasional guy from a bar, and he'd entertained his parents when they'd come for a visit, but none of it at his place.

Though Denver had taken some getting used to after a lifetime in Massachusetts, he enjoyed the freedom of being away from his family. No one here knew him. He could reinvent himself, and that suited him.

He had grown up in a small town about forty miles west of Boston. Speech had come late and was always difficult for him, but made infinitely worse by his brothers' taunting. His most painful early memories revolved around their casual bullying. His parents rarely stepped in to protect him, believing boys should learn to fend for themselves.

One of his brothers' favorite pastimes was to mimic him until he cried. "What is it, J-j-j-eff? Come on, sp-p-p-it it out. C-c-c-c-at got your t-t-t-tongue?" They would dissolve in paroxysms of laughter, never tiring of making him the butt of their jokes.

Speech therapy in school helped dramatically and in fact once he hit his teens, he rarely stuttered except when anxious or overtired. By doubling up his courses, he graduated high school a year early and took off for Boston, with a substantial scholarship. There he fell into the welcoming arms of M.I.T., where, for the first time in his life, he felt at home, or at least among people of like mind.

Back then he never would have considered Reese Armstrong. He hung with other geeks, guys who were more turned on by brains than brawn. He didn't even know if Reese had been to college, and he found he really didn't care. The powerful attraction between them superseded things like education and background. The language they shared needed no words.

*Tom had you fooled too*, the voice of caution whispered in his head. Not only Tom, there had been other guys who had turned out to be, if not players, certainly less than what Jeff had hoped. The fault had to lie partly with himself. He knew he had a tendency to build men up his head, assigning them with better qualities than they actually possessed. Was he doing it again?

God, he hoped not.

When Reese had asked if he was busy that night, Jeff suggested he come by for dinner, thinking at the time this would give him the advantage. He'd be in his own space, the one in control. If one thing led to the next, and he fervently hoped it would, he could invite Reese to stay the night. If Reese refused, well, at least he'd know where he stood.

Now he wondered what he had been thinking. His full-size bed had a sagging mattress that rested on a rickety frame. His bathroom was so small it barely housed the toilet and shower stall crammed into it. He'd cleaned up the old newspapers, magazines and pizza boxes, changed the sheets, and scoured the bathroom and kitchen, but there wasn't much else he could do, save run out and buy all new furniture.

At least the meal would be good. He had everything he needed for the one thing he made really well—lasagna with Italian sausage. It was baking in the oven, the smell of tomato sauce and melting cheese permeating the small apartment. The garlic bread was on a tray on the stove, ready to be toasted at the last minute, and the salad was chilling in the refrigerator.

With a sudden inspiration, he rummaged through the old china cabinet where he kept an extra set of dishes and other stuff he didn't know what to do with, and finally found the white linen tablecloth his Aunt Sarah had foisted on him when he'd graduated. It was still in its original wrapper.

He spread the cloth over the small kitchen table, folding it in half so it wouldn't be quite so obvious that it was made for a much larger table. He thought about candlesticks, which he didn't own anyway, and decided they'd be going overboard. In fact, maybe the tablecloth was too much. The guy would think he was about to propose or something.

Jeff whisked the cloth off the table and tried unsuccessfully to fold it back neatly enough to return to its wrapper. Abandoning that, he shoved it into the bottom drawer of the cabinet.

"I'll just open the wine," he said aloud. "Let it breathe, as they say." He had no idea what that even meant, but it would be an excuse to have a glass and steady his nerves. He glanced at his watch. It was quarter to six. Reese had said he'd be there between six-thirty and seven, depending when he got back from the clients in Colorado Springs.

Jeff decided to take a shower. He lingered over his cock as he soaped his body, remembering Reese's touch. He thought about masturbating, but decided against it, wanting to stay primed for what he hoped the evening held in store.

He set the table and poured himself a second glass of wine. Six-forty-five. Any second now the doorbell would ring. Reese would be there with a smile on his handsome face.

Whatever happened, Jeff would be cool. No sweating palms, no stuttering, no telltale erection bulging in his jeans. He would take his time getting to the door. Let the guy cool his heels a little—Jeff was no overeager teenager. Calmly, he would smile and step back, waving his guest inside.

"So glad you could come," he said aloud in a British accent. "Please make yourself at home. Just ignore this place. My mansion is at the shop." Grinning at himself, Jeff flopped onto the old couch and turned on the TV. He didn't hear a word of the newscast, his thoughts turned inward as he relived their one, perfect night together.

Was he falling in love? Was that even possible in so short a time? Could he really be falling for Reese Armstrong, or was he just lost in the throes of a wild infatuation? Was it Reese, or his own dreams he clung to, assigning them to Reese because he was handy? Just because Reese's smile tugged at Jeff's insides and left his heart pounding, that didn't mean he was in love.

At three minutes to seven, the doorbell rang. Jeff nearly spilled his wine in his haste, all thoughts of being cool deleted from his mind as he raced to the door, unable to stop the wide smile that spread over his face.

Reese was in all black—from his silk long-sleeved T-shirt that molded against his broad chest like a second skin to his black denim jeans to the square-toed black leather boots on his feet.

Jeff was so busy staring at him that he forgot to invite Reese in. Apparently no invitation was necessary. Reese cocked one eyebrow and smiled a slow, seductive smile. Stepping inside, he kicked the door shut and reached for Jeff, taking his face into his hands.

He kissed Jeff hard—no gentle experimentation, no hesitation. He forced Jeff's mouth open with his tongue, penetrating it with hot, sensual thrusts. Without letting up for a second, he maneuvered Jeff, backing him against the door.

His mouth still covering Jeff's, Reese pressed his body against Jeff's, forcing his legs apart. Jeff's cock rose hard against Reese's muscular thigh and he moaned against Reese's lips. When Reese finally let him go, Jeff sagged against the door, barely able to catch his breath.

Reese grinned at him. "Sorry. I've been waiting all day to do that. In fact," he leaned in close again, drawing a line along Jeff's lips with his tongue, "I think I need to do it again."

This time as he kissed Jeff's mouth, his hands found Jeff's fly, which he unzipped. Without asking, he jerked Jeff's jeans down his hips, dragging his underwear along with it. Jeff would have been embarrassed if he weren't so aroused.

As it was, when Reese let him go, only to kneel before him and take his throbbing cock between his lips, Jeff groaned his intense appreciation. Using both hands, Reese encircled the base of Jeff's cock, bringing his fingers together beneath Jeff's balls and forcing his cock out straight as an arrow.

He lowered his mouth over the shaft, not stopping until he'd taken it to the balls. The pressure caused by his fingers, coupled with the hot, wet suck of his lips and tongue, drove Jeff nearly out of his mind.

Jeff's legs threatened to buckle with pleasure. He gripped Reese's head, his fingers twisting in the silky blond hair as he tried to stay upright. "Jesus," he managed to gasp. "You're killing me."

Reese didn't answer. His mouth still enveloping Jeff's cock, he jerked Jeff's jeans farther down his legs and slipped a hand between them. When Jeff felt Reese's finger sliding between his ass cheeks, instinctively he tried to twist away. But Reese held him fast, one firm hand on his hip as the other explored his tiny hole, pressing a finger inside.

Jeff couldn't resist pressing against the digit, forcing it deeper while Reese continued to suck and stroke his cock with silky hot kisses. Jeff had imagined an intimate dinner and maybe a walk afterwards, with a slow lead-in to seduction. His mind still hadn't caught up to what Reese was doing to him, but his body was reacting full force.

He felt the clutch of a climax grip him. 'Ah, god, Reese, oh...' He jerked hard, slamming his cock down Reese's throat. Reese didn't miss a beat, his finger still swirling inside Jeff as he sucked every drop of cum from Jeff's balls.

When he finally let Jeff go, Jeff slid slowly down the door until he was sitting on the floor, his jeans tangled around his knees, his cock still jutting from his groin, wet and shiny. Reese raked his body with his gaze, his eyes hooded with lust.

He held out a hand and Jeff took it, allowing Reese to hoist him to his feet. Reese took him into his arms and kissed his neck. "If that was the appetizer," Reese murmured, "I can't wait for the meal."

# Chapter 7

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The next morning found Reese musing at his desk, his work ignored. Last night had been amazing. Though he hadn't admitted it to Jeff, Reese had been half-dreading seeing him again, not because he wasn't interested, but because he knew it would be impossible for their second time to measure up to the first. No way could the intensity be repeated or recreated.

And yet it had. If anything, it had been better. For one thing, there was no camera recording their every move. He was no longer doing something sneaky. There was no ulterior motive. He was with Jeff because he wanted to be, and that felt good.

He hadn't planned on the impromptu blow job upon entering Jeff's house. Jeff had looked so fucking sexy, his hair still damp from a shower, his jeans slung low over his hips, revealing a band of pale, smooth skin beneath his shirt, his feet bare.

After a very good meal, they'd moved to the bedroom to finish what he'd started, and this time Jeff was back in control, claiming Reese with as much intensity and mastery as he had that first time. Reese had never been with anyone like Jeff. He wanted more, more, more.

Reese was distracted by his cell phone vibrating on the desk. The erection that had been building eased off when he saw it was Hank, but he knew he couldn't put him off forever.

"Hey. What's up?"

"Finally. Where the fuck have you been?" Without waiting for a response, Hank continued, "Want me to pick you up at eight for the show or do you have time for dinner first?"

Shit. Reese had completely forgotten. Adopting his best sincere tone, tinged with regret, he said, "I can't, Hank. I'm sorry."

"What do you mean you can't? I've had these tickets for weeks. What's the problem?"

Reese hesitated, the lie ready on his tongue. "I have to work late. It's my chance for my first big client. If I get this account, I'll finally make a name for myself at Strata."

"You and that stupid job," Hank said, exasperation ripe in his voice. At least he seemed to be going for it. "Damn it, Reese. This is the third time in a week you've put me off. I think you're forgetting on what side your bread has been buttered all these years."

"Oh, yeah? How long does the statute of limitations run?" Reese could barely believe he'd said the words aloud. Now that they were out, he couldn't believe he'd waited this long.

There was a thunderous silence at the other end of the phone.

"There's no statute of limitations on a man's life," Hank finally said in a quiet but deadly voice. Reese actually shuddered, glad he was separated by several miles from the man on the other end of the line.

"Another call coming in. Later." Reese hung up and leaned back in his office chair, swiveling to see the mountains outside his window. He stared past the view, his mind, against his will, returning to that terrible, confusing time.

Back in high school, though quiet and reserved around his classmates, in fact Hank had a caustic, biting wit, which he turned with scathing, cruel accuracy on everyone around them. It made Reese feel special back then to be taken under his wing. He was part of a superior elite of two.

But more than that, he'd found someone who understood and shared his sexual orientation. He didn't have to pretend to be something he wasn't. Reese had been thrilled with their experimentation, an eager and willing pupil in the sexual lessons.

Hank liked to live on the edge, even back then. He enjoyed taking risks, though in retrospect, Reese realized Hank had a safety net—no matter how bad he fucked up, Dad was always there to clean up the mess, or sweep it under the rug.

One afternoon Hank and Reese stayed after school to complete a science lab they'd both missed. Toward the end of the lab the teacher overseeing them had been called away on some emergency or other. They finished the lab and Reese figured they'd leave, but Hank had other ideas.

"Come in the supply closet. You're going to suck my cock."

They were seventeen, perennially horny and very stupid. Reese at first refused. What if someone found them?

"Come on, you know you want to," Hank had retorted. "I'll return the favor when we go to my house, if you're a good little boy." Hank reached for him, his grip sure as he stroked Reese's cock through his jeans.

They both stared down at his erection, Reese with embarrassment, Hank with a sly smile. He pushed Reese back toward the supply closet door. They entered it, leaving the door slightly ajar so they would hear anyone coming.

But they didn't hear a thing—not until it was too late.

What happened next would always remain a blur, punctuated with pain, terror and confusion. Hank's cock suddenly jerked from Reese's mouth, the thunk of Hank's skull hitting the floor, Reese's frantic, terrified scramble to stand, his body drenched in fight-

or-flight chemicals, his hands curled into fists before he even knew who he was attacking. The splintering of glass, the gush of blood, splattering bright red against the gray linoleum, the rush of feet trampling into the room, the cries of outraged horror...

Reese closed his eyes and put his face into his hands. He had blocked out the actual event for so long, so why was it streaming through his brain now? Was it because of Jeff? Had his defenses been lowered by the sweetness they'd shared, allowing feelings so long numbed to sting painfully back to life?

He had to get out of the office – breathe some fresh air. He thought of inviting Jeff, but knew he couldn't keep pulling the guy away from work all the time. Anyway, they'd only been seeing each other a week and a half. He didn't want to come across as needy.

Grabbing his briefcase to make it look official, Reese left the building. He headed for his car. A drive along some country roads would clear his head. Why focus on a past that couldn't be changed, when a bright future lay ahead?

As he drove, thoughts of Jeff returned, replacing those dark memories. If only he hadn't given Hank the video. Yes, the money was great, but nothing involving Hank Seeley came that easy. In his heart of hearts, Reese knew it was only a matter of time before he was forced to pay, though he didn't yet know how.

And what about Jeff? Even though Jeff didn't know about the video, Reese felt ashamed of what he had done. More than once, it had been on the tip of his tongue to confess to his new lover about the stupid bet and apologize, but he'd stayed quiet.

In the ten days since the bet had been won, he'd spent every spare moment with Jeff, which intellectually he knew was a bad move. As Hank would have reminded him, rule number two of the Armstrong code of relationships was you never saw the guy two nights in a row. You did that, and before you knew it, the guy was thinking he owned you, and next thing you knew, he'd want to move in.

But he just couldn't help it. He couldn't seem to get enough of Jeff. He loved everything about him—from his too-long hair always falling into his face, to those amazing silver-gray eyes, to the taste of his skin, the feel of his hard cock, and even the stutter that came out when Jeff was feeling nervous or unsure. There was an innocence—a vulnerability in Jeff that, instead of wanting to exploit, Reese wanted to protect.

He had never felt this way in his life. Was this that thing he'd read about? Was this what all the poems and song lyrics had been talking about? Was the impervious Reese Armstrong succumbing at last to that crazy little thing called love?

"Nah," Reese said aloud, more out of habit than conviction. "No fucking way."

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The weekend arrived and Jeff and Reese decided to take a nice long hike, spending the day in the mountains. A lone eagle wheeled high overhead, circling against the impossibly blue Colorado sky. The nearby rushing waterfall threw off a cool breeze toward the mossy ground where Reese lay with his head in Jeff's lap, his eyes closed.

Jeff stroked Reese's cheek, staring down at him with wonder. He still couldn't quite believe they were together. The last two weeks had been the happiest of his life. What he'd thought he'd found with Tom paled in comparison to the explosion of sheer joy that whipped through him when he thought about Reese.

Every misgiving, every fear he'd had about Reese's sincerity had been wiped away by Reese's constant, loving attention. It was almost like Reese was another person. The swaggering, over-confident guy at the office had given way to a tender, affectionate and sensitive man. He still made jokes at work, and flirted with most of the staff, male and female, but sometimes he would catch Jeff's eye and smile, a secret communication passing between them that seemed to say, "This is just for show. *You* know the real me."

Jeff had been surprised to learn Reese didn't really have any friends either. "There is this guy I hang around with," Reese had amended, when Jeff expressed his incredulity that Reese wouldn't be surrounded by friends and lovers. "His name is Hank. We've known each other since senior year in high school."

Jeff noticed when Reese talked about this guy, Hank, his mood shifted. He would become edgy and even irritable. It seemed fairly clear to Jeff that Reese didn't much care for him, but it wasn't clear why. When he'd probed, Reese had snapped at him, something he'd never done before or since.

"Just drop it, okay? It's a long, boring story. He did me a big favor once. And I worked for his dad for a long time. That's it. No big deal."

Jeff sensed he was lying, at least by omission, but he didn't know about what. He let the matter drop. When Reese was ready, he would tell him. Jeff thought about it, though, wondering what kind of favor Hank could have done twelve years ago that would still keep Reese hanging around.

He had a sense they were, or had been at one time, more than just friends, but again he didn't probe. He didn't really want to know about Reese's prior lovers. They would stay in the present. The only history that mattered was the shared one they were building together.

Reese shifted, turning his head so his face was pressed against Jeff's crotch. "Mmm," Reese murmured. "What have we here?" Jeff cock instantly rose in response, pressing against the zipper of his jeans.



Reese jerked at the snap on Jeff's fly and pulled down the zipper. Reaching into Jeff's underwear, he pulled out his cock. "Hey," Jeff protested, though his erection stiffened even more at Reese's touch. "Someone might see us."

"No one will see us. Those bushes are shielding us from the trail. Relax. This won't take long." Reese chuckled and angled himself, lowering his mouth over Jeff's protruding shaft.

"Christ," Jeff whispered, succumbing to Reese's skilled lips and tongue. Reese was right—it didn't take long, even though they'd already made love twice earlier that morning. When Jeff exploded into his mouth, Reese sucked down every drop and looked up at Jeff, smacking his lips in an exaggerated manner.

"Mmm, mmm good," Reese said, grinning. "What's for dessert?"

"You," Jeff replied, grinning back.

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"The quail with mushrooms and cream sauce is excellent, or if you prefer scallops, the Coquille St. Jacques will melt in your mouth." Hank peered over his leather menu inquiringly at Reese.

They were sitting at a table covered in thick white linen and set with fine china and crystal. A string quartet was playing classical music on a dais in one corner of the room and there seemed to be almost as many tuxedoed waiters milling about the room as there were patrons at the tables.

Reese scanned the entrees, which had no prices beside them. If you had to ask, you couldn't afford it. He suppressed a grin, thinking of Jeff, who wouldn't have wanted any of this rich, creamy food with names he wouldn't even try to pronounce.

He would have rather spent the evening with Jeff, but knew he couldn't put Hank off any longer. And in truth, he'd been dying to try this place, which, despite its astronomical prices, had a waiting list for reservations a mile long.

They placed their order, along with what Reese was sure was a very expensive bottle of red wine. The food was some of the best Reese had ever had, even when Hank had taken him to Paris, and Hank was clearly pleased when Reese expressed this. They talked about nothing much, to Reese's relief, though if he knew Hank, and he did, it wouldn't be long before the other shoe fell.

Two bottles of wine later, over crème brûlée and port, Hank leaned back against the plush, velvet upholstered chair and laced his fingers over his chest in what Reese recognized was his "getting down to business" mode.

"Okay, Reese. Out with it."

"Out with what?" *Here we go*, he thought.

"It's been three weeks. I've barely seen or heard from you. It's like pulling teeth just reach you on the fucking phone. You're seeing someone. I know you are. Don't try to deny it."

"Why would I deny it? You and I are friends, not lovers."

Hank's head jerked back like a flag snapping and his face reddened. Reese knew he'd gone too far, too fast. "Hey," he said, trying to backpedal. "You know what I mean. We've both dated other guys before. Why am I getting the third degree now?"

"We've *fucked* other guys before. What's this *dating* crap? Who're you dating? How come you're not telling me about it? Shit, what's the fun of 'dating'," he used his index fingers to draw quotes in the air, "if we don't tell each other all the sordid little details?"

"It's not like that," Reese ventured. "It's—it's different. He's different."

"Oh Jesus," Hank said contemptuously. "*Spare* me. They're all the same. You and I are the only ones who are different. The rest of them are just pieces of ass, waiting to be used and discarded, once we tire of them, which we always do. You're just caught in some stupid infatuation. So out with it. Who the fuck is this prince among men? And what's he got that I ain't got? Don't tell me you found a new sugar daddy."

Reese winced. There was no denying he'd taken advantage of Hank's largess over the years, though at this moment he regretted it. All of it.

"Come on, spill it," Hank prodded. "Who's the guy? Where'd you meet him? Oh, shit!" Hank slapped his forehead. "Don't tell me it's that French guy you met at George Sander's party, Jean-Pierre whatever the hell his name was. He was all over you like flies on shit and don't deny it, you were into him too. Is that the guy? Is it? What is it, that sexy accent, or is his cock as big as yours—"

Reese reached across the table and put his hand on Hank's arm. "Hey," he said, interrupting him. "Keep your voice down, will you?"

Hank shook his hand away. "So am I right? It's the French dude? Is he uncircumcised? Is that the draw?"

"Hank, shut up. You're drunk."

"So what if I am? Does that change the fact you're not confiding in your best and oldest friend? In your *only* god damned friend?"

"Hank, please."

"You owe me. Damn it, if it weren't for me—"

"Enough!" Reese slammed the table with his fist, rattling the crystal. Two waiters materialized, hovering inquiringly around their table.

"We're fine," Hank said, his mouth forming what might pass for a smile as he nodded toward the waiters. "You can bring the check."

When they'd disappeared, Reese tried but failed to keep the fury out of his tone. "I can see who I damn well please."

Hank took a sip of his port, his eyes not leaving Reese's face. "Think about it. Who but me understands you?" Though Hank's voice was smooth, there was anger beneath the words. "You may think you're into whoever this mystery man is, but when he gets to know you, really know you, what then? Face it, nobody but me would accept the *real* Reese. You're damaged goods."

Reese was silent, Hank's words hooking like barbs into his psyche. All the shame and gnawing fear he'd suppressed for years flooded through him. Hank was right. He was damaged goods. No one would want him. Especially not Jeff, who seemed so genuine and sincere.

Jeff wanted him now, but only because he didn't know him. Not really. He didn't know Reese's initial seduction of him had been cynical and premeditated. He didn't know Reese had taken money in exchange for the betrayal of his trust.

With Jeff, he had hoped he had a chance to reinvent himself. To become what Jeff thought he was. Was Hank right? Was there no such thing as redemption? Could the damage never be mended? Was Reese only fooling himself that this bright, shiny new thing with Jeff could last?

He looked into Hank's handsome, cold face, searching for some spark of his soul to latch onto. But beyond the cruel smile and the flat, glittering eyes, he saw nothing.

He set his napkin on the table while Hank accepted the small leather portfolio that contained the bill for the meal. "Let me help with that," Reese said uncharacteristically, reaching for his wallet.

Hank laughed derisively. "Don't bother. This probably cost more than your monthly rent. Anyway, you know I like to be paid in trade." Hank waggled his eyebrows and licked his lips, leaving no question as to what was expected.

Reese shook his head. He was done being Hank's whore.

# Chapter 8

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Julio tapped lightly at the open door of Hank's study. "There's a Mr. Oliver Hawkins at the door. Should I let him in?"

"Yeah. I'm expecting him."

Who would have thought it would come to this?

If there had been one constant in Hank's life, it was Reese. Hank hadn't been fooled by the tough boy swagger and cultivated bad-boy image Reese projected in high school. From the first time he got Reese alone in the pool house, he'd taken full control. It had been relatively easy to get past the façade to the sexually naïve but eager guy beneath.

In a twisted way, Hank was grateful for the tragic accident that had cost Ray Sipos his life and nearly cost Reese his freedom. In his heart of hearts, he knew he would have lost Reese long ago without that lingering obligation.

The actual event would always be a blur for Hank, though he knew from the depositions and from Reese himself what had happened. Ray and his thugs had been trailing the pair, waiting for the opportunity to make their move. Hank suspected the misguided jerk was actually gay himself, but too macho and in denial ever to admit it.

Ray had been angry when Reese abandoned his gang to spend time with Hank. His frequent threats to beat the two of them to a pulp had never come to much, but apparently he'd only been waiting for the right moment. One of the kids who had been identified fleeing the scene confirmed they had been planning to take Reese and himself behind the school and beat the shit out of them. They were the ones who planned the diversion to get the science teacher out of the lab.

It was a clever plan, as far as it went, at least in terms of getting Reese and Hank alone. Reese had taken to getting a ride home with Hank each day after school, which didn't leave the thugs a chance to follow and attack them the way they could have if the boys took the bus or walked home. Apparently they'd just been biding their time, looking for the right opportunity.

When the gang entered the science lab, Hank had just shot his load down Reese's throat. Still caught in the grip of his orgasm, he looked up at the shuffling sound of sneakers on linoleum. A moment later four boys burst into the room and someone shouted triumphantly, "I told you. They're a couple of fucking faggots!"

Before Hank had a chance to react, he was doubled over by a fist slamming into his solar plexus. Another punch to his jaw sent him backwards and he'd lost his footing. He

heard the crack of something he later realized must have been his skull, and that's all he remembered.

Reese reportedly went berserk, turning all his fury and fear against the punks who'd picked the wrong boys to attack. When Ray went down, fatally smashing the back of his head into the corner of a lab table, his so-called friends had scattered like the wind, leaving their fearless leader to his fate.

Moments later, shouting teachers and hall monitors burst into the room. There they found Reese standing in a daze beside the two boys unconscious on the floor, one of them with his pants around his knees, the other lying in a pool of blood.

The police were called and Reese was led away in cuffs, despite the now-conscious Hank's protests that they'd been the ones attacked. The school officials managed to keep the story out of the papers, but Reese's guilt was assumed by everyone. He was removed from foster care and placed in a juvenile detention center while authorities investigated the case and decided what criminal charges would be brought against him.

Hank missed him dreadfully during those weeks he was incarcerated. He wanted his sex buddy back. He needed someone to admire him and hang on his every word, as Reese still did back then. And, though Hank wouldn't have admitted it, he was lonely and Reese was his only friend.

Hank was an only child to parents who lavished him with things and money, but never with time or love. His father was too busy running his business empire, his mother engaged in luncheons and charity events. Hank usually ate alone in the kitchen, the maid bustling nearby, the TV for company.

They rarely noticed his existence, except when he made trouble at school, which he did every couple of years, mainly out of boredom. Negative attention was better than no attention, he'd come to learn. He had also learned to manipulate his parents to get the things he wanted, and this time was no exception.

Mr. Seeley had made absolutely certain Hank's part in the whole tragic mess was kept well out of the media, not to protect Hank, but because it would be bad for business. His mother's focus had been on discovering his homosexuality, and her distress over his "perversion." She'd tried to make him go to counseling for a cure, but he'd refused and for once his father had backed him up.

It had taken some doing, but his father had managed to pull the strings to make the whole thing disappear. Hank allowed Reese to think it was his doing, strongly encouraging the idea that Reese was now bound to Hank not only by friendship and desire, but by an added obligation more binding than love.

Yet now, the only relationship in his life that mattered might be slipping from his grasp.

The private investigator appeared at the door of his study, a nondescript man in his mid-fifties with thinning hair and small, pale eyes. He carried a slim portfolio under his arm. Hank stood and moved around his desk to greet the man.

Hawkins had a good reputation as an investigator, specializing in divorce cases, providing the evidence of adultery to the injured party. Who better to tail Reese and determine who the mystery man was who was getting in the way?

Hank still wasn't quite sure what he'd do with the knowledge, once he had it, but he believed in the old adage that knowledge is power. He'd see what the investigator had to offer and go from there.

Hawkins sat on one of the chairs in front of Hank's desk and set the portfolio on his knees. He extracted a manila envelope and held it out. "Here are the photos and information you wanted. It's all in there."

Hank, too agitated to sit, felt a strange pressure in his heart, like someone was squeezing it. He stared at the envelope but made no move to take it. "Who is he? What's his name?"

"Jeffrey Michael Hartman. Single, white male, aged twenty-four, no criminal record. He's a developer for a company called Strata Systems. He moved from Boston to Denver last year and lives alone in an apartment on Hamden Avenue. There's a map in the envelope with directions.

Hank stared at Hawkins, confused. He knew that name, but that couldn't be right. That nerd they'd made the bet on? Reese was still seeing *him*? Jesus H. Christ, things were more serious than Hank had thought.

Not only was Reese caught up in some ridiculous infatuation with another man, but now he was falling for geeks who could barely string two sentences together and probably dreamed in binary code.

Hank owed it to Reese to make him see what a fool he was making of himself. He had to save him from his own stupidity.

The detective put the envelope on Hank's desk and stood. "Would you like to examine the contents before we settle up? There are photographs of them entering a bakery, riding on Mr. Armstrong's motorcycle and several of them along various hiking trails. There is even one," Hawkins paused slightly, his features contorting with distaste for a split second before they settled back into bland repose, "of the two of them kissing in the parking lot of Mr. Hartman's apartment building."

Hank felt sick, his stomach clenching as the image of Reese and that little shit making out in a parking lot slammed into his brain like a sledgehammer. Forcing himself to speak calmly, he answered, "No, no, I'll take your word for it. What do I owe you?"

He paid the investigator and called for Julio to see him out. Sinking onto the leather couch, he stared moodily at the marble fireplace. Reese would not get away with this. Nobody made a fool of Henry Baker Seeley III. Nobody.

The cool thing was, all he had to do to make things right was tell the truth.

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The doorbell rang, the sound nearly drowned out by Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2. Distracted, Jeff glanced up from the technical journal he was reading. For a split second he thought it might be Reese, until he remembered Reese was out of town on business, and wouldn't be home until the next night.

Home.

A warmth suffused Jeff. For the first time in his life, he was in love with someone who truly loved him in return. With Tom, he realized now, he'd been permitted to love, he'd been allowed to adore, but Tom had been passive in his receipt of that love and adoration. He'd offered nothing but his body in return. In the end, even that was a lie.

With Reese, it was different. With Reese, it was wonderful. Everything they did seemed to take on a special quality, just because they did it together. As cliché as it sounded, colors were actually brighter when he was with Reese. Food tasted better, too.

Take the cupcakes Reese liked to bring by Jeff's desk, along with hot coffee and a ready smile. Were they really food for the gods, as Reese liked to proclaim, or was it the sharing of them that made them taste so good?

The doorbell rang again, propelling him to his feet. Clicking off the CD player, he walked to the door and looked through the peephole, not recognizing the man on the other side. He looked to be in his late twenties, powerfully built with a full head of dark brown hair.

"Who is it?" Jeff called through the door.

"Hank Seeley," the man answered. "I'm a friend of Reese Armstrong."

A moment's disquiet settled over Jeff. This was the friend since high school, the one Reese refused to talk about. What was he doing at Jeff's place?

All at once his stomach fell. *Oh god, something's happened to Reese.* He pulled the door open, trying to quell his panic.

Without even greeting the stranger, he blurted, "Is everything okay? Is Reese okay?"

Hank smiled, or at least Jeff assumed it was a smile—it looked more like a grimace. "I don't know. You tell me."

"I'm sorry?" Jeff stared at the man in confusion. How did this guy know where he lived? Had Reese told him? And if so, why? "I know you're Reese's friend. Is there

something I c-c-can help you w-w-with?" Jeff closed his eyes. He hadn't stuttered in weeks, not once!

"I doubt it," Hank said, his eye narrowing and his tongue appearing between parted lips. Jeff was reminded of a snake, ready to strike. "But *I* can help *you*."

"Look," Jeff said, now both annoyed and unnerved. "What's going on? I don't know what you're doing here. Have you been talking to Reese? Is something wrong?"

"Aren't you going to invite me in?"

Jeff didn't move, not at all sure he was going to invite this strange man with the glittering eyes into his apartment.

Hank's laugh was thin and bitter. "Relax, I don't bite. I'm here because I have some, uh, information. Something you should know about."

"What? What're you talking about?" Jeff liked this less and less.

Hank looked to either side of himself, as if what he had to impart was top secret and might be overheard by passersby. Reluctantly, Jeff stepped back, gesturing for him to enter the apartment. He made no offer of refreshment, nor did he suggest they sit down. Every nerve in his body was on the alert.

Hank pushed the door shut behind him and stepped into the room, his eyes sweeping over the place with thinly veiled contempt. He fixed his eyes on Jeff and looked him up and down, as if taking his measure. Jeff waited, refusing to ask again what the man wanted.

"Reese Armstrong is a player. I've known him since he was seventeen, and I know what I'm talking about."

"What the f—"

"Don't interrupt, please," the man said. "Hear me out before you subject me to your outraged squawking. This is my good deed for the week. I'm going to save a poor little innocent from the clutches of a sneaky bastard who gets his rocks off by ensnaring pretty boys like you and then fucking them over royally."

"You're lying." Jeff crossed his arms resolutely over his chest, wondering if he could take the guy if he had to. Jeff was an inch or two taller, but Hank looked massive—solid muscle beneath a tight-fitting jersey. Jeff was agile though, and could move fast when he needed to.

"Oh, is that so?" Hank pulled his teeth back in a smile, though it didn't reach his eyes. "What would you say if I told you this whole thing started with a bet? Reese and I are lovers, you see. Oh, yes. Don't look so surprised. Sometimes we like to play with others." He nodded toward Jeff.



"On a dare, I bet Reese he couldn't get the nerdiest little creep in his office into bed inside of a week. He said he could have his cock up that pathetic loser's ass before the guy knew what hit him."

Jeff stared at Hank, his mind not processing the words, though his body felt cold and hot all at once. Hank's eyes were slit with malice. "Don't you get it? You're just a game. Something to do. Reese is clinically incapable of love. He eats little boys like you for supper and then spits out the bones. He's been playing you for the fool."

"I've watched it happen time and again, year in and year out. It's just a matter of time, kid, before Reese adds another notch to his very long belt, and you're left with nothing but the memories."

Jeff stood frozen, trying to make his mind function. This man was lying. Of course he was. He had to be.

"You're c-c-crazy. Get out of here. Reese would n-n-never..."

"Not only that," Hank went on, riding over Jeff's words, "he did it for money. He earned a cool five thousand bucks, while seducing the office nerd in the process."

Jeff stared at the stranger, flames of shame and fury licking his cheeks. He was clenching his fists so tight his fingernails dug into his palms.

"That's right." Hank's laugh was low and cruel. "He fucked you for the money. Come on, Hartman, do you honestly think a guy like Reese Armstrong would look at you twice unless he had something to gain? And now he's stringing you along for his own twisted amusement."

"Get out! Get the fuck out of my house!"

Hank took a step back. "You need proof? Here it is." He dug into his pocket and for a second Jeff thought he was reaching for a weapon. Instead he pulled out something small and flat. He tossed it on the floor between them.

"It's all there, in living color. Watch it and weep, you bastard. I did."

With those parting words, Hank turned on his heel and left, slamming the door behind him.

Jeff sank to the floor, his heart smashing painfully in his chest. He sat stunned for several seconds, his mind whirling with the implication of what Hank had just said. *He fucked you for the money. Come on, Hartman, do you honestly think a guy like Reese Armstrong would look at you twice...*

A small voice, one that had been dormant since that first week, was wide awake again, whispering furiously in his head, *I told you so, I told you so...*

No, it couldn't be true. Why would Reese do such a thing? Hank was a vindictive, crazy bastard, trying to stir up shit for his own twisted purposes.

The object lay on the floor a few feet from him. He stared at it. It was a flash drive. Reaching for it, he turned it over in his fingers, still reeling from the bizarre encounter. He couldn't get his head around it, no matter how he tried. Whether or not they were lovers now, how could Reese have hung out with such a creep?

Jeff stood, clutching the flash drive in his hand. Moving toward his computer, he sat heavily in front of it, staring blankly at the screen. Whatever was on this thing, Jeff was sure it was hurtful. He should just throw it out. Reese and he had a great thing going. Hank probably had some old video of Reese doing something stupid.

Well, Jeff had news for Hank. Reese had confided about his past behavior. He wasn't proud of what he'd done, he told Jeff. He'd used guys. He hadn't understood that love was real, he'd told Jeff, not until they'd met...

He would call Reese and tell him what had happened. It was possible Reese already knew what was on this thing, and could save him the trouble.

He opened his phone and pushed the speed dial. "Hi, this is Reese," the recorded message began, "I'm sorry I—". Jeff snapped the phone shut. No point in upsetting Reese while he was too far away to do anything about it. They'd discuss it when he came back.

He turned the stick over and over in his hands, a rising curiosity now warring with his initial reluctance. What the hell, he'd check it out and then forget about it. Inserting it into the USB port, he waited for it to load.

# Chapter 9

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Strange. That was the third time the call went straight to voicemail. Jeff had known Reese was coming home that morning. Maybe something was wrong with his cell? Jeff didn't have a landline, so Reese couldn't try that.

Instead he opened his laptop and waited for it to boot up. His sales call had gone well, and if things went right, he'd actually have brought a real account to Strata — new business he'd generated all on his own. He was excited to share the news with Jeff.

He scanned the inbox for something from his lover, but there was nothing. No matter, he'd shoot him a note to say he was home, and to please call when he got a chance. He wrote the email, signing it, *Love, Reese*.

Love.

Had he finally found it? Had what had begun as a cynical seduction for cold, hard cash turned into the real thing? Reese didn't know. He just knew every time he thought of Jeff, it made him smile. Just the knowledge that Jeff was in the world made it somehow a brighter place, even when they weren't together.

Reese stripped off his travel clothes and went into the bathroom to shower, Jeff on his mind, his hand on his cock. As he stroked himself with lathered fingers, he let images of Jeff's smooth, perfect body slide through his mind. Wouldn't it be great to go on a beach vacation together? They could find a secluded spot and swim in the ocean. They'd let the sun dry their naked bodies. Then they could fuck each other's brains out on the sand.

Once showered and shaved, Reese dressed in jeans and a casual knit shirt, open at the neck. He loved when Jeff kissed him there, at the hollow of his throat. He splashed on a bit of cologne and headed back toward his laptop to see if Jeff had responded.

Nothing.

Maybe he was at the office, so absorbed in some programming problem that he'd forgotten Reese was coming home. No matter — he'd just hop on his motorcycle and stop by. He'd swing by the office first to see if Jeff was there.

Though it was Saturday, there were several cars in the parking lot of Strata, but none of them was Jeff's old clunker. Good. Much better to see him at his apartment, where he could take him into his arms and kiss him.

He pulled into the parking lot of Jeff's apartment building, moving slowly between the lines of cars until he spotted Jeff's.

He rang the doorbell to Jeff's place, thinking maybe it was time they exchanged keys. He actually laughed out loud at himself. Exchange keys! Was he out of his mind? Rule number three of the Armstrong code... Who was he fooling? The code had been broken. He didn't need codes with Jeff.

He waited a few seconds and then a few more. No one came to the door. Reese glanced at his watch. Ten-thirty. Could Jeff still be asleep? He rang the doorbell again, following it up with a knock.

"Jeff?" he called through the door. "It's Reese. Are you there?"

This time he heard something. He stepped back, smiling broadly at the peephole, his body tingling in anticipation of Jeff's embrace.

The door didn't open.

What was going on? He knocked again. "Jeff! Are you okay in there?"

"Go away," Jeff called from the other side.

Reese couldn't have heard that right. "What? I can't hear you. Open the door, for chrissakes!"

The lock snicked and the doorknob turned. Finally! The door opened and there stood Jeff. He looked awful, his face drawn and haggard, a frown tugging down the corners of his mouth.

"What is it? What's happened?" Reese said, concern overtaking confusion.

"Fuck you," Jeff spat.

"What?" The words hit Jeff like a blow. He actually staggered back from their impact.

Jeff's cheeks paled with anger, leaving a small spot of pink on each cheekbone. He glared at Reese. "You had me fooled. Good job. I'm sure you're very proud of yourself. I hope you got to buy something great with the money you whored yourself out with."

*Oh god. No. No, no, no!*

Somehow Reese made his mouth work. "I can explain. I wanted to tell you. A hundred times I started to tell you, but I didn't know how. It's not like that, I swear. Please, I—"

"B-b-bastard! Just get the fuck away from me. Find some other loser to play your dirty tricks on." Jeff pulled something from his jeans and threw it at Reese. It hit him in the chest and fell to the ground, sliding beneath the bush on the side of the door.

Reese reached for Jeff, desperate to hold him. Jeff blocked his advance with one strong arm and stepped back into the apartment, slamming the door in Reese's face.

"Jeff! Wait," Reese cried. He tried the handle of the door, rattling it as if that would do anything. "Jeff, please," he beseeched, not even sure if Jeff could still hear him. "Just open the door. Let me explain. Whatever Hank said, he was lying. I swear. Give me a

chance to explain. Please. I'm begging you..." He banged with his fist, but there was no response.

Reese let his forehead fall to the door, tears of frustration and rage pricking his eyelids. He stayed in that position for several minutes, until the ice water in his veins drained enough to allow him to move. He felt weak and sick, as if he'd been punched in the balls. This couldn't be happening.

Finally remembering Jeff had thrown something, he bent down, reaching blindly beneath the bushes. His fingers closed around the bit of plastic and he knew with a horrible certainty just what it was. Retrieving it, he stared at the memory stick, his worst fears realized. Fury at Hank warred with misery and shame at what he'd done to Jeff. If only he'd told him first—he'd have preempted Hank's ploy, or at least taken away some of its sting.

Hank had never stooped so low.

He would kill him.

He would ride to Hank's place that minute and kill the bastard in cold blood. Climbing on his cycle, he jammed his helmet on, gunned the bike to life and screeched out of the lot.

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"Sorry, Mr. Armstrong," said the ever-formal Julio, when he opened the front door of Hank's house. "He's not here. He left about an hour ago. Did you try his cell?"

"No," Reese answered, forcing himself to be calm. It was probably a good thing Hank wasn't there, as Reese really did feel a murderous rage. The anger was a good thing—at least it was easier to handle than the devastating sense of loss and sadness that lingered just below, like a bloody wound he was too scared to examine. "Thanks, Julio."

When he arrived at his house, Hank's Mercedes was parked in his driveway, Hank at the wheel. Anger rose fresh in Reese's gut. He pulled alongside the car, whipped off his helmet and kicked down his stand. Within seconds he was at Hank's door, jerking it open.

"Missed me, huh?" Hank said with a lazy smile.

Reaching into the car, Reese grabbed Hank by the shirt collar and yanked hard, pulling him from the vehicle. He aimed a sharp right for Hank's chin, but Hank moved fast, deflecting the blow with his arm and rolling away from the punch.

"Hey," Hank jerked his head toward the sidewalk, where a young couple was passing, pushing a baby stroller. "You're making an ass of yourself. Get a grip. Let's go inside and talk."

"I have nothing to say to you," Reese fumed.

Ignoring him, Hank walked calmly to his front door and, to Reese's surprise, unlocked it. "Where'd you get that key! Who the fuck do you think you are?"

"You gave it to me, don't you remember? When you first rented this place, you gave me the extra key for emergencies."

"Well, I want it back. Now."

Hank stepped inside the house and turned back. "Coming?"

Furious, Reese followed Hank inside. Slipping the key into his pocket, Hank held out his hands, palms up. "Now, before you launch into your how-dare-you speech, just know I did this for your own good. It might not feel like it now, but in time you'll come to see that. You'll even thank me."

Reese stared, stunned into speechlessness by the man's sheer gall. Hank, perhaps taking his silence for agreement, continued. "It had to be done, Reese. You were making a total fool of yourself. You've forgotten everything I've taught you. You and me, we don't *do* love. It's beneath us. We're too smart to get suckered into the vortex of that kind of emotion. In the end, all it does is break your heart."

Reese moved numbly toward the sofa, falling onto it. Hank would never get it. It was as if he regarded Reese as some kind of appendage—an extension of himself. Something that had to be reined in. The guy had no fucking idea of what he'd done.

"Look," Hank said, his voice placating. "I know you're hurting now, but trust me, it was for the best. I'll make it up to you. Let's go back to Paris. We'll stay in that bed and breakfast you liked so much in Ile de la Cité. I'll make you forget Jeff Hartman ever existed. I promise."

Reese stared at Hank as if he'd never seen him before. The cruel curve of his mouth, the strange coldness of those dark, flat eyes. It was all about him. It had always been all about him, Reese realized with more clarity than he ever had. It didn't even occur to Hank what he'd done was reprehensible, not only to Reese, but to Jeff.

Remorse washed over Reese like ice water, taking his breath away. He'd set the wheels of this whole horrible thing in motion by his own cavalier disregard for other people's feelings. Jeff hadn't been the first guy they'd manipulated and used for their own amusement—he's simply been the first one who mattered.

Now Reese was paying the price. He had ended up the victim of his own cruel, callous joke. One thing he swore—never again. Even if Jeff was lost to him forever, he would never take another person's feelings so for granted. He finally understood, not just intellectually, but with every fiber of his being, the damage his actions had wrought.

But Hank, Reese knew, remained mired in the shallow muck of game playing and fear of intimacy that masqueraded as sexual intrigue. He still didn't understand the

magnitude of what he had done. In his own mind he was just doing what he had to in order to return Reese to where, in Hank's estimation, he belonged.

He didn't give a flying fuck if Reese wanted to return. In fact, such a thought probably never even entered his mind. Of course Reese would want to return. Weren't they two peas in a pod, cut from the same cloth, and whatever other tired idioms Hank liked to use in his efforts to convince Reese they belonged together? Didn't duty, loyalty, power and obligation trump love every time?

In Hank's book they did. But not in Reese's.

Not anymore.

Since he'd met Jeff, he found himself letting go of a lot of the defenses he'd thought had kept him safe, but really had served to keep the world at a distance. He was ready for something new. Ready to remake himself the way Jeff saw him...or had seen him, before Hank ruined everything.

Hank hovered, waiting for his reaction to the offer of the Paris trip, no doubt already assuming they'd got past this messy business. A thousand retorts rose in Reese's mind but he knew there was no point. Hank would not listen. He'd never listened. The damage was done, and nothing Reese could do or say would right it.

"Look. I'm tired. I need to be alone for a while, okay? Give me a few days and maybe we'll connect. Right now you need to leave."

Maybe it was something in his face, or the resoluteness of his tone because Hank started to speak, but then closed his mouth. He nodded and smiled. "Sure. I understand. You take what time you need. I'll get those plane reservations and accommodations going—first class all the way."

Reese shook his head in resignation as he watched his so-called friend of twelve years walk out the door. Reaching into his pocket, he opened his cell phone and dialed Information.

"City and state please," came the automated voice.

"Denver, Colorado."

"Location, please."

"Carter's Locksmith."

~\*~

Now that the blinders of infatuation had been ripped from Jeff's eyes, he could hardly believe he'd fallen for Reese's bullshit so hard and for so long. That creep Hank had done him a favor. How much longer would he have gone on, the secret butt of Reese's big joke with his twisted lover?

The humiliation of it nearly suffocated him. To have been played like that! And the irony was, he *had* known, at first. If only he'd listened to his gut, which had warned him from the outset that Reese was just using Jeff for reasons of his own.

Now that he thought about it, what the hell did he even know about the guy? Nothing of his past. Every time Jeff had shared some story or tidbit from his childhood or past relationships, Reese had never responded in kind.

At first Jeff passed it off to a certain natural reserve. Some people were just very private. Though Reese was outwardly outgoing and gregarious, inwardly he might be as shy as Jeff himself was.

As he got to know him better, he had begun to suspect there were a few skeletons in Reese's closet, especially as had to do with Hank Seeley, but again, he hadn't probed too deep, hoping eventually Reese would feel safe enough to open up.

Little did he realize what Reese was actually hiding! How many other videos had he secretly taped in his bedroom? The very thought made Jeff's skin crawl. For him, that night had been one of the most intense and involving of his life. He'd been so consumed and absorbed in his lover and his lover's pleasure that he'd forgotten himself. He'd forgotten to be timid or hesitant or worried he might come too soon. He'd been lifted out of the confines of his insecurities, reborn as something powerful and good.

And to think, through it all, Reese had been playing. Acting. Pretending to give a shit. Pretending to care.

Even as these bitter thoughts passed through Jeff's mind, a part of him rejected it. If that had been all there was, then, yeah, he could totally buy the cruel words Hank had hurled at him. *You're just a game. Something to do... He's been playing you for the fool.*

But that wasn't all there was. The days had stretched into weeks and still Reese came around. He didn't just tolerate Jeff's attention, he sought it out. He did special things for Jeff—leaving a cupcake beside his keyboard at work, massaging his neck when it had stiffened from too many hours staring at his monitor, waking him up by sucking his cock to full erection...

He'd made love to Jeff. Not just fucked him. They'd made *love*. Could that be faked? And if so, why? Why go through the charade? According to Hank, he'd already been paid, so why stick around?

None of it made sense. All he knew was the pain, tearing like a dull knife along his heart.

He needed to eat something. It was nearly four in the afternoon and he hadn't eaten since the day before, when Hank had arrived to destroy his life. But he wasn't hungry.

"You fucking asshole!" Jeff yelled to the empty room. He wasn't sure who he meant. Hank, the cruel messenger, or Reese, or himself for being such a dupe. What the hell was wrong with him? Why did he keep falling for pricks?



Reese had had him fooled, all right. Reese was the consummate actor. Well, Jeff was damned if he'd fall for his crap anymore. If he dared show his face, Jeff wouldn't give him the satisfaction of a reaction. Guys like him probably got off on watching the results of the havoc they wrecked. They didn't even see other people as human, but just a game to be played, a bet to be won.

And what about work? Was he supposed to work in the same office with that snake? Could he stand to hear Reese's deep, sexy voice, the ring of his laughter? To see that shock of golden blond hair and those sparkling blue eyes, crinkling with merriment when he smiled, or staring into Jeff's as they leaned forward for a kiss...

*Ah, Reese.*

Jeff closed his eyes, seeing Reese in his mind's eye, asleep beside him. Jeff gazed at the strong curve of his shoulder and back. He could almost feel the press of Reese's warm lips on his. He opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling, drenched with loneliness.

"Why, Reese? Why?"

~\*~

"You've reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you think you dialed this number in error—" Hank ended the call and stared at his phone. Had he misdialed? He tried again and got the same message.

Something wrong with Reese's landline. He tried his cell—it rang a while and then just—stopped. What the hell?

Hank felt his jaw twitching and realized he was clenching his teeth. He hadn't been himself for weeks. Good thing he'd dealt with that troublemaking Hartman when he did. Things had gotten way out of control.

He chuckled, remembering the look of stunned disbelief on that poor geek's face when Hank had broken the news. Like that nerd actually thought he had a chance with the likes of Reese Armstrong. He'd felt almost bad for the guy, but at least he'd let him down fast. A clean break. It was best that way.

Because Reese belonged to Hank. He always had, and he always would.

Later that evening, when he was sure Reese would be home from work, Hank drove to his place. The motorcycle wasn't there. Frustrated, Hank went to the door and knocked. No answer. He looked for key on his keychain and pressed it into the lock. Reese would sing a different tune when he came home and found the first class tickets to Paris on his kitchen table.

The key didn't fit. He tried again, and then examined the key more closely. Perhaps he'd chosen the wrong one. He peered at the lock. It looked different. Holy shit! Had Reese actually had his locks changed? Coincidence? The disconnected landline, the malfunctioning cell...The coin finally dropped.

Reese was shutting him out!

Impossible.

Or was it?

Well, he'd just see about that.

# Chapter 10

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That Monday morning Jeff was relieved there was no sign of either Reese's motorcycle or car in the parking lot. He could slip into the office and get to his desk without fear of seeing that two-faced bastard. He was already an hour late getting in.

He'd dawdled over his breakfast, anxious at the thought of seeing Reese again. He was going to have to find some way to get past the whole awkward office thing. He guessed they weren't the first two idiots to get involved and then break up with someone at work. But that didn't make it any easier.

He considered calling in to let people know he'd be working from home, but some of the data he needed was stored on his work computer and it would slow him down not to have it. Besides, he'd be damned if he let Reese keep him away. He refused to give Reese the satisfaction. If he saw him, and he wouldn't be able to avoid him forever at work, he'd just turn away.

He moved quickly through the building, not even stopping for his usual cup of coffee. When he got to his desk he saw the cupcake and his heart lurched in spite of his resolve. He sat at his desk and booted up his computer, eyeing the cupcake.

It was such an obvious ploy – trying to win him back by reminding him of happier times. Why was he even bothering? Was this part of the bet? See how long it took to get the loser to take him back? Well, it wouldn't work.

Jeff swept the cupcake into the trashcan by his desk. That's when he noticed the envelope beneath it, his name scrawled across it in a masculine hand. The envelope looked crumpled, as if it had been stuffed into a pocket. Jeff almost smiled, thinking of Reese on his motorcycle, the envelope jammed into his back pocket, the cupcake in its white bakery bag resting on the seat between his thighs...

*Stop it.* Jeff closed his mind to the images and pushed the envelope into the trashcan unopened. Feeling grimly empowered, he focused on his work. Reese could go fuck himself.

By the end of the day, to Jeff's relief, Reese had never made an appearance at the office. Jeff stood and stretched, moderately amazed he'd been able to focus as well as he had. He'd take home the new specs on his latest project and do a little work on his laptop. He put the files he needed into his backpack and reached for the flash drive he would need at home.

He stared it for several long seconds, recalling that other flash drive, the one Hank had dropped on his floor and he in turn had thrown at Reese in his rage.

That was all behind him now. He'd get over Reese. It wouldn't be long before the misery that had engulfed him like a cold cloud since Saturday would lift and float away. He would move on with his life, wiser for the pain.

As he started to walk away from his desk, on an impulse he reached into the trash can. Grabbing the envelope, he shoved it into his backpack, barely acknowledging to himself what he'd done.

~\*~

Okay. So Jeff hadn't called. It was only eight o'clock. He might have worked late. Or he might not even have gone in. That might be it! Maybe Jeff had taken the day off and worked from home. Maybe he hadn't even seen the card yet. Was the cupcake still sitting untouched on top of it?

Reese had arrived at Strata Systems early that Monday, so as to be sure Jeff wasn't yet at his desk. The cupcake was a nice touch, if he said so himself. Jeff would remember happier times, and how in love they had been. He would eat the cupcake, read the card and call Reese.

Wasn't it ironic—his new career was taking off, just as his personal life was crashing and burning. Or rather, had crashed and burned. Hank had seen to that, the bastard.

It had felt good to get the locks changed and cancel his landline, something he'd been meaning to do anyway. The locksmith had come out on Sunday, but it had been worth the extra charge to get it done. First thing Monday he'd put a block on Hank's numbers, so that when he called Reese's cell, it would just ring a while and then disconnect. Hopefully Hank had finally gotten the message.

It was at once strange and freeing to have finally severed the ties that had bound them together for so long. It made Reese realize he could have done this years ago, and probably should have. Hank had been whispering poison in his ear for so long, he'd come to believe it as gospel truth.

He had news for Hank, if he ever wanted to hear it. True love *did* exist, and Reese could vouch for it firsthand. He stared at his phone, willing it to ring, but it remained as silent as the dead.

To distract himself, Reese watched TV for a while. He considered going out to a bar or club, but couldn't be bothered. A couple of scotch and sodas and two movies later, Reese finally hauled himself off to bed.

As he lay wide-eyed it suddenly occurred to him—Jeff might not have read the card. He might have tossed it without even opening it, the way he'd slammed the door in Reese's face, without even giving him the chance to explain.

But was there really any explanation for what he'd done? Could you explain away secretly videotaping sex with someone and then handing it over to someone else for money? Was there any way at all to clean that up? Even if Jeff had given him a chance to explain, what would he have said?

Reese tossed and turned, his pillow hot, his feet cold, his mind roiling. He finally lay still, staring up into the dark, wondering if Jeff missed him, even a little bit. When he finally drifted off to sleep, it was into a tangle of dreams.

~\*~

Tuesday morning the sealed envelope sat on Jeff's kitchen table while he ate his cereal and tried to read the newspaper. He should have left it in the garbage where it belonged.

His eye slid toward it. What harm would there be in just reading it? It didn't mean he would fall for the guy's bullshit—he'd just see how far Reese was willing to go in his games. It would serve to make Jeff stronger—reminding himself he was up against a consummate player.

He slipped his fingertip beneath the seal and opened the envelope, extracting the card inside. On the front was a photograph of the Colorado Rockies, the sun just rising behind them in a burst of gold. Despite himself, Jeff smiled. They had shared some wonderful times on those trails, not just the hot, stolen kisses, but the long walks and the peaceful silences as they stared out at the vastness of the landscape.

Inside, Reese had written: *I'm so sorry I hurt you. I would like to spend the next fifty years making it up to you, if only you'd give me the chance. I am not the man I was when we met. You have changed me. You have shown me the possibility of love. Yours, Reese*

Jeff held the card a long time, trying to tell himself this was just another in a series of ploys to use and humiliate him. Yet he couldn't help but wonder—maybe Reese was sincere? Maybe, at least, Jeff should hear him out?

The image of Hank Seeley rose suddenly in his mind, those hard, cold eyes laughing at him. Much of Hank's hurtful words were etched into Jeff's mind with razor sharp clarity. ...*You should know this whole thing started with a bet. Reese and I are lovers, you see. Oh, yes. Don't look so surprised. ...On a dare, I bet Reese he couldn't get the nerdiest little creep in his office into bed inside of a week. He said he could have his cock up that pathetic loser's ass before the guy knew what hit him.*

And he had. With embarrassing ease, Reese had moved quickly past all Jeff's reserves, taking what he set out to get, videotaping it, and apparently making a tidy sum in the process. Well, fuck him! He could be sorry all he wanted. That wouldn't undo what he'd done. Just the fact he could do it at all spoke volumes about his true character and intent.

Jeff would not be seduced again by pretty words and false sentiment. With deliberation, he tore the card in half, and then tore those halves, again and again until nothing was left but tattered remains.

As Jeff walked toward his car, he heard Reese's voice. "Jeff. Wait."

He whipped around, his heart leaping high in his throat despite his resolve not to react. Reese was standing on the sidewalk in front of the apartment building. He looked good, dressed in a dark blue T-shirt, jeans and black leather boots. His golden blond hair shimmered in the morning sun. He offered a tentative smile and Jeff nearly smiled in return, but caught himself in time.

Without responding, he continued to walk to his car. Once inside, he turned the key with resolve, though he couldn't resist looking in his rearview mirror. Reese hadn't moved. He was staring at the ground and for a moment Jeff's heart ached for him. Then he remembered who he was dealing with. Putting the car in gear, he drove away.

~\*~

Bob Sanchez sat behind the large glass table that served as his desk. He wore an imposing waxed handlebar mustache, his head shaved smooth over a tangle of eyebrows. There being no door to knock on, Reese said politely, "Excuse me, Bob. Is this a good time?"

Bob looked up and smiled, waving a hand toward one of the chairs in front of his desk. "Absolutely. What can I do ya' for?"

Reese sat, aware it was too soon into a new job to ask. Well, what the hell. It wasn't like he was on salary, so it wouldn't cost the company anything directly. "I, uh, I need to ask for a little time off. I know it's been less than six months, but something's come up. I need about a week. Two at the most. I've already talked to Doug and Sam about the possibility. They can cover my existing clients' needs while I'm out. I can finish out this week and take off by the weekend." He girded himself for a refusal.

But Bob just nodded. "Absolutely. You've been doing an excellent job, Reese. I was just thinking it was time for your first review. I like to think of Strata Systems as a family. You have some things you need to take care of, or shit, even if you just want to run off to Cancun for a while, it's totally cool with me."

"Thanks, Bob, I really appreciate it." That sure was different from the clock-in, clock-out, request-vacation-time-six-months-in-advance mentality at the Seeley construction companies. It honestly hadn't occurred to Reese it would be so easy.

This past week and a half he'd been living in a waking nightmare. Jeff refused to speak to him or see him. It was the first time in Reese's life where something mattered so much, and yet he was powerless to change it. He'd committed the crime and apparently Jeff was judge and jury. Reese was guilty, with no reprieve.

He tried to tell himself it was for the best. He'd fucked up and Jeff had called him on it. Better to wash his hands of the whole affair and move on. There were plenty of hot guys out there. Who needed Jeff Hartman?

Somehow he forced himself to come in to work, but Jeff's presence in the corner of the building distracted him so much he couldn't concentrate on a thing. He took to spending as much time as he could away from the office, working his contacts, serving his clients, trying to forget the taste of Jeff's lips, the feel of his cock, the curve of his body when they slept.

But it just wasn't working. Though this realization astounded him, even more than the sex, he missed the companionship. No one had ever listened to him the way Jeff did. Jeff focused one-hundred-percent when they talked. He cared about what Reese had to say. He never spoke down to him or acted like he was superior because of his education or background.

When he was with Jeff, all the old hurts, the fears, the lies and covers he'd erected to face the world were somehow not necessary. Jeff made Reese laugh. He made him forget everything except how wonderful it was to be together.

What would Jeff say if he really knew? If he knew Reese's real story, and all the horrible things he'd done? Would it make him run even farther? Or would he understand? Maybe, for the first time in his life, Reese had found the one person he could trust enough to tell. But he'd proved himself untrustworthy in the process. If only Jeff would give him another chance.

*Forget it, Armstrong. He's through with you.*

An almost uncontrollable impulse suddenly surged through him. He wanted to get up and stride across the building. He would smash the silk screen out of his way and demand that Jeff hear him out. Jeff couldn't very well refuse with everyone watching them.

He squelched the impulse. No matter how unfair Jeff was being, he wouldn't embarrass them both like that. He had to get Jeff alone somehow, but since that wasn't happening, he would stop foisting himself where he wasn't welcome. He would take a break and get his head on straight. He would try to learn from what had happened.

He needed to put some distance between them. He would go somewhere with a beach, where he could swim and rest, and put Jeff out of his mind. He might meet someone new. Maybe he'd never come back to Colorado. He could reinvent himself yet again, far from anyone who knew anything about him.

If nothing else, his eyes had finally been opened to how destructive his behavior had been in the past, and the devastating impact it could have on another. Plus he'd learned he had a capacity for love, something he'd thought had died when his parents had been killed. That in itself was an amazing thing.

He could *love*.

"Jeff," he whispered, wishing with all his heart Jeff was there to hear.

~\*~

Reese unlocked his door and entered the house with his head down, looking through the junk mail and bills. When he looked up he realized someone was in his house. Before his brain processed who it was, he dropped the mail and whirled toward the intruder, ready to fight.

"Have a nice day at the office, dear? I have meatloaf in the oven and a martini on the bar. Little Timmy and Kathy are playing at the neighbors." Hank sat sprawled in Reese's favorite chair, a can of beer in his hand.

"Jesus, Hank! How the fuck did you get in here?"

"Nice to see you, too," Hank said mildly.

"Answer me before I call the police."

"Cut the righteous indignation act, will you? It's so boring."

Reese advanced toward Hank with a scowl. Hank put up a hand in a gesture of surrender. "Okay, okay. Relax. I had a locksmith make me a master key. You wouldn't answer your phone, you've been shutting me out for weeks. I had to see you."

"No locksmith would do that. It's illegal."

Hank laughed. "Don't tell me you're that naïve. As you know from personal experience, money is a powerful motivator. More money is even more powerful. You should be impressed. I paid a very pretty penny just to get an audience with you."

"Well, I'm not. Look, Hank. I know this is hard for you to understand, but it's over. I can't get past what you did. You ruined the best thing in my life."

"Oh, spare me the melodrama. You wouldn't have even looked twice at the guy if it weren't for me. It was just a passing thing. I did you favor, believe me. If it had gone on any longer, you'd be saddled with that stuttering misfit and become just another boring sap plodding along in a dreary, tedious life. You and me – we're made for better stuff."

"No!" Reese shouted. "No. We're not. I'm not. I told you, I'm done with that shit, Hank. Get it through your head. I'm not the man I used to be. I don't want to play those games with you. I'm through being your sidekick and facing the world as if it's the enemy to be conquered, manipulated and controlled. I'm ashamed of what we've done over the years. We've hurt people, Hank. I don't want to live my life like that anymore."

"For fuck's sake," Hank swore. "You make it sound so sordid. We have fun. You've profited from it too, so why now the holier than thou bullshit?"

"Yeah, well, I'm going to pay it back. Every penny. You're right – I'm equally to blame for my behavior, and I'm paying the price now."



"Reese, Reese," Hank said, shaking his head, a condescending smile on his face. "This is all so unnecessary. I don't want the money back. You earned it." Reese winced. "Look," Hank continued. "I'm sorry I messed things up between you and the geek —"

"Jeff. His name is Jeff."

"Okay, okay. Whatever. I'm sorry I got in the way of your tender romance. But face it, Reese. It wouldn't have lasted. You and me, we don't *do* love."

"Stop it! Stop saying that. Speak for yourself. Leave me the fuck out of it."

Hank stood and held out an envelope toward Reese, who made no move to take it. Hank sighed and lowered his hand. "These are tickets. First class tickets to Paris. Let's get away. Start fresh. Put this all behind us. We have over a decade of history. Don't blow it, babe."

For a moment Reese was almost tempted. What better way to put Jeff out of his mind than hop a jet to Europe and allow Hank to distract him with sex, fine dining and long strolls along the Champs-d'Élysées? Hank had been the one in control for so long, it was habit to acquiesce. By mutual, tacit agreement, Hank had been the one with the power.

But love, Reese finally understood, had power over power itself. Whether or not Jeff could love him in return, his own immutable love gave him courage. The concept was at once alien and familiar. Had he always had this capacity for love? Did everyone have it, even Hank?

This fledgling feeling was so new, yet he sensed, deep inside himself, that it mattered. For the first time in his life, something tight and twisted inside him had eased. If he could somehow reach past Hank's defenses, maybe Hank would understand, at least a little.

Hank was watching him with those veiled eyes that signified he was daring Reese to refuse. Reese understood suddenly and with certainty that this was the defining moment. His response would set the course for his own future, a future that would not include Hank.

Feeling resolute, Reese said, "Keep your tickets, Hank. Find someone new. Move on with your life. I'm trying to do the same."

Hank stared at him, comprehension finally flickering in his eyes. For a moment the pain moving over his features was so stark Reese nearly reached for him. It passed as quickly as it had come, however, his eyes losing their light, his mouth compressing in a thin line. They stared at one another for several long seconds. Reese held his ground, refusing to look away.

"Your loss," Hank finally announced, turning on his heel and slamming the door with dramatic finality.

Reese walked over to the window, watching as Hank's driver pulled up alongside the curb, stepping out to open the back door for Hank. Reese felt at once exhilarated and saddened. He knew he'd done the right thing, the only thing, he could have done and remain true to his newly discovered self. Still, it was without a doubt one of the hardest things he'd ever done. Hank had been his world for so long. And what was left for him now?

As the sleek car pulled away from the curb, Hank turned around to stare at Reese through the rearview mirror. His hard expression sent a chill through Reese's frame and suddenly he knew, with a dark, cold certainty that Hank wasn't about to let go so easily.

# Chapter 11

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Jeff awoke, surprised to find he was smiling. He lay still in the bed, trying to recapture the dream, but it was lost, except for one rapturous fragment spinning at the edge of his consciousness. They were naked, Reese's cock hard against Jeff's body, his strong arms holding Jeff close. He could feel Reese's love enveloping him like warm sunlight against his skin.

Then reality set in and all the happiness slid out of Jeff's face. Dreams meant nothing.

He glanced at the clock and sighed. Three-thirty. He'd been asleep maybe three hours, but now he was wide awake. Dreading the thought of lying there with nothing to occupy his mind, he got out of bed.

Perhaps a walk in the moonlight would be calming. Better yet, a hike, something physical enough to distract him. After using the bathroom and washing his face and hands, Jeff pulled on his uniform of T-shirt and jeans, grabbing a windbreaker and a baseball cap. Armed with a bottle of water and a flashlight, he drove toward Cherry Creek Reservoir, where Reese and he had shared their best hikes.

The paths were closed, the signs at the foot of the trails stating clearly the hours were from dawn to dusk. Jeff didn't care. He just wanted to hike to the outcropping of rock where they'd shared their first picnic, back when the world had seemed alive with possibility. Maybe he could find peace there, if only for a while.

He walked up the steep, winding path, enjoying the nighttime solitude. All was silent save the rustle of animals in the woods on either side of the trail. All at once it opened up, the trees giving way to broad, flat rock and a small, tumbling waterfall. There was still moonlight, but the moon was hidden so the cloud edges were silvered.

Jeff found a spot near the ledge and sat, tucking his knees up under his chin and wrapping his arms around them. He sat quietly, letting his mind empty as he stared up at the vast dome of silver clouds, black sky and starlight.

He must have dozed because suddenly he came awake to the sound of Reese's voice. Though that was impossible. Then he heard it again. "Hey, if I knew you were coming, I would have brought some cupcakes."

Jeff whipped his head around. "What're you doing here?" His heart was beating fast. He'd been avoiding Reese for so long, but now for some reason it was all he could do to keep from jumping up and throwing his arms around him.

"I come up here all the time. It's always been my favorite spot for thinking. I've been here nearly every day since we...these past few weeks. Helps me to clear my head." Reese stood with his hands buried in his pockets, some ten feet from Jeff, his strong body and handsome face silhouetted against the moonlight. Jesus, he looked good. "Tonight I couldn't sleep. I'm, uh, I'm going away in the morning. Down to Mexico."

Jeff didn't respond. It was a free country. Reese could go where he wanted.

Reese lowered himself to the ground, still keeping the distance between them. Jeff steeled himself against the sudden aching urge to move closer.

After perhaps a full minute of silence, Reese said quietly, "When I was eleven, my parents died in a car accident."

Startled, Jeff turned toward him, absorbing this unexpected information. Was this just another tale, like the nonexistent Aiden who had broken Reese's nonexistent heart? Jeff didn't reply, waiting.

Reese was staring out across the plains, dark purple in the predawn. Finally he continued. "I was shunted around for a few years between relatives who didn't know me and wanted me even less. Eventually I was sucked into the foster care system. I went to twelve different schools from sixth to twelfth grade. It was in my senior year that I met Hank."

Jeff couldn't help the snort at the mention of that asshole's name. Twelve long years they'd been involved. How could Jeff have ever hoped to compete with that? Reese was silent for a while, and Jeff stayed quiet right along with him, staring out at the lightening horizon.

"I can't fix what happened between you and me, Jeff. I can't wish it away. I can't rewind and start over. I've spent the last couple of weeks really thinking through everything that got me to this point. I've never done that before. My mind's been on autopilot for so long I'd forgotten how to think. I don't know if this makes sense, but I think when my parents died, something in me died too.

"Or I thought it was dead. I forgot how to love. I found other things that substituted for love. I mean, don't get me wrong, not all the foster families I was with were bad. Some of them were good, kind folks trying to help kids in need. Though others were clearly just in it for the money, churning kids through their houses as fast as possible, with as little care as they could get away with. But even with the good ones, it never lasted. Sooner or later, I was moved, for one reason or another. As I got older, I started acting out and getting in trouble. I would fuck things up before anyone else could do it for me. At least I had some kind of control that way, or it felt like it, for a while."

Jeff was listening hard, aware something new was happening. Reese had never talked this long at a stretch in all the weeks they'd been together. And certainly he'd

never talked about his past. He was offering Jeff his secrets. He was giving him a gift. If only it weren't too late.

Reese continued. "When I met Hank, it was the same old story. I was seventeen, the new kid yet again, in the closet, angry and confused. Hank was there for me. He took me under his wing. He was my first. My only for a long time. But that's not what kept us together. Or not the main thing."

Reese paused for so long Jeff turned to look at him again. He was staring straight ahead and when he finally spoke, Jeff had to strain to hear him.

"It was near the end of senior year. A terrible accident. I—I was in a fight. These kids snuck up on us. Hank was knocked out. I think I lost my mind. I punched this kid. I—I, oh god. I've never said this. Not aloud. Never." Reese's voice cracked and he stopped speaking. Jeff remained still, waiting.

Drawing in a breath and blowing it out, Reese finally continued. "I didn't start the fight, but I sure was intent on finishing it. Something snapped inside me when those kids attacked us. When he went down, he hit his head on the corner of a table. There was blood everywhere. You wouldn't think one person had so much blood. I still see it in my dreams—I slip in sticky puddles of bright red blood, drowning in it, suffocating in it..." Again Reese's voice cracked and Jeff thought he might be stifling a sob.

His heart welled with pity. If Reese was lying now, he was the best actor on the planet and deserved a Golden Globe. If he was telling the truth...what then? Did it matter? Did it change things between them? Did it erase what Reese had done?

"I was arrested," Reese finally continued. "Hank's dad did something. Pulled some strings, to this day I don't know what, but he got me off. It was ruled an accidental death and the books were closed.

"But I did it." This last sentence was uttered in a whisper.

He repeated in a louder voice, "I killed him. I delivered the punch that sent him into that table. I took his life. Hank covered for me. He got his dad to fix it, but nothing he did could ever bring that boy back to life. He could never undo what I had done."

"Oh, Reese," Jeff said, forgetting his promise to remain steadfastly silent. "It was an accident."

"Even if he hadn't fallen the way he had, I would have killed him anyway, don't you see?" The anguish was ripe in Reese's voice. "I would have. I was out of my mind with rage that day. I was reacting to everything—all the perceived wrongs done against me over the years, not the least of which was being bullied for being gay. I wanted to kill him. I wanted him dead for humiliating me the way he had. Don't you see, I wanted him dead!"

Jeff was quiet, taking in the enormity of this burden Reese had been carrying around for so many years. "Thoughts don't equal action, Reese. From what you're

saying, it was an accident. He died, yes, but you didn't murder him. You hit him in self-defense and he fell."

Reese shook his head. "They would have charged me with murder, I know it, if Hank's dad hadn't stepped in. He put me to work too, after high school. One of his construction companies. I worked for Hank's family in various capacities all these years, and I guess, by default for Hank, since he's the sole heir. Hank was angry when I quit working for his family business to try something on my own. He kept telling me I was a fool. I think he sensed he was already losing me at that point, even before I knew it myself."

Finally Reese turned to face Jeff. "Hank isn't like other people. The term spoiled really applies in his case. His parents used money as a replacement for love. In all the years I knew them, I never once saw them touch him or each other.

"To people who don't know him, which is most everyone, I guess, he's able to mask it pretty well. He draws on his sheer force of will, wit, good looks and definitely his money to gloss over his inability to connect. I was the only one who knew how empty he really was inside. Or maybe empty's the wrong word. Frozen, somehow. Shut down.

"Instead of trying to help him, I went along with it. For years, I played his games and made them my own. I told myself it was the challenge of the sexual hunt that I enjoyed. The rush of seeing who I could get in bed, without ever involving my emotions. We fed off each other in that way, encouraging and excusing each other's behaviors. We thought we were slick—nothing got to us, nothing hurt us."

Reese sighed. "Until you, Jeff. Until I met you."

Jeff sat, wordless, his mind in turmoil. Now was the moment to stand. To open his arms and welcome Reese into them. To give him the absolution he so clearly wanted. To forgive and forget.

But he didn't move. Though his heart ached for the damaged, hurting man, he couldn't get past the betrayal. He couldn't forget the video Hank had watched of Reese making love to him on the bed. No, *fucking* him on the bed, fully aware as he did so they were being taped.

After what they'd shared—the fiery, tender intensity of that first time—Reese had still had a chance to stop what he was doing. He could have destroyed the video. He could have lied to Hank and said it didn't work out. He could have been honest and admitted he didn't want to play their sick games anymore.

But he hadn't. He'd handed over the video—perhaps their entire night had been recorded and Hank only bothered to share a portion with Jeff. Reese had accepted the money for the deed and then pretended to be falling in love with Jeff, never admitting to the horrible thing he'd done.

Reese claimed he'd wanted to confess a dozen times. If he had done so on his own, would Jeff have been able to forgive him then? If his hand hadn't been forced by Hank, would Jeff have found a way to reconcile the humiliation Reese had subjected him to with the love he'd thought was developing between them?

He honestly didn't know. And he didn't know what to do now either. His heart was filled with compassion, but did compassion equal love? Was it enough to begin to rebuild what had been destroyed?

What was the difference between being in love and thinking you were? Was being in love about what survived after time and temptation, misfortune, change, the need to forget and forgive had all been faced?

While Jeff pondered these weighty questions, Reese stood slowly and turned away. The sun was just below the mountains, casting the sky in gray and lavender. Reese slipped away, the trees along the path swallowing him into darkness.

Somewhere a bird sang and Jeff bowed his head.

~\*~

Reese returned home but he didn't try to go back to sleep. Instead he made himself a pot of coffee and booted up his computer. He had plans to make. His life was not over. It was just beginning.

He felt a curious lightness, even though there had been no fairytale ending at the top of the mountain. Though Jeff hadn't come rushing into his arms, at least he'd listened. If things had gone differently, he might have cancelled his request for time off, but they hadn't.

Still, something important had happened. For the first time in his life, Reese had shared about his past and the secrets he'd held close for so long. He'd shared without expectation of sympathy or as a way to excuse his behavior. He'd simply been ready – at last – to fully open his heart to the man he loved. If only he'd found a way to do so sooner, before Hank had intervened, maybe things wouldn't have turned out as they had.

For too long, Reese had allowed himself to operate within the worldview Hank and he had created over time. In that world, Reese owed Hank because Hank had saved him from his own guilt. Beyond the continuing habit of their sexual relationship, beyond the sordid games they played to keep real feeling at bay, they'd both bought into the fiction that the debt could never be repaid. Reese would owe Hank until the day he died. Reese hadn't helped matters by letting Hank buy him gifts and take him on expensive trips around the world over the years. Had he been any better than Hank? Was it possible to change?

Yes. He was a different man now. There was no longer any question. Had it been Jeff's love that had broken the spell? Or was it his own fledgling realization that he

could love in return? It was a sad, bitter irony that he'd lost Jeff in the process, but he couldn't deny, even in the face of that devastating loss, that he'd gained something in himself.

Opening a travel site on the Internet, he scrolled through various beach destinations, finally settling on a flight that left that evening for the Baja Peninsula. The ticket price was deeply discounted – they were probably trying to fill the last remaining seats. With a few clicks of the mouse, he purchased a roundtrip ticket.

There. He'd done it. He was going away, by himself, for the first time in his life. He had no particular agenda. He would swim in the ocean, sleep on the sand and hopefully find some kind of peace at last within himself over the loss of Jeff.

Whatever happened going forward, he knew he was a different man, a better man, than he'd been before, someone who, if only he could have another chance, Jeff might be proud to know.



# Chapter 12

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Jeff was helping himself to some brownies someone had brought in when he heard Bob's booming voice from nearby. "Excellent, Reese. Glad to hear your trip was good and we'll look forward to seeing you tomorrow."

Reese was back!

It was ironic—Jeff had spent the prior two weeks doing everything in his power to avoid the guy, but once he left, he felt his absence as keenly as the loss of a limb.

Though he hadn't fully appreciated it when Reese was telling his secrets on the mountain, something had changed between them that dawn. It wasn't that Jeff felt any less humiliated or betrayed by Reese's initial deception, but the sting was lessened by an overlay of compassion for Reese's difficult early life.

Jeff felt almost guilty in retrospect. His childhood perhaps wasn't ideal, but at least he'd had a family to see him through. He had no secrets—at least not the kind Reese had. His parents knew he was gay, and while not overtly thrilled about it, at least hadn't disowned him. He'd even made a sort of peace with his brothers.

He tried to imagine what it must have been like, carrying the burden of feeling responsible for another person's death. Poor Reese. And no one out there who really loved him—who would be there for him when he needed it most. All he'd had was Hank, and he, from the sound of things, took complete advantage.

Listening to Reese talk on the mountain was like watching someone peel the layers of an onion, gripping deep and pulling hard, tearing away the very protection he'd armored himself with all his life. That offering of himself, emotionally naked, was perhaps the best and most intimate gift Jeff had ever received.

And he'd let Reese go.

He'd let him walk away.

He'd stayed another hour on the rock, watching the rising sun turn the mountains that curious pink-gold that made them look like they were lit from within, thinking of Reese.

*I still love him.*

That realization hadn't come as quite the shock it might have. Jeff had known all along, beneath his hurt-drenched anger, he was still in love with Reese. It's what had made what had happened so very hard to bear.

He had driven by Reese's place later that evening, thinking maybe they could talk. He wasn't going to commit himself to anything more than that, but maybe, just maybe, he was ready to start a dialog again. To perhaps begin to piece together some of the shattered fragments of their relationship.

Reese's motorcycle wasn't in the driveway and so Jeff had returned home, not yet ready to call. He'd spent the week Reese was gone wondering and waiting. Had he missed his chance? Had Reese reconciled with that bastard Hank and taken off for the Caribbean? Had they toasted their rekindled relationship with piña coladas by the sea, all thoughts of Jeff finally wiped out by his failure to act when Reese had reached out to him?

His mistake, he now understood, was in negating the better part of Reese, the part he'd seen and experienced firsthand. Reese had given the best of himself to Jeff. In the face of pretty heavy odds, Reese had somehow found the moral strength to pull out from under a lifetime of misbehavior and deceit. He was literally rebuilding himself to be a man Jeff could love, but Jeff hadn't been able to find it in his heart to forgive.

Brownies forgotten, Jeff hurried back to his desk and shut down his computer. He wasn't even going to pretend to try to focus on work. Reese was back! He had no idea if he would welcome Jeff with open arms, or tell him it was too little, too late.

There was only one way to find out.

~\*~

The doorbell rang. *Shit. That better not be Hank.* Reese really wasn't in the mood. The week in Mexico had been just what the doctor ordered. Reese had been lonely, especially at first, but he had come to appreciate it was a good kind of solitude.

He'd found a cheap room to rent in town, taking the bus everyday to the beach, where he swam for hours, until he was physically exhausted. Then he would sleep on the sand, letting the sun warm and dry him. He kept to himself, avoiding the resorts and bars in town that catered to tourists. For the first time in weeks he slept deeply and well, waking with the sun each day. Though there was a lingering sadness, he also felt a kind of optimism. He was going to be fine. Better than fine.

He missed Jeff, but then, he would probably always miss Jeff. That was the same no matter where he was. He realized he wasn't going to be able to continue to work at Strata Systems, even though he really liked it there.

Jeff's presence would be a constant reminder of how bad he'd fucked up. Even if the love he felt faded over time, it would never erase what he'd done. Jeff's very existence would be a constant reproach—a reminder that Reese, like Hank, was damaged goods.

He would come up with something to tell Bob. A sick relative in Boulder needed him around for a while. A really good opportunity in New York had fallen into his lap,

something he just couldn't pass up. It wasn't like he was tethered to Denver. He could go anywhere. He was a free man, with no ties in all the world.

He went to his door, ready to face Hank calmly, and remind him that there was nothing left to say. Without even glancing through the peephole, he pulled open the door.

Jeff stood there, a white bakery bag in his hand. "Jeff!" Reese's heart constricted in a painful way so that he actually gripped his chest before he realized what he was doing. He dropped his hand, offering a small, uncertain smile.

"I heard you were back," Jeff offered, his expression difficult to read.

Reese tried to quash the fluttering joy trying to surge through him. He needed to be cool. He needed to wait and see just what Jeff was doing here. He might only have come to say good-bye.

Reese stepped back, gesturing for Jeff to enter. "You, uh, would you like to come in?"

Jeff stood where he was, clutching the bakery bag like a shield. Why had he come? Reese waited, silent and stoic. The next move was Jeff's.

Still making no move over the door sill, Jeff remarked, "You got really tan. Where'd you go?"

Reese looked down at his arms, which were a dark golden-brown, the hairs bleached nearly white. Did Jeff really come by to talk about his fucking tan? Still, he answered the question, keeping his voice as neutral as Jeff's. "I spent a week being a beach bum down in Cabo. You'd love it down there. If you avoid the fancy resorts and don't mind taking the bus, you can stay for really cheap."

*I'd love to take you,* he ached to say.

"Well, I just thought I'd come by and, um, you know, say hi." Jeff suddenly thrust the bag forward. "I got cupcakes."

In spite of the tension and Reese's aching confusion, he couldn't help but grin. He took the bag, forgetting his promise to himself to be stoic. "I missed you," he said, aware of the longing spilling into his words but unable to control it. "I've missed you so much."

Jeff said nothing and Reese felt the heat rise in his cheeks. Fuck. He'd moved too fast. Jeff would pull away again. He needed to be cool, damn it. But he couldn't let Jeff go—not like this.

"Please," he said, hoping his voice was steady, "come in, Jeff. Please."

"Yeah, okay," Jeff agreed. "We should talk, I guess. I've had time to think while you were gone. About everything. About us. About you." For the first time he looked

directly into Reese's eyes, and Reese's heart caught again. How he ached to pull Jeff into his arms, to beg his forgiveness, to plead for another chance.

Jeff stepped into the room, pushing his hands deep into his pants pockets. He was wearing those old holey jeans Reese used to make fun of in his head, but now found endearing. They were so — Jeff.

They stood facing one another. Jesus, this was hard. He had told himself he was over Jeff and at a place of peace, but seeing him now, so close he could take him in his arms, he knew he'd been lying. He'd never get over Jeff. Never.

To distract himself from these raw emotions, he opened the bag and peered in. Two huge cupcakes, both chocolate, sat side by side. Despite his turmoil, he smiled. "I could put on some coffee," he offered.

"Yeah. That sounds good."

Jeff followed Reese into his kitchen. He sat at the table, fiddling with the salt and pepper shakers while Reese made coffee. Reese filled two mugs and set them on the table. He grabbed the cream from the fridge and set it down by the sugar bowl.

Neither of them reached for their mugs. The cupcakes sat untouched in the bag. Reese longed to speak, to say something, anything, to break the tension, but his mouth refused to comply. Finally Jeff opened the paper bag and took out the cupcakes, pushing one across the table toward Reese.

Reese reached for it. For something to do, he bit into it, enjoying the rich icing and moist cake despite himself. Jeff added sugar to his coffee and lifted the mug, sipping it while he watched Reese eat. Feeling self-conscious, Reese set down his half-eaten cupcake and added cream to his coffee, stirring and then sipping in the thundering silence.

The sound of the front door being unlocked and pushed open made them both look toward the living room. "What the...?" Reese rose, a sick feeling rising in his gut.

"Lucy, I'm home," Hank called out in a singsong voice. *Damn, damn, damn!* Reese had completely forgotten Hank's illicitly obtained key. The bastard couldn't have planned his entrance better, or rather, worse, if he'd tried.

Reese glanced helplessly at Jeff. "I'm sorry. Just let me deal with this."

Jeff shrugged, his expression guarded. Reese felt a fault line crack along his heart but he didn't dare dwell on the pain. He had to get Hank out of there, pronto.

He hurried into the living room, Hank stood just inside the door, an elegant silk jacket slung over his shoulder, his face a study in casual insolence.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Reese demanded through clenched teeth.

"You've been back from your solo vacation for a whole day. I kept waiting for you to call *me*, but you obviously couldn't be bothered. Then when I heard Hartman was heading over here —"

"What? You're admitting you had both our places watched! Jesus, Hank. You've gone too far, even for you. I can't fucking believe you'd stoop so low."

For a second the insolent mask slipped and Reese saw the vulnerable pain behind it. "I want you back," Hank said in a low voice. "I'll do whatever's necessary to make that happen."

Reese shook his head. "It's not going to happen, Hank. Too much damage has been done. I need to move on. I'm sorry, but you're going to have to get that through your head."

Hank narrowed his eyes. "You think so, huh? You really think your little love interest is going to want to have anything to do with you once he knows the real you? I've got something here that says he won't." Hank patted his jacket.

"This isn't about Jeff. I'm not the same person I was before."

"Sure you are. Nobody really changes. Don't run me that shit. I *know* you, don't forget." Hank looked toward the direction of Reese's bedroom. "Where is he, anyway? Waiting in your bedroom with his pants around his knees?"

"That's enough." Reese felt his blood pressure rising. He refused to give Hank the satisfaction of seeing how upset he was. Jeff had returned, possibly to reconcile, and Hank's showing up was going to ruin everything. Trying to keep the desperation out of his voice, Reese said firmly, "You need to go, Hank."

Ignoring Reese, Hank turned his face toward the kitchen and his eyebrows lifted, a mean smile pulling at his lips. "Ah, there he is. Jeff, isn't it? Did you drop by to stutter all over Reese's cock?"

Reese swiveled toward the kitchen door, where Jeff slouched against the doorframe, his hands in his pockets, his expression impossible to read. Reese implored, "Jeff, I'm really sorry. Just ignore him. He'll be gone in a second."

Hank offered a hollow laugh. "I warned you, Hartman. Don't tell me you actually believe him. Not after all the lies." He advanced toward Jeff but Reese stopped him, blocking his way. Unperturbed, Hank continued to address Jeff. "I have my own key to Reese's house. Do you? Reese and I have been fucking since you were in junior high school. Reese owes me everything he's got, and then some. Do you really think he's going to pick you over me?"

"Shut up!" Reese roared, the barely controlled rage now spilling out, spreading like a red film over his eyes and heating his blood. He started toward Hank, ready to physically propel him out the door if necessary.

Hank dodged quickly around him, laughing softly. "I don't write checks I can't cash," he said, pulling something from the inner pocket of his jacket. "Watch and learn how the big boys play."

Before Reese realized what he was doing, Hank pushed the button on the DVD player and slipped a disc into the slot. The TV turned on and after a moment, the images lit up the screen.

It was Reese, naked in a video taken several years before with a man who, like Jeff, hadn't known he was being videotaped. Tears of shame and fury filled Reese's eyes. "You fucking bastard." Helpless anger robbed him of judgment and he shoved Hank so hard Hank sprawled to the ground, landing with a thud.

With a shaking hand, Reese pushed the power button off, wondering how much Jeff had seen. All the petty lies, all the cavalier sexual games Reese had played over the years, weighed on him now like a stone. He felt himself sinking beneath the weight of his shame.

"Please," he begged, his voice ragged with pain. "I'm not that man. Not anymore."

Hank got slowly to his feet, the snide expression of a moment before replaced with something darker and more menacing. "You *are* that man, Reese Armstrong. You'll always be that man. Look at him, Jeff. This is the real Reese. Piss him off and he'll push you around. He's a rage-aholic, out of control." Turning to Reese, he demanded, "You probably want to kill me now, don't you, Reese? Just like the last time you killed someone, huh? Did you bother to share *that* little detail about your life with your new lover? Huh? Did you?"

It was as if Reese were thrust back in time, back to that horrible day when, as now, rage had blinded him. Hank was right. He did want to kill him. Not just punch him or make him leave, but smash his face in. He wanted to slam Hank's head down against the floor until it split like a melon and silenced forever the corrosive, damning voice of the man who was trying to ruin the first and only good thing ever to happen to him.

Fury propelled him forward, his hands curling into fists as he advanced on Hank, who held his ground, his expression defiant. "You wouldn't dare hit me, you pathetic little shit. Don't forget who you're dealing with. I had Daddy clean it up the first time. This time I'll be the one pressing the charges, and you can bet I'll make them stick."

Reese barely heard him. Just beneath the blinding anger, his heart breaking with sorrow, certain now by Jeff's silence that he'd lost whatever slim chance they'd had of a reconciliation.

"You fucking bastard," he cried. If nothing else, he'd have the pleasure of wiping that smug, superior expression off Hank's face. He brought his arm back, fully prepared to deliver a sharp right when Jeff's quiet voice penetrated the blood roaring in his ears.

"Don't, Reese. You're better than that. You *are* a different man now. I know it."

It was as if someone had taken a lance and punctured the bubble of fury that had encased him. All at once he felt it easing away, draining from him like blood and pus from an infected wound.

He dropped his arm, suddenly aware he was shaking, and turned toward Jeff. The tender expression on Jeff's face washed away the last of his anger. Jeff was right. He was a different man now. It wasn't just lip service or wishful thinking. That kind of uncontrolled, helpless anger no longer held sway over him. Hank just plain wasn't worth it.

Reese felt a strange exhilarating calmness descend over him. All the dirty, guilty shame over his past behavior and deeds seemed to slough off like a skin no longer needed. He was washed clean at last by Jeff's faith in him.

Was that what love was? Something that refused to believe the ugly and shallow, that saw only the good in a person? Or did it also see the fears and the failures, the dreams broken, and still love the person? Was believing in the possibility of the good what inspired it into being?

Addressing Hank, Jeff spoke with quiet but undeniable authority. "You need to leave. I think Reese has made it pretty clear you're not welcome."

Hank's face was mottled with rage, his mouth twisted into a snarl. Taking the key from his pocket, he hurled it to the floor. "When you come to your senses, Reese, you'll have to get on your knees and fucking *beg* me to take you back."

Reese stared at him, too stunned that Hank actually thought such a thing might be possible to answer. Hank started back, his dark, hooded eyes glittering. Once Reese would have been afraid of Hank's wrath, but not anymore. He felt — nothing.

"Good bye, Hank," he said quietly.

Hank glared a moment longer, his eyes flitting from Reese to Jeff and back to Reese. Turning on his heel, he strode out the front door, slamming it as he went. Calmly, Jeff followed him and turned the lock.

Jeff walked back toward Reese. Reese said nothing, any words he might offer too clumsy, too inexact to convey his happiness. Stepping closer, Jeff took Reese's face in his hands and pulled it toward his. Reese closed his eyes as their lips met.

Reese brought his arms around Jeff and held him tight, tenderness warring with lust as his cock rose hard against Jeff's body. His own body ached with the memory of Jeff's touch, the heat of his kiss, the hard press of his cock. Desire for this quiet, sensual man burned like a flame over his skin.

Arms still around each other, they moved in silent accord to the bedroom. It was a mess, the contents of Reese's suitcase strewn over the unmade bed, some of it spilling onto the floor. Reese pushed it aside. Sitting on the bed, he pulled Jeff down beside him.

Their mouths locked again, as if both were starving men, the other's lips their only sustenance.

After a while, they pulled apart. Jeff reached for Reese's hand and held it between his. He smiled slowly and Reese felt a strange sensation in his chest, as if the shattered remains of his heart were literally mending themselves into a cohesive whole again.

They sat quietly for a while, just holding hands. "You okay?" Jeff finally said.

"Yeah. You?"

"Better than okay." Jeff let go of Reese's hand and drew his fingers over the curve of Reese's forearm. He moved his hand, slipping it beneath Reese's shirt and resting the palm flat against bare skin. Jeff's touch caused lust to rise like hot wine in Reese's veins. He reached for Jeff, but, as he had that first night, Jeff pushed him back against the bed.

With deliberation, he unzipped Reese's jeans and pulled them from his body, along with his underwear. Reese's cock sprang out and he groaned with pleasure as Jeff's fingers closed around it. He was watching Reese, his pupils dilated, his lips parted.

Jeff pushed at Reese's T-shirt until his stomach and chest were bared. Taking the hint, Reese pulled it over his head and tossed it aside. When Jeff brought his warm, wet mouth over the head of Reese's cock, Reese's eyes closed and his head fell back against the pillows. Jeff licked and sucked his cock and balls, worshipping the phallus until Reese was ready to explode.

Apparently sensing his impending climax, Jeff pulled away. "No, not yet."

Reese managed to open his eyes. He was so close to the edge. He wanted to grab Jeff's head and force him back down onto his cock, but something in Jeff's expression made him wait.

He could feel Jeff's desire, matching his own and reflecting his heat. He could feel Jeff's power and he gave himself over to it, falling back against the bed. Jeff's silvery gaze was at once tender and fierce. "I want you, Reese. I can't deny it. I tried to forget you, to get over you. I can't do it. You're in my blood. You're in my bones. Tonight I'm going to take you back and this time, I won't let you go."

Reese shuddered, Jeff's words resonating inside him. His cock was so hard it throbbed, his balls tight and aching with need. Jeff stripped quickly, standing naked in front of him, his cock every bit as hard as Reese's own.

Jeff reached for the condoms and rolled one onto his shaft. Reese lay on his back, watching him. Taking the tube of lubricant, Jeff knelt between Reese's legs and squeezed some onto his fingers. His eyes on Reese's, he rimmed the puckered hole and then inserted two fingers. Pushing his fingers deep inside, he leaned forward and kissed Reese on the lips.



"I'm going to make love to you," he informed Reese in a low, growling purr. He withdrew his fingers and replaced them with the fat crown of his cock. Nudging forward, he slipped inside, pulling a moan from Reese's lips.

Reese gave himself over to the pleasure. Jeff's sensual control was nothing like the cynical ownership Hank had tried to wield. This was about passion, and something even more powerful. Reese could feel Jeff's mastery as they locked gazes.

Jeff moved inside him and Reese groaned with pleasure. He kept his eyes open as long as he could, mesmerized by Jeff's smoldering stare. "Jesus," he gasped, finally giving up the fight and letting his eyelids close.

Jeff began to move faster inside him, thrusting in long, hard strokes that, coupled with Jeff's hand pumping Reese's cock, sent jolts of pure ecstasy ripping through Reese's body. "Oh, god!" he cried, "Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, I can't, I'm going to, please, oh, oh..."

Reese convulsed in powerful spasms, his cum shooting in a series of ribbons over his stomach and chest. Jeff gripped his shoulders, thrusting hard, his eyes closed, the tendons on his reddening neck standing out. All at once he stiffened, save for the tremors of his orgasm as he came hard inside of Reese.

Jeff collapsed against Reese, who pulled him tight into his arms. He could feel Jeff's heart pattering rapidly against his own. "I love you," Reese whispered, before he realized the words were out.

For a moment he was gripped with terror. He had never said those words before. Not since he was a child. He held his breath, wishing he could stuff them back into his mouth.

"I love you, Reese," Jeff whispered back.

Something happened in that moment, something Reese had no language for. A tightness, a bitterness that had lived deep inside him for so many years simply...vanished.

They lay quietly in each other's arms and eventually, by the easing of his body and the deepening and slowing of his breathing, Reese realized Jeff had fallen asleep in his arms. He closed his own eyes and slept.

~\*~

Hours later, in the stillness and the dark, they made love again, and again, only stopping when exhaustion claimed them. Finally, sometime after midnight, they stumbled from the bed, hunger driving them. A late-night pizza place delivered a large pie and they sat together at the table, eating the greasy but delicious food and washing it down with cold beer.

Happiness rose in Reese like helium. He wouldn't have been surprised if he levitated right out of his chair from sheer joy.

There were no secrets. No shame left. Yes, he had nearly lost the best thing that had ever happened to him, but somehow, by some quirk of fate, this time he'd been lucky. This time he'd been given a second chance.

A lingering cynicism tried to rear its head, to warn him this wouldn't last, but he ignored it, telling it to get lost. Jeff had come home, bearing cupcakes and all was right in the world.

Jeff rested his chin on his hand and smiled at Reese.

"What? What're you smiling at?"

"You. You look so happy."

"I am happy. Maybe for the first time in my life, I'm truly happy." He paused and then added softly, "Thank you, Jeff. Thank you for forgiving me."

"That's not what happened, Reese. I do forgive you, but that's not why you're happy."

"No? Fill me in then, oh wise one," Reese replied with a grin. "What's the key?"

"The key," Jeff said, love shining in his eyes, "is you forgave yourself."

## About the Author

Claire Thompson has published erotic fiction since 1996. Claire's work includes the sensual exploration of BDSM as well as sizzling m/m erotica, both vanilla and D/s. Claire's recent work includes in-depth exploration of the m/m relationship, in the context of romance and D/s. And don't miss her ménages, both m/m/f and m/m/m, where she explores the complexities and passions when two become three. Claire has published over forty novels and short stories, both in print and ebook format. Claire lives and writes in upstate New York.

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