

## Everything Changes

Megan Hart



In Tempted, Anne gave in to her passion for both her husband, James, and his friend, Alex. Now it's time for Alex's side of the story....

When Jamie tells Alex he wants him to sleep with his wife, Alex thinks it will only lead to trouble. Sure, Alex thinks Anne is hot and they've talked about sharing a woman before, but that was a long time ago. Before Jamie knew what Alex really wanted.

Still, Alex can't resist the pleasure of being with Anne—and with Jamie....

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She'd left them on the bed, folded neater than he ever would have and tied with a hot pink ribbon that matched the smiling faces printed on the black material.

Hello Kitty.

Alex Kennedy, thirty-five, single and devastatingly fucking handsome, looked in the mirror. Straightened his tie. Smoothed his shirt. He slicked a hand back over his hair and stared into his own eyes for so long he imagined, for just a moment, he saw something there.

A blink and another slide of his hand across his hair, and he looked at the bed again. They were only pajama bottoms, and they wouldn't bite. But Genevieve could, and had, and he wouldn't have put it past her to try again.

She'd written his full name across the front of the card. She was the only person who'd ever insisted on it. Alexander. The Great, she sometimes added with that low, throaty laugh. Usually when she had his cock in her fist. She'd said it the last time she jerked him off while some dude they'd picked up at a club

got between her legs and ate her until she came.

The gift had been waiting for him when he got home from the meeting, which had been short and to the point. Global Communicom was buying him out, utterly, and taking over the transportation business he'd built here in Singapore. So sorry, Alex old chap, but there's no room for you on the executive board, not even in a consultant's position. Take the money, please, and get the fuck out. Alex wasn't stupid enough to think it had nothing to do with the fact he'd been fucking Reginald Bell's wife on and off for the past six months. Which was probably why she'd left him this present, he thought with another glance at the bed and its perfectly made-up sheets, the comforter pulled smooth over the top. She must have used her key to get in while he was out.

He looked again at his reflection. Transcom had meant everything to him, had been built with sweat and blood. He'd left behind his entire life to come here and start it up, and in less than ten years had made himself a millionaire. Take the check, he thought. And get out, fuck you very much, have a nice day.

Alex tugged one end and the smooth, slippery ribbon twisted around his fingers as it came loose from the floppy bow. The pants were cotton, black, with hot-pink Hello Kitty faces all over. Women's pajama pants, but the elastic waist would be big enough to fit him, easily. She knew him well enough not to misjudge something as simple as a size. He should be considering himself lucky she hadn't sent him a pair of ladies' frilly panties instead.

He tried to think if she'd ever left him a note before, but couldn't remember. Text messages, sure. Dozens of them, usually filthy just like her mouth and just like she loved him to be. Well, not loved. Genevieve Bell didn't love anything but herself. Even her pets had been chosen for their use as accessories and investment rather than anything as base as an emotional connection.

How many swipes of her tongue had licked this flap closed? He tore the paper, thinking of her mouth. She'd have laughed if she knew. Maybe she did. She knew a lot about people, even the ones who tried like hell not to let her see anything important. Especially those people.

Him.

The front of the card was blank but for a small black square in one corner, a stylized gift. Inside: Happy Birthday . That was all. Two words, no summons or command. Not even a signature. He'd walked out on her, but it was Genevieve who'd cut him loose.

That was worth a thank-you, if nothing else was, but because he was the asshole she'd called him more than once, Alex didn't call her to give it. He looked around his flat at all the pretty things he didn't care if he never saw again.

He had enough money to go anywhere and do anything he wanted, but in the end there was only one thing to do. One place to go. One person to call.

"Jamie," he said when the man on the other side of the world answered his phone. "Guess what? I'm coming home."

The woman in the kitchen stood with a bowl in her hands, her face crunched in concentration. In profile her features were not as soft as they'd been in her wedding picture, but her hair hung halfway down her back in a mess of red-brown curls a man could get lost in. Alex watched her from the doorway, thinking

what a lucky bastard Jamie had always been. Looked like the luck had held out.

“Hello, Anne.”

She screamed and dropped her spoon. He tensed to duck, but she didn’t throw anything at him. She set the bowl on the counter with a clang. There was more to say, an introduction to make, but looking at her wide, startled eyes and her mouth, half-open, Alex couldn’t seem to find one.

It lasted a long time, that first moment. He got to see the color of her eyes and watch the rise and fall of her shoulders as she caught her breath. He’d known she was pretty from her photos, as if he couldn’t have guessed just from the fact his best friend had married her. But the woman in front of him was more than an alignment of features, a curve of ass and tit and belly. This was the woman who’d married Jamie. She could’ve had three eyes and an ass the size of Arizona, and Alex would’ve wanted a piece of her.

The silence drew out. Just before it got awkward, he made a show looking over the rims of his sunglasses around the kitchen and back at her. “Hi. Anne.”

“Alex? Wow. I’m sorry, I wasn’t expecting you.”

He was the big bad wolf when he took off his sunglasses, all the better to see her with. Released from the shadows made by the dark lenses, her face sprung into high relief. Every freckle, every line, every curve. She had smooth, straight eyebrows no entirely straight guy would have noticed. Not that Alex gave a damn. He hadn’t been entirely straight since the eighth grade.

“Yeah, sorry about that. I rang Jamie’s cell and he said to head on over. He said he’d call you. I guess he didn’t.”

“He didn’t.” She laughed and ducked her head, wariness in her gaze.

What had Jamie told her about him? More importantly, what had he kept a secret?

“Bastard.” The kitchen hadn’t changed much since the days when he and Jamie would bike their way over to hang out with Jamie’s grandparents and swim in Lake Erie, which edged the property. He made himself at home as Anne watched him with an expression he doubted she knew looked so cautious. Women liked smiles. It put them at ease. He gave her one of his best. “Something smells good.”

She was baking bread and making brownies, and from the too-casual way she described it, he knew it was more for Mrs. Kinney’s benefit than anything Anne herself wanted to do. Jamie’s mom had stopped making Alex nervous a long time ago, but that’s because he’d stopped giving a fuck what she thought. Then again, he hadn’t married her son.

He studied Anne’s efforts and listened to her describe what she’d done so far. He could do this, help her out. Prove right off the bat that no matter what stories Jamie had told, Alex wasn’t all bad. He might be a rascal, but he could bake a kick-ass brownie.

Another smile, as charming as he could make it. Once on a trip out West he’d gone to a prairie dog farm, where the little rodents would take a peanut from your hand if you sat very, very still. He felt a little something like that now, like she was some skittish, pretty creature he ought to do his best to tame.

“Want to know the trick?”

“Of making brownies?” Her face showed him she was expecting another sort of trick, maybe one on her, and Alex pricked his mental Mrs. Kinney doll with another set of pins.

“Want me to show you?”

Butter, chocolate. A low flame. He didn’t really need magic, just patience. In another few minutes the batter was finished and ready for tasting.

He tasted, and so did she. He grinned at her. “Brownies fit for a queen.”

“Or James’ mother.”

“Even her.”

Her first real smile had been worth waiting for. It was easy to see why Jamie had fallen for her. He was very glad to see she didn’t look scared of him any more.

She was a better wife than he was a friend, though, because she cleared her throat and moved back, just an inch or so, but enough to matter. “I should go shower. Your room’s ready, I just have to get some clean towels.”

Alex had been with women who’d have made that an invitation, but not even his ego let him think she was coming on to him. “I don’t want you to go to a lot of trouble.”

“It’s not any trouble, Alex.”

His name slipped out of her mouth, casual, an afterthought. Her smile had connected them but saying his name sewed them up tight together. He wanted to hear her say it again. It had been...

“Perfect,” he said, not meaning the towels or her effort, though she didn’t know it.

Maybe there wasn’t a moment. Maybe it was in his head, but Anne broke it anyway with her laugh and a gesture at the chocolate all over her clothes and hands from where she’d gripped the bowl. He watched her lick it from her fingertips and there was no more denying it. Hewas an asshole.

“You have some just...there.” His thumb traced the corner of her mouth, which opened at his touch.

Fuck, her lips were soft. The tip of her tongue hovered and he wanted to slide his thumb into her mouth’s heat. He wanted to kiss away the sweetness on her mouth...but he didn’t.

She backed away, her eyes going over his shoulder, and Alex already knew what he’d see. “Jamie,” he said as though he hadn’t just been thinking dirty thoughts about his best friend’s wife. “How the fuck’ve you been?”

The dinner part went as well as anything involving the Kinneys could. Evelyn curled her lip at him but had been polite, at least. She was always polite in front of other people. Alex reminded himself he didn’t give a flying fuck at a rolling doughnut what the old hag thought, or had ever thought, or ever would think.

He made sure to linger around Jamie and whisper in his ear when he saw her watching.

The look she gave him then was well worth the look on Jamie's face, that sort of half-startled, half-lazy leer Alex bet Jamie didn't even feel in his eyes and on his mouth. Leaning so close his lips brushed Jamie's ear, Alex could smell the new cologne his friend wore. Underneath it, the scent of the same soap he'd used for years, that and fabric softener. In a blink they were back in junior high, wrestling over a copy of Mad Magazine on Jamie's bed.

"Goodbye, Mrs. Kinney," he made sure to say sweetly when Jamie's family left. "Great to see you again."

She was too much of a bitch to know he meant it. Once upon a time Jamie's family had been his, too. At least he'd thought so then. He knew better now.

Anne went to bed early, and as soon as she did, Jamie was pulling open the cabinet to bring down a bottle of Jack so dusty his fingers left a mark on the glass. He put it on the table with a triumphant grin and brought out two shot glasses, too.

"Let's drink."

After leaving Singapore and making his way through Amsterdam, Germany and a few other countries, Alex and the hours on the clock still weren't seeing eye-to-eye. Jet lag had nothing on the bone-deep level of exhaustion threatening to topple him, but the shower he'd taken before the Kinneys arrived had woken him, as had the company. He was too jazzed to sleep but too tired to make much sense of things.

"Hell, yes." The first shot tore through his veins and slashed a sliver in his throat, making him cough so hard Jamie had to pound his back.

"Jeeze, man. Don't die on me—you just got here." Jamie looked down the hall to the bedrooms. Interesting, that he didn't want his wife to know he was knocking back a couple shots with his friend. "Let's go out on the deck."

He took the bottle. Alex followed. Outside the chill breeze drifting off the lake felt good on his face with the fire from the liquor still burning its way to his gut. Alex shuffled in his pocket for the Marlboros he was going to quit one of these days. The lighter flared and he drew in smoke, deep, before easing it out through his nose. He looked up at the night sky.

Jamie eased into the space beside him, close enough the heat from his bare arm pressed at Alex's through the fabric of the shirt that had been too fancy for the dinner party. There was plenty of room for the other man along the deck railing. Jamie didn't need to stand so close.

Alex slung an arm around Jamie's shoulders, pulling him closer and pinching Jamie's bicep before shoving him a few steps away with a hip. "Your mom seemed glad to see me."

Jamie laughed. He gripped the railing with big, strong hands. He'd grown since college, thicker through the shoulders and thighs. The arm Alex had pinched had nothing much to grab on it but solid muscle. He wasn't much like the skinny kid who'd sat behind Alex in homeroom in junior high. Neither of them were.

"You know my mom," Jamie said, which wasn't an excuse for her but didn't invite criticism, either.

What must it be like for Anne, Alex wondered as he drew in another long, slow breath of sweetly burning smoke and let it drift from his nostrils. Married to the golden boy? Evelyn must've tried her best

to eat her alive.

“Thanks for letting me stay with you.” He ground the cigarette into an empty coffee can he swore had been there since Jamie’s grandpa had owned the place.

“No problem.” Jamie grinned and punched Alex on the shoulder. “Glad to have you back.”

That was what guys did to the ones they loved. Punched or pinched, gave them Indian rubs or knuckled their scalps. That’s what Alex and Jamie had always done. But now Jamie sidled closer again, his arm brushing Alex’s sleeve, and though he kept his gaze turned out to the night and the lake and the lights from Cedar Point Amusement Park across the water, there was no way he couldn’t know they were touching.

“I never thought I’d say it, but I’m glad to be back. At least for a while.”

Jamie’s shoulders hunched. The motion pressed his arm harder against Alex’s sleeve. Their hands were inches apart. All Alex had to do was spread his fingers wide, and he’d be able to touch Jamie’s hand. But that wasn’t what straight guys did. That wasn’t how they touched.

Jamie turned to look at him. “It’s been a long time, man.”

Since what? After the big fight in college they hadn’t talked for years, but then the wedding invitation had come. Alex hadn’t gone to Jamie’s wedding—he couldn’t, not after so much time. But it had opened the door. They’d talked sometimes on the phone after that and sent occasional e-mails that had become more frequent. But they hadn’t really seen each other in person since the night Alex had put Jamie through a glass table and spent the night sitting next to him in the E.R., holding his hand while a doctor who looked like Ed Grimley stitched him back together.

“Yeah. It has.”

Then Alex reminded himself he no longer gave a fuck what anyone thought, and he reached to pull Jamie closer to him for the hug he’d wanted to give him all along. Jamie came willingly enough, if awkwardly, his elbow knocking against the deck railing. Alex pressed his face into the side of Jamie’s neck, smelling his new cologne and the old soap, the familiar and strange scent of his oldest and best friend. He nuzzled closer for a second, not too long.

“You can hug me back, fucker,” he murmured into Jamie’s skin. “Anything above the waist isn’t gay.”

Jamie’s laugh sounded a little strangled, but his arms came up and held Alex tight, then tighter. He drew in a breath that pressed their bodies together. The breadth of Jamie’s shoulders and chest didn’t feel the same in an embrace as they did in a wrestling hold, and Alex held on a few more seconds. Almost too long, but then he pushed his friend away and added a one-two punch, left and right, to Jamie’s arms as the other man held up his hands to fend him off. They were back to being dudes again.

Alex put a few steps distance between them. Solid. There were places they weren’t meant to go. Not together, anyway. Not if he wanted to keep one of the few things in his life that had always meant something to him.

“How long you going to be around?” If Jamie noticed Alex’s retreat, he didn’t show it.

“As long as you can stand me. I’ve got some things lined up, people to talk to about stuff, but I don’t

have anywhere to be for a while.” The first part was less true than the last. People to talk to equaled calling up old contacts and seeing if there was anything open for him.

“Nothing wrong with taking some time off, right? Can’t you afford it, Richie Rich?” Jamie tossed a few air punches his way. “If I could make a million by selling my company and retiring, I’d do it.”

“You wouldn’t, and you know it. Besides, a million doesn’t last long with tastes like mine.” Alex buffed his nails on his shirt, and they both laughed.

“You and your tastes. So, you still...?” Jamie’s voice got low and trailed off, but his eyes didn’t cut away.

Alex tensed. The last time they’d had this discussion it had ended badly, and they’d managed to avoid it ever since. Still, he was here and if it was going to make trouble he’d rather have it now. Get it over with. “Fuck guys? Yeah. Sometimes.”

Jamie had been holding his breath because now it blew out in a long, slow gust. “Do you have a...anyone...”

Alex watched his friend struggle for half a minute before figuring out what Jamie was trying to say. “You mean like a boyfriend?”

“Yeah.” The relief at not having to say it out loud was evident in Jamie’s voice, but Alex gave him points for at least trying.

“No. I don’t have a girlfriend, either,” Alex said, easily enough considering this was a conversation a long time in coming. “But lookit you, brother, all locked up in the bonds of holy matrimony and shit. How’s that treating you?”

Tension eased. Jamie turned to lean against the deck railing. The drinks had been forgotten, or put aside. “Great. Anne’s the best thing that ever happened to me. She’s perfect.”

Nobody was perfect, but even Alex wasn’t so much of an asshole that he was going to point that out. “Good for you.”

“She’s smoking fucking hot, for one thing,” Jamie said, all confidence that nobody could disagree. He looked at Alex. “Don’t you think?”

Alex knew him well enough to know he wasn’t looking for reassurance. Jamie moved through life with the indelible knowledge he was right. When he asked for confirmation it was not to reassure himself but others they were correct. Alex had lied a few times to Jamie just to make him happy, but he didn’t have to lie now.

“Yeah. She is.”

Jamie moved again while Alex stayed still. He turned back to look at the lake, then around again to face his friend, then paced a few steps back and forth. If anxious energy cast a light, Jamie would have been burning like a star.

“I’m really glad you came to stay, man. It’s been too fucking long, you know?”

Alex knew. But he wondered what, exactly, Jamie knew. “Are you gonna get all sappy on me?”

Jamie’s laugh lacked some of its old flair and sounded forced. Alex watched him carefully and then pulled another cigarette from his pocket. He licked it, but didn’t light it, and he didn’t miss the way Jamie’s eyes followed every move or the way he ran his hand through his hair and practically levitated off the deck.

“You remember Ellen Haskins?”

Alex had to think for a moment, frowning, before the image of a girl with large melon tits and bleached blond hair popped into his memory. His frown eased into a smile. “Yeah. You wanted to ask her to Homecoming.”

“She went with you, ya fucker.”

“But she went home with you, brother. Parking, right? Didn’t you get two fingers deep in her that night?”

Jamie laughed. “I did.”

“What about her?”

Jamie’s laugh faded away. He paced. “You knew I liked her, but you went after her.”

Shit. Well, there was part of it, right there. Jamie didn’t need to know that after Ellen had dumped his ass and left with Jamie, Alex had gotten a couple of joints and some superior head from Chad Phillips beneath the bleachers.

“Jamie, Christ.” If there was something to come out it was best to do it now the way they’d done the other shit. “She’s your wife. You’re my best friend. Still my best friend. High school was a long time ago.”

Jamie stopped and went suddenly still. He turned, fast, to look at Alex and the pleasure on his face was unmistakable. He swallowed, the sound audible even from a few feet away. He took a couple steps closer. “Actually that’s not what I was worried about.”

Alex frowned. “You want me not to tell her I like guys, too? Dude, I’m not really in the habit of describing my sex life in detail to people just for the hell of it. But if you’re asking me to lie about it...”

“No. No, no.” Jamie put up his hands to fend off the words. He moved closer again. “Anne wouldn’t care about that, anyway.”

“Fuck, dude. Calm down. What the hell is the matter with you?” Alex watched him warily, then went against his better judgment and reached out to grab Jamie’s upper arms. “Stop dancing around like we’re at a fucking debutante ball. Tell me.”

“You’re my best friend, too,” Jamie said.

“Yeah? And?”

Jamie went still. Totally motionless. Under Alex’s hands, the muscles in Jamie’s arms leaped once and then tightened to stone.



“I want you to be with her.”

Neither of them laughed. This was dirty talk, but no joke. Jamie meant it, Alex could see it in every line of his friend’s face and in the rock-solid stillness of his body.

They’d talked about this, once or twice. The idea of sharing a chick. But it had been a long time ago, back when Jamie thought Alex only liked women. It had always been talk.

“You want me to fuck your wife?”

He should’ve felt guiltier for already having thought about it, but this was different. Thinking wasn’t doing.

Jamie hesitated, then shook his head, just barely. “Maybe not that. But other stuff. We could do other stuff with her.”

“Seriously? What the fuck.” Alex let go of Jamie’s arms. It was his turn to pace. He lit the cigarette, too, bringing in smoke and holding it in his mouth for a long time before letting it out.

“She wants it.”

Alex shot Jamie a glance over his shoulder. “She just met me.”

“I mean she wants to be with two guys at the same time. And you’re the only one I...trust.”

There was more to it than that, and they both knew it even as they both neatly skated over it. Alex groaned and let his head loll back on his shoulders to look up at the night sky. Jamie seemed to take this for an agreement.

“I want to make her happy.”

“I can’t screw around with your wife.” He said the words flatly to leave them open for no argument, but Jamie had never been one to let go of an idea once he’d grabbed it.

“What’s the matter with my wife?”

“Nothing...” With a sigh at Jamie’s inexorable will, Alex slanted a glance at his friend. “What about you? Can you handle it?”

“I’ll be there, too. It’s not like she’s going off with some stranger.” Jamie’s grin got bigger and he started that barely visible bouncing again.

“This sounds like a helluva lot of trouble, Jamie.”

“It won’t be trouble.”

“This sort of shit always causes trouble,” Alex said. “Trust me on this one, brother.”

For the first time ever Alex was the voice of reason between them. Jamie wanted to get started right away. Alex had convinced him there was a method about such things. This was rocky ground, no matter what Jamie seemed to think and no matter what he said Anne wanted.

Alex wanted to make sure of that for himself.

Asking her straight out if she wanted to take him to bed would've been the easiest thing to do. It had worked for him in the past, that up-front, forthright question, "Wanna fuck me now or fuck me later?" But with Jamie's wife it wouldn't be so easy. They'd laid out rules, him and Jamie, only a few but enough to make it clear this was supposed to have limits.

It would have been next to impossible for him not to flirt with her, even without Jamie's request, but it was the first time Alex could ever remember holding off on a seduction, once he'd decided to make it. It wasn't that he didn't want her. Anne's full, lush mouth and tangle of auburn curls were sexy. She was smart, too. Smarter than Jamie, with all his claims of her perfection, gave her credit for. And she watched him, Alex, with a knowing gaze that went deeper than it should have. She scared him a little, like she could see right down inside of him to all the places nobody else bothered to look.

Jamie, Alex thought, had no idea what his wife really wanted.

Alex was sure Jamie had no fucking clue what he wanted, either, and that this little game was more than just a way to satisfy his wife's kinkier urges. And that was the real reason he waited and watched and got to know her before deciding to take Jamie up on what he'd so freely offered. This wasn't about going to bed with Anne; it wasn't about pleasing her.

It was about trust.

He took Anne to Cedar Point, his treat, to prove he could be a good houseguest and not just an imposition. They rode the coasters, shared some lemonade, swapped stories. He hadn't talked about his time working at the park in years, hadn't met anyone who'd have understood or cared, but something about Anne opened his mouth on words he wasn't expecting to say. He turned the tables, got her to talk about herself, instead. And on the way home, though he'd promised her it wouldn't happen, a storm blew up over the lake and tried to tip the small sailboat that had belonged to James' grandparents. Alex had promised to take care of her, and she'd trusted him, and so though he could feel his jaw set tight and hard at the wind and water threatening to tip them, he didn't let her know how much trouble they were in.

He got them home just as the rain hit, soaking them both. The kitchen floor was slick beneath their wet feet, and they skidded as he slammed the door. Anne, dripping, stared at him with her arms clutched around her tight.

"You're shivering." He handed her a dish towel and forced his eyes to stay on her face and not the tight, hard points of her nipples poking through her thin, wet T-shirt.

"My father," Anne said suddenly, "took me out on a boat. The storm came up fast. We weren't too far out. But I didn't know how to sail. And he was..."

Alex understood, then, what had allowed Anne to look so deep inside him without even knowing him. He put a hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently, nothing to say.

She shuddered and straightened her shoulders. Bucking up. Putting on the brave face he also understood. "We didn't drown, obviously."

“But you were scared. You’re still scared, remembering it.”

“I was ten. I didn’t know any better. My dad wouldn’t have done anything to hurt me.”

Alex didn’t need to know her father to believe that wasn’t true, but who was he to burst her bubble? He squeezed again as lightning flashed and made her jump; she slipped on the tiles but he was there to make sure she didn’t fall.

The lights went out.

He could have pulled her into his arms. Touched her. He could have put his mouth to hers and had the rain-diluted taste of her kiss on his tongue in no more than a heartbeat or two.

She spoke. “He was drunk.”

He hadn’t been too noble to take advantage of someone’s vulnerability in the past, not when it suited him. He had no doubts he’d find himself in a place to do it again in the future. In darkness, Alex knew all too well how easy fantasy could be, and what it could do, and where it could lead. But listening to the sound of Anne’s breathing, feeling the heat of her skin even as she shivered from the chill of dampness, he couldn’t move. He couldn’t take what Jamie had offered. Not like this, with her words pulling memories he’d rather have left buried to the surface.

“Families suck,” he said, his best attempt at giving comfort.

The lights came on. They moved apart. The moment broke and was gone, but the memory of it lingered there between them, something the storm had dredged to the surface and refused to sink again.

“Where are you, fucker?”

Alex laughed into the cell phone. “Ooh, I love it when you talk dirty to me, baby.”

Jamie snorted. “Just wondered where the hell you were off to every day.”

Since the day of the storm, Alex had been putting some much-needed distance between him and Jamie’s wife. “Trying to get my punk ass a job.”

“Any luck?”

Alex looked at his watch, then the empty table across from him. Troy Sauders, one of his contacts, was supposed to meet him for lunch. So far, the man hadn’t showed. Alex didn’t want to think it was because of anything Bell might have said about him, but you could never be sure. Sometimes corporate America, even when it was headquartered overseas, could be as vicious and backstabbing as high school.

“Not yet. I think I’ve been ditched, actually. Shit.”

“No worries, man. I’m sure you’ll get something. Hey, you could always come work for me. We could use a transportation guy.”

“Dude, transportation specialist doesn’t mean dump truck driver.” Alex laughed, though, thinking about it. “Maybe if I get desperate.”

“I’d be your boss.”

“Then I’m definitely not in. I’ll catch you at home later, okay?”

“Yeah, man, I’ll be back regular time. And...Alex.”

Alex’s smile faded. “Yeah, brother.”

“Have you been thinking about what we talked about? Just wondering. Because you haven’t been around as much as I thought you might be, and I thought maybe...”

“It’s cool,” Alex said after the pause Jamie left proved he wasn’t going to continue.

How did you tell a guy who offered you his wife that yeah, she was a smoking hot piece of ass, but no, you couldn’t bang her because you...fuck it to hell...you liked her too much?

“Good. I don’t want it to be weird or anything, that’s all.”

“Fuck you, Jamie, anything you do is weird.”

Jamie laughed. “Fuck you.”

“Fuck you!” Alex laughed, too, giddy with the sense of boyhood and the power of a curse word they’d once thought so grown up.

The guy passing his table, tall, brown-haired, built like a runner, paused to look back. Great ass under a designer suit and a hundred-dollar haircut.

“Gotta go,” Alex said. “I’ll see you later.”

He disconnected without waiting for a goodbye and shot his wrist another look. Sauders wasn’t coming, or he was hella late and too fucking rude to bother calling. Well, fuck him. Alex Kennedy had money and time, and now, courtesy of his best friend reminding him there could be a threesome in the future, he had half a hard-on, too.

“How’s it going,” he said to the guy with the nice ass when they both got to the cashier.

“Good. You?” He paid with a shiny silver card and made sure Alex could see it, along with the shiny watch on his wrist.

It was a cliché that gay men would fuck anything, but Alex had no problem with that. By the time he’d followed the guy to his shiny silver BMW, he was already getting hard inside his own designer suit pants. The backseat turned out to be plenty big enough for two.

The guy didn’t offer a name. Didn’t even ask about preferences. He just unzipped, tore open the latex condom package with his teeth and got to work, sucking Alex’s cock like it had been on the menu inside. His sloppy wet tongue circled the head and he used his lips to suck hard before sliding all the way down the shaft to Alex’s balls, where his hand met his mouth.

Even blunted by the rubber it was hot, hard, fast and good with a little bit of physical mess but no emotional garbage to deal with. Alex tilted his hips upward into the guy's mouth and closed his eyes. They slid on leather seats growing hot in the summer sunshine. The scent of sex smothered him until he drew in small, shallow breaths but couldn't stand it any longer, thrusting upward with a strangled groan when the guy's fingertip slid backward to press inquisitively at his ass.

"Fuck, yes. Do it."

Alex heard the sound of tearing plastic again and then the finger was back. Pleasure shook him, made greater by the anonymity. He knew nothing about this man other than his taste in clothes and cars and condoms. It was all he had to know.

The man's finger slipped inside, pressing as the tight muscles relaxed. Alex grunted, shifting against the hot, sucking mouth and the slick, stroking finger sending shards of pleasure spiking into every nerve. The man between his legs; his moans muffled around Alex's cock, moved faster.

Alex shifted, opening his eyes to look down to where the guy was not only sucking and fingering him, but stroking himself with his other hand. Fucking talented bastard. The sight pushed Alex closer to the edge. It was always better the other person got off, too.

Pleasure coiled tight and hard, low in his belly and balls. He fucked the man's mouth harder and bore down with inner muscles to take everything he was being given. Fuck, so close, so close...

He looked down, saw the man's prick gripped tight in his fist, the head dark with arousal. Pre-come glistened on the head, disappearing and reappearing in his fingers. He was close, too, based on the sudden jerkiness of his strokes and the moans slipping from an occasionally lax mouth.

Anonymous, swift and without repercussions, that was all he wanted. His thighs shook as his body surged toward the explosion that would wipe his mind clean. Make him stop thinking. But as his muscles tensed and nerves began the rapid-firing release of sensation preceding orgasm, Alex didn't just lay back and let it wash over him. His hand found the softness of the man's hair and he pulled, just enough to get the guy off his cock.

Wet lips, hooded eyes, flushed cheeks. It was clear he was getting off on this as much as Alex, and that was all it took to send him over the edge.

"Look at me," he said, and the guy did. They all did, when he told them to.

He came with a grunt and bit down hard on his lip as the ecstasy burst out of him. The scent of it filled the close, hot air inside the BMW as his anonymous friend shuddered and cried out with his own passion.

Breathing hard, the guy pulled away long enough to reach under the seat and pull out a hard plastic box of baby wipes and a couple plastic grocery bags. He handed the wipes to Alex and used the bags for cleanup.

Alex took them, amused and stated. "What a Boy Scout."

The guy laughed. Sweat beaded along his hairline. It was getting too fucking hot in there. "Yeah. Never hurts to be prepared."

“No, I guess not.”

They took care of what they had to do in silence. When it was done Alex sat back against the leather seat with a groan that had nothing to do with pleasure. He’d pulled something in his back from the awkward position.

“Would it be lame for me to give you my number?”

Alex cracked open an eye to look at the guy now wiping his face. “I’m not going to be in town much longer.”

The guy grinned and reached to flip Alex’s tie with a finger. “Right. No problem.”

Alex laughed, relieved the guy wasn’t a drama queen. “No, really. I’m just in on business. You can give me your number, though, in case I come back.”

The guy studied him before looking out to the parking lot. If anyone had walked past to peer in the beemer’s tinted windows and catch a peek at the show, they’d gone. “Yeah. Okay.”

He pulled a shiny silver card case from his breast pocket and handed it to Alex, who put it away without looking at it. Then, without so much as a handshake, he got out of the car and went to his own. He ran the air conditioner on high all the way from Cleveland to Sandusky and still felt like he smelled like sex by the time he got back. His back still hurt like a motherfucker, too.

She was there when he got back to the house. Of course she was. It was her house, he the piss-poor houseguest who’d been avoiding her.

She sat on the deck, lemonade in hand, and shaded her eyes to look at him as he stood in the doorway. “Hi. Long time, no see.”

He was always in the doorway, it seemed, waiting to come in. Thinking of going out. Always stuck in between.

“I’ve had a lot of meetings. Investors.” It was only half a lie. She didn’t need to know he hadn’t had much luck.

Damn, it was hot out here, and he was tired of being in this suit. His armpits were damp and his cock pressed obscenely against his briefs, reminding him that not more than a couple hours had passed since it had been down another man’s throat. He needed a shower, but couldn’t make himself leave her.

He kicked off his shoes, took off his socks and reveled in the deck’s hot wood on his bare feet. He unbuttoned his shirt as they talked and joked. He put his face to the sun and let it warm him all over the way her low, slow chuckle heated him inside.

He didn’t want to look at her, sure his lust would blaze in his eyes like some punk kid with a crush on the Homecoming Queen. He stretched, wincing, his back snap, crackle and popping in a line up his spine. “Christ, I’m tight. I got spoiled in Singapore. I had weekly massages there.”

Their banter took a turn toward teasing, toward flirting. It was easier when he was teasing. He could

pretend he didn't mean any of it. But in the end, the low and breathy tone her voice took on when he implied the massages in Singapore had been more than simply therapeutic sent him down a twisting, turning road to a very hot place.

He wished he had some lemonade and knew she'd get up to get him some, but Alex didn't want to ask Anne for it. He wanted to stand across from her for a while with the hot sun on them and the wind blowing off the water. He just wanted to listen to her laugh.

When she drank, he watched her throat work as she swallowed and imagined how her lips would feel on his dick. She would drink him down like she did the lemonade.

A wedding ring had never been anything more than a challenge to him in the past. Worn by a man or a woman, it meant he never had to keep what he took. He'd never wanted to. But playing with other people's toys had started getting old, not to mention complicated.

Wetting his prick wasn't the only thing in the world that mattered.

Was it?

Even when he knew how much Jamie wanted it? Even when it was, maybe, the only way to ever come close to giving Jamie what hereally wanted? Alex shook himself, shivering, and another slice of pain lanced him.

"Fuck, my back hurts. Would you rub it for me?"

He sat at the end of her chair and took off his shirt. Easier to do it looking away, when he didn't have to see her face. When he could pretend again it didn't mean anything, even though his heart stuttered at the thought of her touching his now-bare skin.

The clink of the glass on the table. Anne's slow, slow inhale. Alex closed his eyes.

Waiting.

"Does anyone ever say no to you?"

Once again, the doorway, only this time he wasn't in between, contemplating whether to stay or go. This time, he'd stepped all the way through with no going back. Alex looked at her over his shoulder. He told her the truth.

"No."

Neither did Anne.

Mrs. Kinney, arriving unannounced, interrupted. Alex watched Anne handle her mother-in-law with more grace than he'd have managed under similar circumstances. He admired that.

Even so, things had been set into motion and he wasn't sure he could back away from them even if he wanted. Anne still watched him with her quiet contemplation, her gaze on the verge of stripping him bare.

“You’re a master, man.” This came from Jamie, under the stars.

Alex tipped a beer to his mouth and said nothing.

Jamie begged a cigarette and lay back on the lounge, letting the smoke waft out of his mouth and nose in lazy streams. “I can tell she likes you.”

Alex didn’t agree or dispute. He closed his eyes and listened to the rise and fall of Jamie’s voice. When his chair dipped and he looked up into Jamie’s eyes, inches from his own, he didn’t move.

“Wake up, fucker.” Jamie breathed beer and smoke across Alex’s face. Jamie’s knees pressed Alex’s sides. The weight didn’t make it impossible to shift him off, but Alex stayed still. “She won’t make the first move, man. You have to do it.”

“What if you told her what you told me?”

“No.” Jamie shook his head.

Alex slid his hands up Jamie’s sides to anchor at his belt loops and noticed the way his friend’s eyes widened, just a little. “Why do you want this so much?”

“Why don’t you?”

Alex pulled, for the moment not caring what Jamie thought, but he didn’t turn this into an embrace. Instead he dumped his friend ass backward onto the deck with a thump that echoed in the night. They both burst out laughing, loud and long.

“I want to,” he admitted, finally, unable to keep a secret from Jamie now any more than he ever had. “Soon. I told you, the time has to be right. You can’t just dive into this without thinking it through, and if you just won’t come out and tell her—”

From his spot on the deck, Jamie shook his head again. “No.”

“It would be easier just to be honest,” Alex said.

Jamie’s laughter eased, but though his smile faded, it didn’t disappear. “Look who’s talking.”

Alex thought about a past accusation in a beer-blurred voice, a shove, the shattering of glass and the sudden copper tang of blood. He looked at his friend, the only man—hell, only person—he’d ever truly loved. “Yes. All right. I’ll do it the way you want.”

Women liked men who could cook. It had been a while since he’d utilized his culinary skills, brownies notwithstanding, and it surprised him how good it felt to sauté and simmer and steam. Something therapeutic in it, something calming. With Jamie still not home from work, Alex had Anne all to himself again. He wondered if it was the way his friend had planned it. He found himself hoping Jamie would be late.

Later, dinner, drinks. Laughter. There were stories only Jamie knew, jokes only Jamie would get. Anne watched them both with her usual quiet concentration, and if she felt left out or jealous, she didn’t show



it. Night fell. Full bellies, good booze and better company relaxed them.

Alex looked at the lake, his cock already getting thicker at the thought of what was meant to happen.

“Look at that water.” Jamie sounded content.

Alex stood. “You know what we’ve got to do, man.”

Jamie, that fool, started laughing in protest until Alex hooked the edge of his shirt and tugged. Only then did he get up as Alex stripped out of his shirt.

“You up for it, Anne?” He didn’t think she’d do it, but he wanted to see if she’d at least think about it, if she could be eased toward it.

“Swimming? Now?” She didn’t sound enthusiastic.

“She doesn’t swim, Alex.”

“She can swim.”

Didn’t and wouldn’t were different matters than couldn’t. He knew she could and knew, too, that Jamie wouldn’t push the issue. Might not even know there was one, the bastard. Living with Jamie must have been so easy for her in some ways, Alex thought as he stared her down in the mix of golden light from inside and silver from the moon. Jamie never challenged her.

His fingers went to the buttons on his jeans and he notched the zipper down, tick-tock, zip. Her eyes went to his crotch, and his prick threatened to bust right out of the faded denim.

Jamie spoke. “C’mon, pussy. Thought you were going in.”

“I’m waiting to see if Anne’s coming, too.”

Would she? His fingers lingered at his crotch, his breath held as he waited. But Anne shook her head and met his gaze head-on, refusing even when he tried to charm her.

“I don’t swim in the lake.”

She’d already told him why. In that moment, he didn’t want Jamie’s wife. He wanted the woman who’d given up a piece of herself to him and made him wonder what it would be like to do the same.

In the water, naked, Jamie grabbed him by the ankles to pull him under. Kids again, that’s what they were together, and for a while Alex lost himself in the horseplay. Dunking, splashing. Touching. Rubbing.

Jamie slid an arm around Alex’s shoulders to knuckle his head, both of them in water to their chests. He pulled Alex close to breathe heat into Alex’s ear. Beneath the dark water, Jamie’s dick edged the side of Alex’s thigh.

It would have been nothing to touch Jamie just then. A casual stroke where nobody could see. Alex’s cock twitched at the possibility even as his muscles tensed at Jamie’s touch. It would be so easy to lean

into Jamie's embrace and take his friend's cock in his hand. It had been that way when they were boys, too, wrestling in the lake, their swimsuits clinging to their legs and balls and asses. There'd been times Alex got so hard he ached and had to swim too far out, doing laps until his erection went down, or even one-handed jerking under the water until he came.

They weren't kids any longer.

"You watch," Jamie said into Alex's ear as they left the water and headed to the blankets, where Anne sat. "It will be so hot. You'll see."

It was hot.

Sitting across from Anne and Jamie, shielded by a blanket from the night's chill, Alex shouldn't have been able to see his best friend's hand slip between his wife's thighs. Not that Jamie tried to hide it.

Smoking, drinking, talking, the rise and fall of their voices melted into one long, erotic haze as he watched Anne's face blur with pleasure. Her mouth parted. The tip of her tongue wet her lower lip, just the smallest, most unobtrusive bit, but he noticed. He noticed everything about her. The way she shifted, slowly, beneath the blanket and leaned against Jamie. The way Jamie's arm moved just as slowly, but without cease.

When she came, he knew it as surely as if she'd cried out. He could see it in her eyes and the shape of her mouth. She was looking into his eyes when she climaxed. She would look at him when she came with him, and he wouldn't have to ask her for it.

He realized there was silence and wondered if he was meant to answer a question he hadn't heard. Jamie was looking at him, too, tension thick as a quilt between them. Alex stood, blood rushing between his legs to leave his head a little dizzy.

"Well, ladies, I'm off to bed. I need my beauty sleep." He'd meant to make it light, but all he could think about was his cock.

Now might be the time to move. He leaned over both of them as Anne struggled to get out of the blankets and Jamie just sat there. Alex wasn't sure what he'd meant to do, only that now he swayed, drunk not from the alcohol but the scent of her. Something light and fresh, a woman's scent, mingling with Jamie's familiar soap and fabric softener smell. Anne smelled like something Alex couldn't afford but would buy anyway, which was a laugh because he had a bank account full of money and nothing he wanted to spend it on.

He looked into her eyes, the pupils huge and black. He heard the soft in-hitch of her breath. If he kissed her mouth now she would open for him. He knew it better than he'd known anything before.

The question of "if" had now become "when," and the answer to that was "soon." But not tonight. Alex Kennedy prided himself on many skills—baking brownies, deciphering the global transportation needs of major and minor corporations...seduction.

He wanted Anne to want him, not as much as he had grown to want her, but more. That was how it worked best, for him. To be desired more than he did.

"Good night," he said, and instead of a kiss on the mouth he touched his lips to her cheek.

He brushed Jamie's, too, for good measure, not the first time he'd ever done so, but in the air between them he felt the tense and shift of Anne's muscles. He patted them both on the head and went to the doorway where he staggered for just a moment, hand reaching out to support himself lest he stumble and fall into the darkness inside.

In the bedroom down the hall from Anne and Jamie's, Alex stripped off his clothes and pulled back the blankets and sheets to slip beneath them naked. His cock, freed from its denim prison, was already in his fist. Anne's face in his head. The scent of her, the sound of her voice. The heat of Jamie's breath in his ear.

For a long time he hadn't gone without one goddamned thing he'd wanted. Raised poor, a drunk for a dad and spineless doormat mother, he'd been a white-trash cliché. Having money only changed the outside, not the boy he'd been or the man he was now, prick stiff as stone against his belly as he stroked it. He'd denied himself nothing for years and now desire sat low in his gut, hot as a stone left in the fire.

Through the cracked-open window the faint slap of water against wood reached him, and something else. The murmur of voices, too low to be heard. A groan. He bit back his own, recognizing it as Jamie's.

Alex spit into his palm and rolled onto his belly to bury his face in the pillow. His hand, hot and now slick on his cock, gripped and moved. He thrust his hips, fucking his hand and the bed, both poor substitutes for a hot, slick cunt or mouth.

He fucked himself with no finesse or grace, his only focus on a swift, hard orgasm. He ground himself down, hard and harder. Each push and pull edged him toward coming until he shuddered with it, this descent into mindless pleasure. He couldn't remember the last time he'd jerked himself like this, furtive and a little embarrassed at the huge and overwhelming need for release.

His guts tightened, his balls tingled, and his cock throbbed in his fist. He fucked forward once, twice more, and shot. He bit the pillow and spilled into breathless laughter at the ecstasy. In five minutes he wouldn't believe anything could ever feel this good; in ten he'd be asleep and dreaming, if he were lucky.

Sighing, blinking, licking his mouth to wet the dryness there, Alex reminded himself of one thing.

Jamie had always been the lucky one.

Thump, thump, thump, the beat pounded in his ears. His pulse. People around them moved in perfect time, a couple hundred bodies becoming a single entity with the music to bind it. And the three of them, somehow separate but making their own connection. Becoming one.

Facing Jamie, with Anne between them, Alex let the crowd press him closer to her. Jamie's eyes flashed. Grinning, he pulled his wife closer and his best friend, too. Both of them rocked against her, front to back. She bound them.

Fuck, he loved to dance. To move and sweat, to take a partner and make some sort of anonymous and fully clothed love on the dance floor. He'd lived entire lifetimes on the dance floor, met and married and divorced a dozen people in the span of a three-minute song.

None of them had felt like this. Jamie slid his hands up Anne's hips and Alex met them with his. Their fingers linked, the contact intimate and startling, and fucking sexy as hell. Alex and Jamie had slept in the

same bed, side by side. They'd wrestled, taking turns to pin each other down. But they'd never held hands. Not like this.

Between them, Anne swayed and moved. Her ass pressed Alex's crotch and not even the thick leather of his pants could keep his cock from trying to thicken. Jamie turned her to face Alex, who let himself get swallowed up by her gaze.

Again, he didn't kiss her mouth. She had to want him enough to make that move. None of it would be worth a damn if it wasn't Anne who did it first. So he nuzzled at her neck, taking her scent and tasting her skin, and though his cock throbbed like a wild thing, he kept himself under control enough not to push it faster than that.

He did have to step back, though, literally. There was only so much a man could take, and the constant pressure of her lush body on his prick had pushed him to the edge. The music changed and he used that and a need for more drinks as an excuse to leave them.

He had Jamie alone when Anne went to the bathroom. Jamie, laughing, eyes bright and with a sheen of sweat Alex wanted to lick off his face. Jamie, who was adamantly not "a fag," but who'd blended into this club, Wonderland, like he'd been going there forever. Funny how the shield of a woman could make a straight boy crack open the closet door.

"Having fun?" Alex had to lean close to make sure Jamie heard him over the music and the crowd.

"Hell, yes." Jamie grinned and tossed back another Red Pill, the club's specialty drink. "Anne is, too. I can tell. That was fucking hot, man, out there. Tell me it wasn't."

"It was hot," Alex said and finished his own drink.

Jamie laughed for no reason but joy; Alex understood that though it had been a rare feeling for him. He joined his friend, exhilarated at what the night would bring.

Alex turned, and she was there. He reached for her hand and she took his. He pulled. She moved.

He didn't look at Jamie, who was a part of this but not the whole. Alex took Anne to the dance floor, no longer three but two, still separate from the crowd that surged and roared around them.

Knowing where this would go, must go, had taken some of the urgency away. He wouldn't push her. Didn't have to. It wasn't vanity that told him Anne wanted this—or maybe it was. He could read desire in her eyes and slope of her shoulders. In her breath and step and the way she moved against him, the way she let him move against her.

He turned her to face Jamie on the sidelines. "He looks lonely. Should we take pity on him? Invite him back?"

Her hands fell on top of his, holding herself to him. "No."

"No?" He turned her to face him again as the music swelled and Anne slid her hands to cup the back of his neck.

"No."

The look in her eyes broke his smile in half so he could feel it, crooked, on his lips. "Should I be flattered?"

Anne didn't smile. Music moved them but they might as well have been standing still, because they were no longer dancing. Her fingers tightened on the back of his neck, in his hair, grown a little too long.

"Are you gay?" She didn't pull the question or make it coy. She wasn't looking to be surprised but to confirm what he thought she must've already assumed.

He'd been asked before and sometimes said yes, which as much a lie as the answer he gave her now. "No."

"Then why," Anne said bluntly, her voice clear and strong through the threads of song swirling around them, "are you trying to seduce my husband?"

Jamie didn't know his wife as well as he thought he did, but Anne sure to hell had Jamie pegged pretty fucking neatly. Alex didn't look away from her eyes. "Is that what I'm doing?"

"Isn't it?"

He leaned close to her ear to take a breath of her and gave her an answer that was not a lie. "I don't know. I thought I was trying to seduce you."

Everything changes.

Jamie didn't know this, but Alex did. Anne did, too. He saw it in her eyes on the dance floor. She hadn't slapped his face or run to Jamie in protest. She'd merely speared him with that soul-searching gaze and nodded once, then ignored him for the rest of the night.

Now, less than a day later, the room smelled of licorice from the absinthe he'd brought from Germany, and of cigars. Cards spread out across the coffee table and Anne, who'd joined their game late, held up a pair of kings. She'd beaten Alex and Jamie both.

"Pay up, boys."

Jamie, who had the right to do it, nuzzled at her ear. "We're both broke. I'll have to pay you with sexual favors."

"That's fine for you," Anne said, "but what about Alex?"

He'd been broken but now was broken.

Jamie ended the silence. "I guess that's up to you, Anne. Do you want him to kiss you?"

Desire didn't always mean a choice was easier to make. Sometimes it was harder, because it meant so much more. Anne kissed Jamie's mouth, their tongues touching, while Alex watched with the fire of wanting creeping along every nerve.

"Do you want him to?" Anne asked.

She put it into Jamie's hands, and like the charming fool he'd always been, he had no idea what gift she'd given him. Alex knew. If she were his, he'd have told her not to do it.

"Yeah," Jamie said. "I want to watch him kiss you."

She was still holding Jamie's hand when she did it, that first time. When she leaned across the table and put her mouth to Alex's, all he could do was let her. His eyes closed but his mouth opened.

She owned him in the span of a minute, when their kiss sealed this deal.

He kissed her harder than she had him, his hand on the back of her neck to hold her to him. Tongues stroked and he wanted to die from the taste of her. It filled him, overflowing. He didn't have air enough to breathe and still Alex kissed Anne, long and hard and fierce.

"Now," he said when he pulled away and they were able to speak, "I want to watch you kiss him."

This was not about two; it was about three. Jamie, for all his desire to watch, could not sit back and leave it all to Alex and Anne. He had to join them, or none of it made sense.

Of the three, Alex would have bet his entire fortune he was the only one to have ever done anything like this, but Anne was the one who led them. Down the hall, her crooked finger and husky "c'mon" a beacon, the men followed.

Another doorway to pass through, another doorway to stop him in time for as long as it took two bodies to adjust to the space only big enough to allow one to pass. Face-to-face, the men stood so close Alex couldn't tell who was breathing so fast, him or Jamie. Once before they'd stood like this without a doorway to keep them there or a woman to bridge them, and like before, they parted and pushed away in the eternal span of seconds.

Anne held out her hands and they both went to her. She kissed them both, one and the other. Alex could taste Jamie on her tongue and the thought Jamie would be doing the same sent sensation hurtling through every inch of him.

Jamie knew Alex better than anyone in the world and though Alex believed his place in Jamie's head had been filled, rightly, by Anne, he still had a pretty good idea of what was going on inside it. They didn't need to talk about where to touch her, how to stroke her, which way to turn her.

Anne pushed Jamie's pajama bottoms down, freeing him. It wasn't the first time Alex had seen his friend's dick, but he'd never seen it hard. Anne turned to him, pushing his already undone jeans over his hips and thighs and calves while she followed the denim to the floor.

She took him into her mouth and he wanted to shake with the pleasure of it, but his body would only stay still. Wet heat engulfed him and there wasn't really any more thinking to be done; Anne was on her knees in front of him, sucking his cock, and Jamie was at his side.

She sucked them both, one after the other. When they moved at last to the bed, Alex's knees had gone so weak he was grateful for the chance to stretch out so he wouldn't fall. Together, he and Jamie made love to the woman who could only belong to one of them.

"Jamie, sit up," he said when none of them could have lasted another second. "Anne, move here."

He coordinated it without thinking, watching Anne slide herself onto Jamie's cock but facing away from him. Jamie's hands gripped her hips as he thrust upward from behind, her thighs straddling him. Her back arched and her eyes fluttered closed as pleasure sighed from her lips.

She tasted sweet and spicy, delicious. Her clit went hard and tight beneath Alex's tongue. He licked her while Jamie fucked her, and then her hand came around to fuck Alex's cock.

None of it should have worked; someone should have faltered. It was hard enough for two people to come at the same time, but to have three reach orgasm almost simultaneously took a trick that could only have been called magic. Yet they made it, the three of them arching and moaning and shaking within seconds of one another. Alex gave it up into the hot circle of Anne's fist as her pussy fluttered under his mouth. Jamie shouted.

And later, in the dark when the others slept, Alex crept from the bed to his own down the hall, not because there hadn't been enough room with Anne between them, but because they all fit just right.

Alex was not about to forget he was only one point in this triangle. There were few times in his life he cared enough about something to make sure he didn't overstep, but this was one of them. Licking Anne to orgasm while Jamie fucked her had blown his mind, but all it took was watching Anne and Jamie, secure in their marriage, the two of them a unit, to remind him he didn't have a permanent place here.

It was worse how easy it was to imagine himself with the both of them. Living here, a part of their lives all the time and not merely a guest for the summer. Coming home to Sandusky had never felt much like coming home...until now.

Anne cornered him in the kitchen, and Alex made no attempt at escape. The trouble he'd told Jamie this was going to be was about to spill out. He could tell that much from the snap of anger in her gaze and the grim line of her mouth.

"He told me about how you talked about what you could and couldn't do. I don't like it," she told him firmly.

As he watched Anne brandish her mug of coffee like it was a shield, he saw something else. Anne wasn't only angry. She was a little afraid, too.

He knew how that felt.

"You don't like what?"

"The rules the two of you made."

He was on his feet, then, standing close enough to intimidate her, but Anne didn't back down. He hadn't made those rules. They'd come from Jamie. But he wasn't going to say so. It would only make them both look like assholes.

"Which ones don't you like?"

There was really only the one rule. "Don't fuck her," Jamie'd said as though it were the simplest thing to

avoid. "You can do whatever else you want, but just don't fuck her."

Too bad Jamie didn't know how many ways there were to fuck a person, some of them having nothing to do with sex.

He put a hand on the wall beside her head. She smelled good. His cock, which hardly ever could be counted on to respond logically, began to get hard. "Do you not like the rules or the fact you didn't make them?"

"You negotiated me like it didn't matter what I wanted."

"You're right. We should have asked you what you thought. So tell me. What do you think?" He should've walked away, but couldn't make himself move anyplace but closer. "Is it all right if I kiss you? Is it all right if I touch you? Is it all right if I put my mouth on you?"

Her taste flooded his tongue and he fought a groan at the memory of how hot and wet she'd been. His cock heated, filling, and his head swirled.

"Anne." He didn't trust his voice above anything louder than a whisper. "Is it all right if I fuck you?"

Please say yes. Irrational thought, led by his cock, leaped into his brain, erasing the rules. Erasing logic. Even, fuck help him, erasing his best friend. Especially erasing Jamie.

She looked at him, not all of the anger gone from her eyes. "You know it's not. That's the one thing he said no to."

He had to touch her. No denying it. Her pussy pressed hot to his palm when he cupped her through the thin pajama bottoms. "Then it's a good thing there are so many other things to do than fuck."

And he wanted to do all of them, every single one.

He lapped at her cunt like a starving man. He drank in the taste and scent of woman and reveled in her softness. Alex often demanded his lovers to look at him, to make that connection with their eyes if nothing stronger than that, but now it was his turn to stare up at Anne. Her face flushed, her hair tumbling over her shoulders, she rocked against his tongue and came on the smile he was unable to hide.

When she got on her knees for him and took him down her throat, he wanted to shoot right there. He'd had his cock sucked thousands of times, but nothing quite like this. The sound of her breath, the heat of her mouth, tipped him over into orgasm.

Empty balls gave him a clearer head. This was not just about sex, and he couldn't convince himself it was. Alex swallowed, still tasting her climax, and held back a shiver. He wanted to kiss her again but did not.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know he hadn't told you. I thought you knew."

The lie washed away the flavor of her desire, but he blinked and gave her no sign of it. He didn't know why he'd said it, other than just once he wanted not to be the one held responsible for the inevitable fuckup.

"I'm not sure I'm glad I found out. It's not nice to find out someone you love hasn't been truthful."



“Jamie’s never been a good liar. He’s not a rascal like me.”

She had no idea.

“Maybe not, but he’s not as good as he thinks he is, either. I also didn’t know you’d been in touch after our wedding. As far as I knew, you hadn’t spoken since your big fight in college.”

She knew? “He told you about that? The fight?”

“Yes. He told me that, too.”

“And you’re—” Okay with it, he meant to say. You’re okay with the fact your husband once tried to kiss me when he was drunk and called me a faggot and punched me in the face, and that I knocked him through a glass table when he did.

But the door opened to admit Anne’s younger sister Claire with a family fire to put out, and the moment for truth, if ever there had been one, was lost.

He fell into her slowly, and deep. There’d be an end to it, of course. Things like this only ever worked because they weren’t meant to last. Alex thought Anne knew it as well as he did, even if Jamie didn’t seem to.

In the beginning, Alex had tried staying away but now it was Jamie who left the house early and didn’t come back until much later. He said it was work, and Alex didn’t believe his buddy was lying. He also didn’t think Jamie had any sort of fucking clue exactly what he was doing by leaving Anne and Alex alone together so often. Putting a cock inside a cunt was the smallest of small things when set beside the very long list of what else was going on while Jamie was at work.

“Do you love him?” Anne asked in the bed the three of them shared more often than not.

“Everyone loves Jamie,” Alex said, which was not a lie.

“Then why are we doing this?”

He couldn’t stand the hint of agony in her voice, barely covered by desire. A hundred lies tripped to his tongue, and what would one more be on top of all the others? But it was getting harder to lie to Anne about everything. Harder to lie to himself.

“Because we can’t stop ourselves.”

They fucked in every way but that small one, and in the end, it wasn’t cock in cunt that mattered. It was mouth on mouth, skin on skin. Breath on breath. It was the way she curled her fingers in his hair and pulled, just right, and how she cried out his name when he put his mouth on her flesh. It was how she clung to him when she wept about the mess her family had made of their lives. It was how she looked inside him, all the way down, and he wanted her to see what was there.

“This is more than it was supposed to be,” Anne said when the love had been made, all day long, and both of them were boneless and sated from it.

Alex couldn't answer her. Words fought to come out, and he bit them back. Lies or truth, in the end it didn't matter what he said. He could hardly tell the difference, anymore.

He'd always had a knack for hurting someone who loved him. Something in his makeup let him see what would cut the deepest; something lacking had always let him use it. Until now, though, he'd never much regretted anything he'd ever done.

It would be better, in the long run, for this to end on Anne's urging. Jamie wouldn't do it. Alex knew that as well as he knew that Jamie would always go for paper first when playing rock, paper, scissors. And, as the summer got closer to ending, Alex found he couldn't do it.

If he'd had a job to go to, that would have helped, but he'd slacked off in his efforts and finding employment. He could live for years on what they'd paid him to buy out Transcom. He didn't need to work, but he also had no excuse to leave other than overstaying his welcome, and so far neither of his hosts had started grumbling.

He knew Anne had doubts. She had to. She couldn't know the story of the fight and its reasons without wondering if somehow, sometime, Alex might choose Jamie over her. Or if Jamie might choose Alex instead of his wife. She wouldn't have been human if she didn't wonder.

It wasn't easy to ignore her in favor of Jamie the way it would have been had this never begun, but Alex managed. And if there were times when it would have been easier to lead Jamie to know Anne better, Alex chose to follow his friend, instead, and pretend he didn't know. She couldn't know how it stung him to watch her shoulders tense when the pair of men started in on the boyhood jokes, excluding her from the secret club they'd formed so long ago. And Jamie, true to form, didn't notice a goddamned thing.

"Why don't you guys ever touch?" Anne, who'd been prickly for days, demanded of them one night.

Alex said nothing. Jamie sputtered and shot him a glance, but Alex wasn't going to throw him a lifeline. Not on this.

"Both of you," Anne said and turned off the TV so they couldn't ignore her. "Why don't you ever touch each other when we're fucking?"

It had come down to that. The question Alex had never asked because the answer was so blatant he didn't want to know. Jamie, however, was less than subtle. He'd been casually stretched out next to Alex on the bed, but now he eased away, like cock-sucking was catching.

"Well?"

"I'm not queer," Jamie said, "not that there's anything wrong with that."

That, at least, had changed in his friend's eyes. If Alex could be grateful for anything, it wasn't that Jamie wasn't a homophobe anymore. Once again, the truth and lies had become indistinguishable.

Alex looked at her. "He's not queer, Anne."

She wasn't satisfied, not quite. Jamie tried to soothe her and did a bad job of it. Alex could have done it

better. He knew what to say. But he didn't. Instead he got off the bed and made to leave.

"Where do you think you're going?" Anne's voice shook. Maybe not with as much rage as she thought. Maybe not with as much grief as he did.

"Giving you some privacy." Reminding her he didn't belong here.

"Privacy?" She laughed. "You can stick around when it's time for you to put your prick in my mouth, but when I'm in a bad mood you're out the door, is that it?"

"Jesus, Anne. What's the matter with you?" Jamie sounded stunned.

"I'm going to go out for a while. Give you two some time alone." It sounded nice, like a considerate gesture, but that wasn't how he meant it and it wasn't how she took it.

"What are you going to do? Go out clubbing? Pick up some guy and give him a blow job in the back alley?"

"God, Anne. What the hell?" Jamie looked sick.

They weren't broken yet, not entirely, but Alex didn't try to salvage it. He'd always known how easy it was to hurt someone who loved him, and how easy it was to be hurt by someone he loved. "Is that any of your business?"

"I think it is, yes, when you're coming back here to my house, and my bed, and my husband!"

She shouted so loud her voice cracked. Alex didn't shout. It wasn't his style.

He knew where to cut, and how deep, and he did it.

"Anne, if you want me to leave, all you have to do is say so. You don't have to turn into a raging bitch."

A good husband would have hauled off and punched the shit out of him, but Jamie only stared at the floor. Anne wavered for a moment before stalking into the bathroom and slamming the door behind her. The silence after she did it was very loud.

"Christ, you're an asshole," Jamie said.

Alex found a smile that made Jamie flinch. "Later, brother."

"Don't go, man. Not like this."

Alex looked at the bathroom door and back to his friend. Two quick steps would have taken him within reach, though what he meant to do if he took them, he didn't know. Instead he shook his head. "You'd better check on her, Jamie."

Jamie sighed and scrubbed at his eyes, face bleak. "Yeah. I guess I should."

"Don't feel bad about it," Alex said. "I am an asshole."

Jamie didn't want him to leave, though Alex had planned to simply pack his shit and go. He could afford a hotel. Fuck, he could afford to buy a hotel.

"Don't go, man. She'll get over it." This from Jamie in another conversation on the deck after Anne had gone to bed.

"She shouldn't have to get over anything." That Jamie couldn't see this fact infuriated Alex enough to raise his voice.

Jamie softened his and put his hand on Alex's shoulder. "She doesn't want you to go."

Alex drew in the smoke from his cigarette and watched it make patterns against the porch light. "What about you?"

"Shit, man. I don't want you to go, either."

"But you know I have to. Sometime."

"But not before..." Jamie stopped and took his hand away. When Alex looked at him, Jamie seemed to have grown smaller. His mouth turned down at the corners and his shoulders slumped. "Not before the end of the summer, okay? Just stay till then, at least. It's been a long fucking time without you, that's all."

Alex stubbed out his smoke and stood. "I'm going out. I'll see you later."

Jamie didn't protest, only shrugged.

Alex could have found a woman at any of the bars he went to. All it would have taken was a smile and a bit of charm, and he'd have been up to his ears in all the pussy he wanted. But he didn't want. He wanted something harder and different. The curve of a bicep, not a breast. The scratch of a beard. He found what he was looking for, but it wasn't what he really wanted.

Stumbling down a dark hall to an empty bed was the right choice, but his feet took him farther. Through the doorway to Anne and Jamie's room. To her side of the bed.

Whiskey had blurred his vision and given him fumble fingers that couldn't quite manage to get his zipper down without the effort of a grunt. Buttons flew off his shirt when he became too impatient to undo them and instead just ripped. Half naked, he stood over Anne in the darkness and waited for her to scream.

She reached for him, instead, and drew him in. This was forgiveness he didn't deserve, but he took it. He tightened his fingers in her hair and pulled until she looked up at him.

"Wake him up."

"James," she said at once. "Wake up."

"Jamie," Alex commanded. "Wake up."

Alex told them both what he wanted them to do, and they did it. Anne's mouth on their cocks. Their

hands on her body. Her mouth on Alex's, then Jamie's. Effortless pleasure built between them, and it was perfect.

Anne came first, her body tensing and twitching in the way that had become so familiar. She kissed them both, one and the other. Jamie came next with a grunt and groan, and Alex just after that.

His hand had slid to the back of Jamie's neck. Orgasm pushed them closer together. With his eyes closed, it could have been any mouth he sensed close to his lips, but Alex knew it was Jamie's mouth. Not Anne's. She was no longer a bridge between them but an open door.

A door he once more couldn't go through.

Alex opened his eyes and let go of Jamie, who looked dazed. Alex pulled away, retreating from the almost-kiss.

"Alex," Jamie said.

Alex pushed them both away. Whiskey rose up, burning his throat and he stumbled for his clothes, heart pounding and stomach churning. He fled down the dark hall to the bathroom where he got in the shower without waiting for the water to get hot.

Faggot.

Fucking fairy faggot queer.

The words echoed in his brain, said in Jamie's voice. He'd been drunk and angry, but that didn't matter. Alex had heard worse. It hurt, coming from Jamie, but he understood it. Jamie, at least, knew him.

What, I'm not good enough for you? You have to get it from some random faggot, is that it? You can fuck some guy up the ass but you can't be with me?

Alex hadn't said then what he could never say now. That no matter what Jamie thought he wanted, it would never be what he would have. A fumbled jerk-off or hesitant cock sucking couldn't take the place of real, true friendship. It couldn't take the place of love. And Alex didn't want it to.

Anne was the one who came after him. She stepped into the now-hot water and cradled him. He held her tighter than he deserved to.

"I didn't know parents could really love their kids until I met the Kinneys," Alex said. "My old man's a mean bastard when he's sober and a nasty fucker when he's drunk, which is most of the time. He broke a wooden spoon on my ass, once. Then he switched to the belt. I started fucking guys because I knew it was the one thing that would send my old man into a stroke."

"What did he say when he found out?"

"Nothing. I never told him." He looked at her through the veil of falling water.

"Why not?"

Alex's smile hurt his face. "Because I knew he'd hate me. But at Jamie's house, everyone was nice. All the time. Mrs. Kinney made cookies. Mr. Kinney played ball with us boys. They took me in and made

me feel like they loved me, too, because I was Jamie's friend. They threw birthday parties for me when nobody else remembered. They picked me up from work when it was raining so I didn't have to ride my bike. I practically fucking lived in their house for four years, until Jamie went away to school. Four years, Anne. And the day after Jamie left, I went over there to see if Mrs. Kinney wanted me to run any errands for her. I got my first car, see, and I wanted to be able to go to the store for her. If she needed."

"She didn't."

He took a long, deep breath. "She opened the door and didn't let me inside. She told me that James wasn't at home, and I should come back when he was. And she shut the door in my face."

"What a..." Anne bit off the sentence.

"I never told Jamie. When he came home, I went over there like nothing was wrong. But when he went back to school, I forgot they even existed. If I saw them around town, and I did, I looked the other way. Jamie never knew. I never told him."

"I'm sorry, Alex."

"Jamie's the only person in my whole fucking miserable life who ever made me feel like I was worth a goddamned thing. When you asked me if I love him...how could I not love him? Jamie's the only person who ever made me understand what it was like to love someone. From the first time I saw him in that fucking pink alligator shirt with the collar up, I think I loved him."

Alex got up and turned off the water. He grabbed two towels and they got out of the shower, clothes dripping. He sat on the toilet while she wrapped one around herself.

"When I went to see him in college to tell him I was leaving the country, I wanted him to ask me to stay, you know? To have one person want me not to go. But he was excited for me. Told me he was proud, thought this would be a great chance for me to make something of myself. We both knew I'd never be anything in Sandusky. Never get a good job. But I still wanted him to ask me to stay here. So I told him the truth, all of it. That the guy giving me the job wasn't just somebody I met, but somebody I was fucking."

"And he got mad. You fought. I know."

A small smile that had little to do with humor curved his lips. "I don't think so. When you told me he'd told you the story, I thought you got it. You understood. But I don't think you did."

"So, tell me."

"We got shit-faced, and I got what I wanted. He asked me not to go. He got mad, yeah. He wanted to know how I could take it up the ass for somebody else, how I could fuck just...some guy. That's what he said. How could I fuck some guy. How could I kiss some guy. And he tried to kiss me."

She studied his face, looking again so deep he knew there was no way she couldn't understand him. "He didn't tell me that."

Alex laughed. "Jamie couldn't hold his liquor. He tried. I didn't let him."

"Why not?"

“Because,” Alex said. “Jamie’s not...that’s not him.”

“Obviously it is.”

He shook his head. “No. I don’t think so. He’s not going to suddenly come out of the closet. He’s not queer, Anne. And I loved him, yeah, but not...not in a way that would end up being very good. For either one of us. I’m a fuckup. I can’t make things work. And I didn’t want us to screw trashed out of our heads and lose everything we had.”

“And the fight?”

“Oh, we had it. He punched me in the face and called me a fucking fairy faggot queer. We both hit the coffee table, and he got tore up. I took him to the E.R. The rest is the same.”

“And you left for Singapore.”

“I went back to the Kinneys once before I left,” he said. “I wanted to find out how he was. Mrs. Kinney told me I wasn’t worth the dirt under Jamie’s shoes and that I should consider myself never welcome in their house again. I’d known she didn’t like me, but I’d never realized until then that she hated me. I don’t know what he told her, but it was enough to make her crazy.”

She smoothed his hair off his face. “Alex. I’m so sorry.”

“I wanted to come to your wedding. I could have. I could’ve taken the time, no problem. But when it came right down to it, I didn’t think I could see him again for the first time in so long walking down the aisle. So I waited, sent a gift.”

“It was very nice. We still have it.” She smiled.

He smiled, too. “I sent him a card. We kept in touch. I ended up here. And once again, I’ve fucked it all up.”

“No, you haven’t.”

He reached to put his hand on the back of her neck, to pull her just a bit closer. Their foreheads touched. She closed her eyes, waiting for a kiss that didn’t come.

“I didn’t count on you.”

A small, hitching sob leaked out of her. “I thought you—”

“Shh.” He put his arms around her, no longer wanting to hurt her even if it was better in the long run.

“What are we going to do?” Anne whispered.

“Nothing.”

“We have to do something.” She pulled away to look at him, to cup his cheek. “This is something.”

He pulled away. “What you and Jamie have is something. This is just...nothing, remember? A little

summer fling. I'll leave. You'll forget it ever happened."

"No. I won't. He won't, either."

Alex tried a smile. "You'd be surprised what Jamie can forget when he wants to."

"I won't forget," Anne said fiercely, a sheen of tears in her eyes. "I won't ever forget."

He kissed her forehead. "Yes, you will."

"Will you?"

It was all too much. There was too much there between them, layers he hadn't expected. Like the surface of the lake, clear to a point and murky below it, and he was treading water without knowing what lay beneath. He was a disaster, a mess, and he could not let her choose him. He had to walk away.

He kissed her forehead again, softer this time. "Anne, I already have."

Then he got up and left her alone.

John Kennedy pushed the coffee pot across the diner table toward his son. "Drink up. It's on me."

"I can pay for it, Dad." Alex filled his mug with the black, bitter coffee and added sugar and cream.

His dad snorted. "You drink your coffee like a pussy."

Alex didn't let that get a rise out of him. Compared to some of the things his dad had said in the past, this was the equivalent of a hug. They drank their coffee in silence broken by the clatter of forks on plates and low conversation.

"You got another one of those?" His dad gestured at the pack of Marlboros in Alex's breast pocket. "Your mother got me quitting all kinds of shit."

Alex gave his dad the pack. "You can have it."

His dad quirked a thick, gray eyebrow. Alex swore to himself if his hair ever started to grow as wild and ungroomed as his dad's, he'd shave himself bald. His dad sucked in a long, grateful drag before he started coughing and pounded out the cigarette.

"Fucking things," John said morosely. "They're killers."

His dad sat back in the booth and stared at him while Alex stared back. It had been a long time. He'd spoken to his parents on the phone and kept in touch with his younger sisters, but that wasn't the same.

"Listen," his dad said suddenly, as though he couldn't bear the silence. "I wanted to say...I'm sorry."

Alex tensed his jaw on the words threatening to spill out. Instead he said lightly, "For what?"

"For being a fucking drunken asshole to you," his dad said so sincerely there was no question he meant



every word. "I've been sober, God willing I should keep it up, for five years."

Alex blinked, years of built-up anger trying to surface and sloughing away at this unpretentious and simple honesty. "Dad—"

His dad held up his hand. "No. No, listen to me, boy. I know I've been an awful fucking father to you and your sisters, and a shitty fucking husband to your mother. But, God willing, I've changed. And I'm trying to make amends. So I'm fucking glad you came back here, son, so I can tell you this. That's all."

His dad nodded, that gesture familiar in the way the apology was foreign. Alex didn't point out that although he hadn't kept in touch with his family, he'd always made sure they got their monthly checks. They always knew where he could be found. If his dad had really wanted to make amends he might've done it long ago.

"It's okay, Dad."

"How about you?" His dad said, almost as an afterthought. "You good?"

"Um... yeah. Sure. I'm good." He'd told his dad about selling Transcom but not about much else. They walked to the cashier and though his dad had said he was going to pay, Alex pulled out his wallet and paid the tab.

"Got a special lady in your life?" In the parking lot, his dad nudged him with a grin showing teeth that had had a lot of work done.

Alex looked up into late-summer sunshine, squinting against the glare. A breeze made the day less of a scorcher than it might have been, otherwise, but sweat trickled down his back anyway. He looked at his dad, who'd always seemed so big but had shrunk.

"No, Dad. No special lady."

"Don't wait forever," his dad said with another nudge. "Your pecker'll fall off. Well, maybe you'll stop over to the house before you head out of town. I'm sure your mother would be glad to see you."

"I will," Alex promised.

He stood in the parking lot for a long time after his dad drove away. There should have been more to it than that. A tearful embrace would have been too much to ask for, but maybe a handshake or something honest.

Not everything changes.

"Man, of all the places you could stay, why are you holed up here?" Jamie looked around the room, which had been remodeled but would always be small. "Fucking Breakers hotel? C'mon."

The Hotel Breakers was Cedar Point's oldest property, right on Lake Erie. Alex used to unclog its toilets and put down sawdust on the puke spots when little kids had too much fun at the amusement park. Now he was staying in its most expensive room and ordering room service every day. Jamie wouldn't get it if Alex tried to explain, so he didn't.

“Everything work out okay with Claire?”

Anne’s sister’s husband had run up a bunch of gambling debt and put them in the hole to the tune of almost a hundred thousand dollars. Jamie had asked Alex for a loan and Alex, who was by no means any sort of humanitarian, had given it. He had fuckall else to do with all that money.

Jamie nodded. “Yeah, man. Thanks for the money. It will help her a lot. Anne wanted me to thank you.”

Alex laughed and looked out the window to the lake beyond. “Yeah, right.”

“Listen. I could talk to her. If you wanted.”

Alex flicked Jamie a glance. “Why would I want you to do that?”

Jamie looked uncomfortable, and Alex tried to find some pity for his best friend. Very little of it rose to the surface, so he dug deeper, trying to imagine what it must be like for Jamie, the peacemaker, to deal with his pissed-off wife. Alex tried but couldn’t quite manage more than the barest of sympathy.

“It’s better this way,” he said when Jamie didn’t answer.

Jamie fidgeted foot to foot and scrubbed at his hair. Then he sat so heavily on the end of the bed it creaked and rocked against the wall. He buried his face in his hands, shoulders hunching, and let out a low groan.

“I think...I think she’s going to leave me. She says she’s not, but fuck...” Jamie’s voice trailed off, strangled.

Alarmed, Alex turned and went to the bed. He put his arm around Jamie’s shoulders. “She won’t.”

“She says she won’t. She says...she loves me.” Jamie’s voice, muffled behind his hands, broke. His shoulders heaved again. “But I wouldn’t blame her if she did.”

Alex wouldn’t have, either, but he kept his mouth shut on that truth. “Shh. She loves you.”

“She loves you,” Jamie said without a hint of accusation.

Pain speared Alex’s heart, sharp as a blade. “No. She doesn’t.”

Jamie looked up at him, expression agonized but eyes dry. Alex had never seen his friend look bleak. “You were right. I should’ve just told her from the start.”

Alex didn’t wish Jamie had listened to him. Then it might never have happened at all. “Too late now, brother.”

“Alex...”

Jamie almost never called him by name. It was always man, or buddy, or dude, or bro. Now his voice drew out the syllables and dragged on the consonants, turning the name into a plea.

“No, Jamie.” Alex shook his head and would have moved away, but Jamie’s work-worn hand gripped

his wrist.

Jamie kissed him.

Alex, ready for it, didn't open his mouth though Jamie's parted lips gusted hot breath over it. Jamie shifted and held him close though Alex was no longer trying to get away. He felt the wet probe of the tip of Jamie's tongue and couldn't fight it.

For all the years spent imagining it, the kiss was harder than it should have been. Jamie shook against him even as his tongue swept inside Alex's mouth. Jamie's taste reminded Alex too much of Anne.

Jamie put a hand on Alex's thigh, high up. Leaning, breathing, kissing, it seemed the embrace when on forever, but at the touch, so close to his prick, Alex put away. He jerked his wrist from Jamie's grip and slapped his hand down on his friend's to keep it from moving higher.

"No, Jamie," Alex said again, softly, their mouths still so close they almost touched with every word.

Jamie withdrew a little. "Why not?"

Alex ran his hand over Jamie's hair, memorizing the thickness of each soft strand, and anchored Jamie to him with a hand on the back of his neck. He put his forehead to Jamie's, eyes closed for half a heartbeat. Then he pressed first his lips and then his cheek to Jamie's so he could speak directly into his friend's ear.

"Because I love you too fucking much. Because things would change if we did this, and not for the better. You know it, too."

Jamie put his arms around him, his face buried against the side of Alex's neck. "I fucking ruined it all."

"No. Not all of it. You'll always be my best fucking friend, Jamie."

They held each other, tight, without any of the fake backslapping or arm-punching that had always punctuated every embrace they'd ever had without a woman between them. And then, Alex pulled away. Jamie blinked, face red, and his fists clenched in his lap.

"Go home to your wife, Jamie. Everything will be all right."

Jamie nodded and stood on unsteady legs, but though it looked as though he might fall he made it to the doorway without stumbling. Alex watched him go. He heard the dry, hard click of the door locking as Jamie closed it, but Jamie didn't look back.

When the knock came at the door, Alex knew who had to be on the other side. Jamie wasn't answering his calls. It could only be one other person. "Does Jamie know you're here?"

"Yes."

"He does?" Surprised, he couldn't meet her eyes. "Fuck."

"Exactly."

He looked at her then, startled at her calm response. He tried to speak, but had no words. The world shifted under his feet and he could only concentrate on standing still.

Anne's fingers eased open the buttons of her shirt. "I have to know something, Alex. Do you want to fuck me?"

Fucking Anne was the least of what he wanted from her. He couldn't speak, could only watch as she shrugged out of her shirt and then her skirt. Her clothes fell to the floor and she stood before him in only a set of soft, simple cotton panties and bra.

She held open her arms. "Do you?"

He grabbed her without thinking, and she gasped. "Is that why you're here?"

"Yes. It is."

He couldn't stop himself from pulling her against him. He'd felt her there before, but this was different. Everything had changed, and Alex wasn't sure he could stand to stop himself yet one more time from doing what he really wanted.

She smelled so fucking good he wanted to cry. His cock thickened, pressing the front of his jeans. "Jamie's my best friend."

"He's my husband."

With a helpless groan he pulled away to look at her. "Why, Anne? Why now?"

"Because I want to. Because you're going away."

Jamie thought she was going to leave him, though she'd said she would not. Anne pushed Alex's shirt from his shoulders, then slid her hands over his bare chest. His skin humped into gooseflesh. She wasn't going to leave Jamie, and Alex knew it. But he also couldn't find the strength to stop her when she pressed her face to his chest, just above his heart.

"Because I have to let you go," she said against his skin. "You have to go."

He did have to go. He held her close, his fingers tracing the bump of her shoulder blades. "I'm going. It's better this way."

Anne, as far as he knew, had never lied to him, and she didn't now. "It's not. But that's okay."

She drew his face to hers and kissed him. She unzipped his jeans and reached inside to find his already hard prick. He said her name and nothing more, and then she pushed his jeans down to the floor.

On her knees, she took him into her mouth. The wet, slick ecstasy of it was familiar and strange at the same time. He knew her touch but there was something different in it now they both knew it wouldn't have to end with this.

He looked down. She looked up. He took her hand and led her to the bed, where he laid her down to kiss every part of her. She made the noise he loved, and he had to smile.

“I know how to touch you.”

“Yes. You do.”

“I want to hear you make that sound again,” he told her and moved up her body to suck first one nipple, then the other.

Desire might have made him fast, except he wanted to hold on to each of these moments, knowing they were the last. The texture of her hair, unbound and tumbling around her shoulders. The flavor of her skin and the taste of it. The smooth, cool tightness of her nipples and softer warmth between her thighs. He memorized every part of her so he could take the memories with him and leave the rest behind.

His cock throbbed, aching with the need to be inside her. They shifted on the bed until he rested between her legs. The head of his erection nudged at her. Heat and wet welcomed him, drew him in. His arms, supporting him, trembled as he eased inside her and she shifted her hips to take him deeper.

Everything had always gone deeper with Anne.

He wanted to move fast and forced himself to slowness. In. Out. Half a thrust at a time to make it last. Anne came, her body going tight around him. They kissed, mouths biting and sucking at each other, and still their bodies would not come down from the pleasure building up.

He lost track of her orgasms, unable to count when all he could do was focus on his own impending climax. He licked her mouth, looked into her eyes. They moved together and it was so fucking good it didn't seem real. When she came again, he joined her. Pleasure roared through his veins and left him blind.

Afterward, hands linked side by side in his big hotel bed, they lay silent. After a few minutes Anne got up and went into the bathroom without a word. He wanted to call her back, not to make love to her again but to tell her he didn't want to leave. That even though it was for the best, he didn't want to go.

When she came out of the bathroom she wore a different face. She'd combed her hair and fixed her makeup. She looked at him with different eyes, and he hated feeling as though all she saw was the surface.

“Goodbye, Alex. I hope you'll be happy.”

She had her hand on the doorknob before he got the balls to speak.

“Anne.”

She stopped but didn't turn. He didn't want to make this harder. He didn't want her to regret this. But Alex was tired of lying.

“When I said Jamie was the only one who'd ever made me understand how it could be to love someone...”

She looked at him then with tears sliding in silver tracks down her face.

“...he wasn't the only one.”

She closed the door behind her.

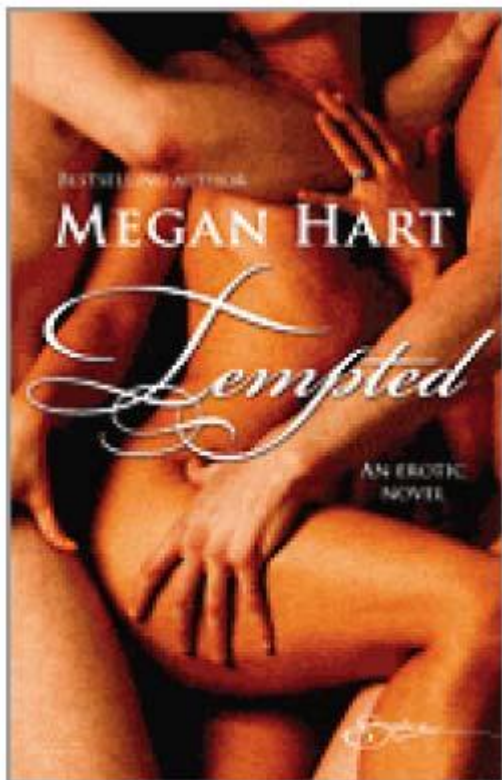
He did not go after her.

When he went to the window to stare out at the water and sand below, he saw her. The water, dark and choppy, had wet the bottom of her skirt. She didn't look up to the window. She didn't see him watching.

It was the end and he couldn't decide if the truth had been worth telling. All he knew was that it was time to go. Because sometimes doing what was best for someone you loved was more important than taking care of yourself. Because sometimes the things that were never meant to last were what ended up mattering the most.

Because sometimes even a door that's always been open has to close.

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Everything Changes

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