

ELLORA'S CAVE EXOTIKA



CAT GRANT
The First
Real Thing

The First Real Thing

Cat Grant

My name's Cameron. And I'm a male escort. I'm the best, and most expensive, at what I do. I have one rule—never let anyone in.

In five years of hooking I've never picked up the wrong guy. But when I met Toronto ad man Trevor Barclay in a Manhattan bar, his soft green eyes and shy smile drew me right in. When I discovered the error I had made, I should have written it off as a mistake and moved on. But memories of the steamy encounter we shared in his hotel room continued to haunt me.

I never should have agreed to see him again, but from that very first night he worked his way under my skin and into my heart. I can't stop thinking about him. But how can I tell him the first man he's been with in sixteen years sells himself for a living?

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

The First Real Thing

ISBN 9781419930577

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

The First Real Thing Copyright © 2010 Cat Grant

Edited by Grace Bradley

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication September 2010

The terms Romantica® and Quickies® are registered trademarks of Ellora's Cave Publishing.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

THE FIRST REAL THING

Cat Grant

Dedication

For my staunchest supporters, the Monterey Bay chapter of Romance Writers of America.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Lynna Banning, Kimberly Gardner, Angelia Sparrow and Aleksandr Voinov, for outstanding beta services. And also to Storm Grant, for helping me brainstorm this story.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following workmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Armani: GA Modefine S. A. Corporation

Coke: The Coca-Cola Company Corporation

Frisbee: Wham-O, Inc.

Gaggia: Gaggia S. R. L. Corporation

Glenfiddich: William Grant & Sons Limited

iPod: Apple, Inc.

Porsche Boxster: Dy. Ing. h. c. f. Porsche Aktiengesellschaft

Prada: Prefel S. A. Corporation

Ralph Lauren Luxury Oxford: PRL USA Holdings, Inc.

Rolling Rock: Anheuser-Busch, Inc.

Sapporo: Sapporo Holding Limited Corporation

Starbucks: Starbucks U.S. Brands

Wolf: Wolf Appliance, Inc.

Chapter One

Friday, May 7th, 4:34 p.m.

Want to play a game?

Next time you're in some elegant upscale bar, take a look around and see if you can spot the prostitutes. I guarantee there'll be at least one or two.

The dark-rooted blonde in the short skirt getting loud and sloppy over her third martini? Desperate divorcée, maybe, but definitely not a hooker. No self-respecting pro would call attention to herself like that.

The swarthy guy with his shirt unbuttoned halfway to his navel, showing off way too much chest hair? Not unless you've jumped in a time machine back to the seventies.

It's not the bartender either, or any of the waitresses. Who in their right mind would sling drinks for minimum wage when they could be making three hundred bucks an hour?

Fact is, you've probably rubbed elbows with us more than once and you never had a clue. The real pros have a talent for blending in.

See the guy sitting at the bar, the one in the charcoal suit and crisp white shirt open at the throat? Dark hair, blue eyes. Well groomed, in shape. Attractive but not underwear-model pretty. Looks like just another business exec winding down after a long day, doesn't he?

That would be me. My name's Cameron, and I'm an escort.

Prostitute. Whore. Rent boy. Call me what you like, I won't be offended. I enjoy sex, and I'm good at it, but it's not the only service I provide. Most of the guys who hire me are just plain lonely. I'm there to fill the void for an evening or a weekend. Why shouldn't I get paid for it? It's a hell of a better living than waiting tables or slaving away in an office.

Now I sound like I'm trying to justify myself. I'm not even sure why I started this blog. I've never kept a written record of my working life before, but it's not like I've got anyone else I can talk to about it. My family doesn't know what I do. Mike's my only real friend, and thank God he doesn't judge me, but he's not in the life. He can't understand.

I've been hooking for five years—that's a long time in this business. First thing you learn is to turn off your feelings, turn on the charm and get the job done. All those hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold stories are bullshit. You can't afford to have a heart, not in this line of work.

Can't afford to let anyone in.

* * * * *

Six o'clock at the Park Regent Hotel bar. It's one of my favorite spots, even when I'm not working—elegant, quiet and low-key. Tonight they had a jazz trio swinging lush and cool. Took a minute before I recognized the song. *The Man I Love*. I chuckled at the irony.

It was still early, which was fine with me. I'd give my client his two hours then grab a leisurely dinner somewhere before heading home. A couple of years ago I would've skipped dinner and gone clubbing instead, but staggering home drunk at two a.m. had lost its appeal. It was fun being a party boy at twenty-five. At thirty it was too damn pathetic.

I sidled up to the oak-paneled bar and parked myself on a stool. The bartender came over and took my order—club soda, rocks, with a twist. No drinking on the job for me. Wouldn't do for a client to see me at anything less than my best.

It didn't take me long to spot him—one lone guy among a sea of couples, sitting at the opposite end of the bar, a cell phone glued to his ear. I got up and elbowed my way over, snagging the stool beside him the moment a slightly tipsy brunette vacated it. He nodded at me then turned away, continuing with his phone conversation.

There was a plain white envelope sitting on the bar, right next to his drink. I scooped it up and slid it in my jacket pocket. Discretion was vital when it came to handing over my fee in a public place. I didn't insist on payment up front, except for first appointments. Cut down on my chances of being stiffed and pretty much guaranteed that the client in question wasn't an undercover cop.

He talked for a couple more minutes, then hung up with a sigh and reached for his drink, downing half of it in one gulp. Not a bad-looking guy. Late thirties to early forties, a bit younger than most of my clients. Blond with a touch of gray at the temples. Nice green eyes. A rather calming shade of green, even if at the moment he looked anything but calm.

"Someone needs to tell your boss the five o'clock bell's already rung." I flashed him a smile. "Or can't he take a hint?"

He laughed then drained his glass. "I'm heading home tomorrow. They might as well get their money's worth out of me before I leave."

"Where from?"

"Toronto."

Not the answer he'd given me in his emails. But he'd also mentioned that he wanted "something different". Did he want to pretend this was a chance meeting? As fantasies went, it was a fairly harmless one, and after all, that's why I was here. I usually preferred getting the details ironed out ahead of time, but in this case I'd just have to wing it. "Nice city, or so they tell me. Never been north of Buffalo myself."

"That's not far from the border. Next time, keep driving."

"Maybe I will." The bartender came over and freshened our drinks. I picked up my glass and clinked it against his. "My name's Cameron, by the way."

"Trev Barclay. Trevor, actually, but...I prefer Trev." It was hard to tell in the bar's muted light, but I could've sworn his cheeks had gone pink. My gaze drifted down to his hands resting on the edge of the bar. There was a band of pale skin around his left

ring finger. Not terribly surprising. I saw a lot of closeted married guys. Which explained his skittishness.

Best to put him at ease before we adjourned upstairs to his room. “What sort of business brings you to the Big Apple, Trev?”

“Advertising. One of the larger New York agencies just bought out the company I work for. We’re coordinating efforts on a new campaign, so I had to fly down and caucus with the guys in creative.”

“Sounds stressful.”

“Yes and no. The meetings were routine, but I’m not fond of traveling. I never sleep well in hotels.”

“What, not even this one? The rooms are pretty plush... Or so I’ve heard.” I shot him my sexiest grin. “And the room-service menu isn’t bad either.”

He let out a nervous bark of laughter then chased it down with another sip of scotch. He had a pleasant laugh—not too loud or bombastic like a lot of guys, especially after they’d had a drink or two. But it was that soft, gentle smile of his that really got me. “Now that you mention it, I’m starving. Care to join me?”

I nodded and got up to follow him. But instead of making for the elevators, he strode over to the maître d’s podium at the entrance to the dining room next door. I hung back for a moment. He hadn’t mentioned dinner in his emails either. It might make our appointment run over the two hours he’d already booked me for, but we could always settle up accounts later. Besides, this hotel had a damn fine restaurant. If he wanted to treat me, I wasn’t about to say no.

Luckily we’d arrived ahead of the Friday-night rush. The hostess seated us at a quiet corner booth and handed us our menus. I scanned it quickly then put it aside, settling back on the overstuffed leather banquette. I’d have whatever Trev decided to order. Didn’t want to look greedy.

The waiter came by to take our order. Caesar salad, New York steak—rare for Trev, medium-rare for me—with all the trimmings and a bottle of cabernet. My belly rumbled

in anticipation, though I knew I'd have to pace myself. Sex on a full stomach was no fun.

The service here was superb. We had our wine and salad within minutes. I took a few bites, savoring the crisp lettuce dusted with shavings of parmesan. I'd intended to stick with water, but when Trev poured me a glass of the cab, I couldn't resist a sip. It exploded on my tongue in a smoky, fruity cascade that left me sighing.

"That good, eh?" Trev smiled at me over the rim of his own glass.

"Very. You've got a knack for choosing the right vintage."

"Not really. All I know is, white wine goes with fish and chicken, red goes with steak. Then I just pick out whatever's at the top of the list."

"Sounds like a good system to me."

His cheeks went pink again. Maybe it was the wine this time, but I didn't think so. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm a bit rusty at this. Flirting, I mean."

I smiled. "You're doing fine."

"Thanks. It's just...weird to be back at it again after so long." He stared down at his left hand. "My divorce was final a few weeks ago."

Not the first time I'd heard this story. No wonder he looked so tense. "That must've been rough."

"Actually it was a relief. Elaine and I hadn't been happy together for a long time. But then a few months ago she came home and told me she'd fallen in love with someone else. And that was that." He shook his head. "Sorry. Didn't mean to bore you with my life story."

He sounded regretful, even a bit resigned. Was there a hint of truth leaking through the pretense? "Don't worry about it. If you ask me, it sounds like you've earned an evening of relaxation."

"I agree." He knocked back his last sip of wine then refilled his glass. "But I've been wondering... There were plenty of other guys in that bar. Why'd you pick me?"

He really was enjoying this game, wasn't he? And to be honest, so was I. "You looked like you could use some company."

"Wasn't I on the phone when you came over and sat down?"

"True." I grinned. "But now you've got a flesh-and-blood person to talk to."

Our waiter chose that moment to whisk away our salad plates, replacing them with our entrées. My steak was done to an absolute turn, pink, juicy and tender enough to cut with a fork. I anointed the steamed asparagus tips that accompanied it with a dollop of butter, letting out a tiny groan of delight when the first bite hit my tongue. Jesus. Good thing I didn't eat like this every night or I'd spend my life on the damn treadmill.

Heavenly as it was, I only ate half before pushing my plate away. Trev soldiered on bravely for a few more bites, but when the waiter came to take away our plates and offer us dessert, we opted for coffee instead.

We sat in silence as we sipped our French roast, letting our eyes do the talking. We were simply delaying the inevitable, stretching out the anticipation. The crotch of my pants tightened as I watched Trev take a long sip of coffee before moistening his lips with the tip of his tongue. Then came that shy smile again. He was the kind of guy who probably didn't think of himself as sexy, but damn if that didn't make him even more appealing. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had this kind of chemistry with a client. Maybe it was all an act, but I didn't care. I couldn't wait to get him upstairs.

Trev signed the check and we slid out of the booth and strolled back to the lobby. He turned to me for a moment, looking like he was about to say something, but I grabbed his hand and led him over to the elevators. We stepped in ahead of another couple and Trev punched the button for the tenth floor. If we hadn't had company, I would've stopped the car and pushed him up against the wall.

Trev's hands shook so badly he nearly dropped his key card. I kicked the door shut, yanked off my jacket, tossed it on the bed then pulled him into my arms and kissed him.

The slow seduction's always been my best move. I'm good at painting the illusion of intimacy. Lots of gentle nips, licks and bites until Trev's lips finally parted. Then came the hot, delicious glide and slide of tongue on tongue and before I knew it, we were on the bed, making out like a pair of teenagers.

Usually I'm in complete control in the bedroom. That's what the client's paying for, after all. But tonight it was all I could do to shed my shirt and pants before Trev tore them off me. No matter how badly we both wanted this, I wasn't about to ruin an Armani suit.

Trev's gaze dipped to my crotch and *froze*. I'm pretty well hung. It's one of my prime selling points. There are nude photos of me on my website. Lots of them.

And yet, Trev's mouth fell open in surprise. "U-uh... Wow." He blinked, plopping onto the edge of the bed. "Looks like I won the lottery."

"You like what you see?"

"That's an understatement."

"Then why don't you get over here and show me?"

He approached me slowly, as if he were sleepwalking, naked lust written all over his face. His fingers brushed down my throat, my shoulder, across the smooth planes of my chest. His breath floated over my skin, warm and quick. Then he wobbled, and for a second I thought he might fall over. I caught hold of him and drew him close, one hand sliding up to stroke his hair. He smelled amazing, his spicy aftershave mixing with the scent of sweat and rampant need.

"S'okay," I murmured. "Take what you want. That's what I'm here for."

"I-I..."

"Would you like to suck my cock?"

"Jesus." It came out like a sob. "I haven't done that in...sixteen years."

If he'd been pretending before, he certainly wasn't now. The desperation in his voice caught at my heart.

I gave him a gentle nudge and he sank to his knees. His hands still trembled, so I had to hold onto my cock for him, guiding it to his lips. Out darted his tongue, licking the tip like a kid with an ice cream cone. It tickled.

Took him a few minutes before he worked the fat crown into his mouth. I liked the way it stretched his lips wide and made him breathe through his nose. "C'mon, lover, do it. Suck me down." I'd lapsed back into professional mode just in time, thank God. I called all my clients "lover". Kept me from blurting out the wrong name.

I'd expected him to be lousy at it after such a long dry spell, but amazingly enough, he did fairly well. He took as much of me as he could without choking, until the tip bumped the back of his throat. When he started to swallow, it felt so fucking amazing I almost lost it. Tempting though it was to let him finish me off, I wasn't sure I could get it up again after the wine I'd had with dinner. He was paying for *his* orgasm, not mine.

I tugged him to his feet and started to unbutton his shirt. His eyes went wide. "Don't you want me to—"

"I'd rather take care of you." Off came his shirt then pants and boxers, all tumbling to the floor in a haphazard pile. I was pleasantly surprised at how fit he was beneath the nondescript armor of his suit. Thickly built, but without that unsightly spare tire around the middle that plagued so many of my clients. Nice definition in his arms, chest and thighs. Obviously he made time to hit the gym every week.

I shoved him back on the bed and climbed up beside him, the smooth cotton duvet cool against my skin. Then I started to kiss his chest, following the crisp trail of fur down to his navel. As I ventured lower, his cock rose to greet me, moist and rosy-pink at the crown, encased in pale foreskin.

"What do you want, lover? Shall I fuck you with my big cock, or would you rather have my mouth?"

He levered himself up on one elbow, staring at my dick. It was pretty clear what he wanted and where he wanted it, but after a second or two he simply shook his head. "I-I'd love to, but...I don't think I can."

Fair enough. Maybe we couldn't fit my cock inside him, but my fingers and tongue wouldn't be a problem.

First I sucked him until he was good and hard, savoring the salty-bitter taste of his pre-come when I pushed back his foreskin to lick and nibble at the crown of his cock. Then I moved down, burying my face in his musky-scented scrotum before tilting back his hips.

Trev gasped at the first tentative swipe of my tongue across his puckered hole and drew his legs up farther. He had both hands twisted in the covers by the time I'd opened him enough to slide in one spit-slicked finger. His face had gone bright pink and he panted like a marathon runner.

God, he was tight. His hole gripped my finger. I pushed in a little deeper and he gave a jolt.

Last thing I wanted was to hurt him. This was supposed to be fun, not an ordeal.

But when I started to pull out, he shook his head. "D-don't stop. It doesn't hurt. Just feels a little...weird."

Obviously we needed a little help. "Be right back," I said, rolling off the bed to find my pants. I kept condoms and lube in the right-hand pocket.

I slicked up two fingers and slid them gently inside him. When I leaned over to take his cock in my mouth again, Trev's gasps turned to full-throated moans and groans.

He came within seconds, a gush of warm, salty cream exploding on my tongue. I took a few moments to relish the taste before I swallowed then pulled off gently. Trev gazed up at me with the glassy-eyed look of the well-fucked, smiled a dopey smile and went out cold.

I gathered up my clothes and went into the bathroom to get dressed. Splashed some cool water on my face, combed my hair. Wouldn't do to show up in the lobby sporting the just-been-fucked look, even if the dull ache in my balls reminded me I'd forgone my own orgasm.

Trev was lying on his side snoring when I emerged from the bathroom. I glanced at my watch, surprised to discover we'd only run a few minutes over. No point waking him to ask for more money. Clients didn't like clock watchers.

I pulled one of my cards from my wallet, put it on the bedside table and left.

I'd turned off the ringer on my phone before I'd entered the bar earlier that evening. Somehow I'd accumulated five messages – which was strange, since I didn't have any other appointments scheduled for tonight.

They were all from the same number too. A number that looked vaguely familiar.

And a voice that sounded pretty damn pissed off. "Where the hell are you? I've been waiting in this fucking bar for forty-five minutes!"

The next three messages followed in the same vein, capped off by the final salvo. "All right, I've had it. For the amount of money I'm paying, I don't expect to be stood up. You can tell Charles he'll be getting an earful from me tomorrow."

My stomach plummeted to the basement. My knees turned to water. What the *fuck*?

The elevator doors opened on the lobby. I wobbled over to the nearest chair, fishing in my jacket pocket for Trev's envelope.

But there was no money in it, only an airline ticket.

An airline ticket to Toronto.

Jesus. In five years I'd never picked up the wrong guy before. All those clues, and I'd ignored every one. How could I have been so bone-headed?

And there was still the real client to take care of. Charles would have my ass on a pike for this. I sucked in a deep breath and hit the redial on my phone. It rang five times before the line clicked on. "H'lo?"

"This is Cameron. I just got your messages."

An exasperated sigh, then, "W-what's the matter, did your watch break?"

"I'm sorry we missed each other. I've been here at the Park Regent all evening."

"Well, I didn't s-see you anywhere." He sounded fuzzy, indistinct. Half in the bag. Oh, wonderful. Just what I needed.

"Like I said, I'm sorry. If you'd like to schedule another appointment —"

"F-fine. I'm in room 1430. You c-can come up now."

I didn't usually do more than one appointment a night, but in this case I didn't have a choice. I probably still reeked of Trev. Why didn't I take a fucking shower before I left his room?

Hopefully this guy wouldn't notice. "I'll be there in ten." I rang off then got back in the elevator and rode up to the tenth floor. I stopped in front of Trev's door but hesitated before knocking. What exactly was I going to say? Best to shove the ticket under the door and walk away.

The door opened and there was Trev, wrapped in a terrycloth robe with the hotel's insignia stitched over the right breast. His hair was still damp. Even clean from his shower, his spicy, sexy scent tickled my nostrils.

"I picked this up by mistake when we were in the bar." I shoved the envelope at him. "Didn't realize it 'til just now."

He stared at it, then back at me. "Thanks, but why'd you leave? Did I do something wrong?"

"No! No, of course not. I just...lost track of time. Need to be somewhere else."

"Oh."

Talk about awkward. I could hear my watch ticking. "I should get going."

No sooner had I turned away when he added, "I'll be back in a couple of weeks. Is it okay if I call you?"

Now I could've kicked myself for leaving my card. At least it only had my name and cell phone number on it. He wouldn't look at it and realize he'd just had sex with a hooker.

"Sure," I replied and practically sprinted for the elevator.

Chapter Two

Saturday, May 8th, 6:15 a.m.

I've hardly slept at all. Still confused about last night and royally pissed at myself. I never make stupid mistakes like that.

So why did I?

Short answer—I liked Trev. I liked him from the moment I saw him. I'm a sucker for a guy with nice eyes and a terrific smile. And amazingly enough, he liked me too.

Sure, a lot of guys like me. They like my toned body and big cock. But I'm just a slab of meat to them, something they can order up like a pizza.

But Trev liked me for *me*, even if I didn't know it at the time. He liked talking to me, sharing my company. Hell, we spent more time lingering over dinner than we did fucking.

And as for the fucking... Jesus. I was his first time with another guy in sixteen years. That's one hell of a responsibility. But I made it good for him. When I saw that happy, sated look on his face, I knew I'd truly accomplished something.

It's the first real thing that's happened to me in a long time.

* * * * *

I went back to bed and managed to sleep a couple more hours until my phone woke me up. It was Charles. I almost declined the call but knew he'd keep on trying until I picked up. So I propped myself up on my pillows and hit Accept.

"I didn't wake you, did I?" he asked, his cheesy faux-British accent grating on my ears.

I glanced at the clock. Ten minutes before nine. "What do you think?"

"Lionel just called. Apparently there was a problem last night?"

"I got there late. I apologized. I thought he was cool with it."

"He also said you refused one of his requests."

"He wanted an SM scene. You know I don't do that anymore."

"Didn't he offer you an extra two hundred?"

"That's not the point." Sighing, I ran a hand over my face. Jesus. Awake three whole minutes and I already had a half-assed headache. "Besides, he'd had too much to drink. He wasn't up for anything."

"And whose fault is that?"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm not the one who left him sitting in the Park Regent bar for two hours."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Charles! It was an honest mistake. I said I was sorry. What more do you want?"

Stony silence, then, "I'll make you another appointment with him tonight. This time you'll do whatever he asks for, with no complaints. Understood?"

There it was, that contemptuous undertone he always took on whenever I balked at his orders. The one that whispered, *Ungrateful little bitch. And after all I've done for you!* Sure, he'd taught me everything I knew about the business. But whatever debt I owed him, I'd repaid ten times over. "No."

"*What* did you say?"

"I'm not letting some drunken jerk tie me up and whip me, not for any amount of money."

"Fine," Charles snapped. "You won't be getting any more business from me until this attitude of yours improves."

"Yeah, well, I'm doing fine without you or your damn clients. Don't bother calling me again. I fucking *quit*."

I switched off the ringer, tossed the phone on my bedside table and hauled my ass into the bathroom, where I washed down two aspirin with a fistful of water. Then, with

a sigh, I padded down the hallway to the exercise room. I opened the blinds to let in the morning sun, taking a moment to savor the warmth and peer down into the street below.

My apartment filled the entire top floor of a converted warehouse on Hudson. I'd bought it at a bankruptcy auction three years ago and spent the better part of the next year and a half renovating and redecorating. I'd installed a walk-in bedroom closet and knocked down a wall to combine the living and dining rooms into one large space. My kitchen now boasted restaurant-quality equipment, including a four-burner Wolf gas range, six-foot-tall stainless-steel fridge and an imported Gaggia espresso machine. Too bad I hardly ever ate anything but breakfast at home.

Plush, overstuffed leather couch and chairs in the living room. Thick Turkish rugs. Framed Neiman and Hockney prints. Top of the line home theater system, including forty-two-inch plasma screen. Walls lined with sturdy black oak bookshelves. I read everything. Mysteries. Science Fiction. Politics. History. Biographies. Even the occasional sex manual.

There's a closetful of Armani and Prada suits in my bedroom, and a king-sized bed with five-hundred-thread-count cotton sateen sheets.

Nothing but the best, right? Call me shallow, but I enjoyed my creature comforts. I'd worked hard enough for them, after all.

I did some preliminary stretching then hopped on the treadmill, dialing it up to a full run. Forgot my iPod this morning, but it didn't matter. I shut my eyes and let my body take over, jogging until sweat poured off me and the slow burn in my muscles escalated from exquisite to excruciating.

Hot water and soap never felt more like a baptism. I stood under the pounding spray until I felt like warm jelly. Then I toweled off, shaved and threw on my blue flannel robe before heading to the kitchen to feed the snarling, starving beast in my belly.

My housekeeping service had brought fresh groceries the day before, including my favorite breakfast—Ethiopian coffee and fresh sesame seed bagels with honey butter from Zabar’s. Nectar and ambrosia. I made myself a four-shot latte then sat down at the kitchen table to read the *Times* and *Wall Street Journal* from cover to cover. My clients liked good conversation as well as good sex, and that meant staying well informed.

It was closing in on eleven when my landline rang. Only a handful of people had the number. I grabbed it on the second ring.

“Hey, sugar, how’s tricks?” Mike’s gravelly Texas drawl rumbled in my ear. “I tried your work phone but it went to voice mail.”

“Sorry. Wasn’t in the mood to answer it after my convo with Charles this morning.”

“Oh shit. What now?”

“More of the same. I’ll fill you in on the details next time I see you.”

“Speaking of which, I’m gonna have to beg off our lunch date today.”

“Oh.” To be honest, I’d completely forgotten about it. “Hope everything’s okay.”

“Not really. Ted’s back in the hospital, so I gotta take over the early shift at the bar.”

“Jesus.” I sat up straight, immediately concerned. Ted Nolan and his partner Garrett were two of my oldest friends here in the city. Their Icon Bar on Eighth Avenue had become a second home to me during my days at NYU. After graduation, and before I’d met Charles, Ted had even hired me to tend bar part-time when I was between regular jobs. I owed him a lot. “Will he be all right?”

“I got no fuckin’ idea, sweetheart. He’s already been through three rounds of chemo and I’m not sure he can take another. Just between you and me, I think he’s ready to go.”

Oh God. It wasn’t like I hadn’t expected it, but still. “How’s Garrett holding up?”

“He sounded kinda shell-shocked when I talked to him about an hour ago. Poor dear really thought Ted was gonna beat it this time.”

I sucked in a breath. “Can I help with anything?”

“Just think good thoughts, I guess. For all the fuckin’ good it’ll do.”

Sighing, I put the phone on speaker and got up to set my dishes in the sink. “Look, there’s no reason we need to cancel lunch. Why don’t I pick up some sandwiches and come hang out for a while? Frankly, I could use the company.”

“Something wrong?”

My mind spun back to the huge fucking mess also known as last night. Even now it made my skull throb. “Yes. No. I don’t know. But maybe talking about it will help.”

“C’mon by anytime, sugar. Sister Mike’s ready to listen.”

I put on jeans and a t-shirt and headed out, taking a leisurely stroll to the Greek deli five blocks north. I loved this time of year, just warm enough to walk around without a jacket, yet not so hot that it made my shirt stick to me. The deli was crowded with lunchtime business, so I took a number and grabbed a couple small bags of chips while I waited. Stavros, the proprietor, smiled and waved me over when it was my turn. We chatted about baseball and the weather while he made a roast beef and Swiss on rye for Mike and a veggie wrap for me. After last night’s steak and this morning’s bagel, I needed to take it easy on the calories. Overindulgence wouldn’t look good in my expensive suits.

I walked a couple more blocks north until I flagged down a cab and rode the twenty-plus blocks up to Chelsea. Not cheap, but a hell of a lot safer than the subway. I was mugged outside the Eighth Street station my first year at NYU and my stomach still twisted up in knots whenever I walked past a subway station. Now I could afford to never set foot in that filthy hole in the ground ever again.

Barely noon, but the Icon was already open for business. With the exception of a few pathetic souls drinking their lunch, it was pretty quiet. It wasn’t a big place—only a dozen or so tables—but what it lacked in size, it more than made up in charm. Twinkling rainbow lights festooned the walls, along with framed photos of famous divas from the silent era to the present. Louise Brooks. Gloria Swanson. Dietrich. Harlow. Davis. Crawford. Liz Taylor. Cher. Celine. Madonna.

And one more, hanging over the bar in a special place of honor. Michelle, Mike's alter ego, in full regalia. My first night here I'd walked through the door and ran—literally—right into Michelle. I'd never seen a two-hundred-pound drag queen in a sparkly silver gown and Rita Hayworth wig before. He'd peered down at me from atop his three-inch heels and said, "Shut your mouth, sugar, unless you're looking to suck on something."

We'd been best friends ever since.

Today, however, he was just plain Mike. Jeans, black t-shirt sporting the Icon's logo, scuffed black leather wristband, long blondish-gray hair scraped back in a ponytail. Stubby cheeks, bleary hazel eyes. And the warmest, most welcoming smile I'd seen since last night.

I slid onto a stool at the far end of the bar while Mike got out plates and napkins. He inhaled his sandwich and both bags of chips in nothing flat, while I still nibbled away at my wrap. "What's the matter, did you skip breakfast?" I asked, barely holding back a chuckle.

He stared down at his plate as if he'd just noticed his food was gone. "I should know better than to let you order lunch. I'll never keep my girlish figure this way."

"I think that ship's sailed."

"Oh, fuck you," he retorted with a good-natured grin, then went over to take care of a customer waiting at the other end of the bar. He refilled his Coke and my water on the way back, setting the glass in front of me with an expectant look. "You wanted to talk about something?"

"I did?"

"You'd better. Otherwise I just packed on another five pounds for nothing."

I swallowed the last bite of my wrap, wiped my mouth and fingers and launched into my story. The whole damn thing, including my blowout with Charles this morning. Mike sat there gaping at me once I'd finished. I could see the wheels spinning in his brain.

"So...you picked up the wrong guy and you fucked him, but you wouldn't fuck the guy you went there to fuck. Now Charles is all pissed because you wouldn't fuck him. The second guy, I mean."

"Yeah, basically."

"Christ on a cracker." He knocked back a slug of Coke. "Jerry Springer's got nothin' on you."

Great. Now I wished I hadn't told him. "Thanks a lot."

"C'mon, sweets, you know I'm joking. So you gonna make nice with Charles and get back in his good graces?"

"I don't think so."

"Won't that take a bite out of your bottom line? No pun intended."

"I've got my regulars. Hell, I've gotten more business from my website in the past six months than I have from Charles. I'm sick of the guys he sends me. They always ask for something extra, something off the menu. Last month I had this guy who wanted to fuck me bareback and got really ugly about it when I told him no. Turns out, he'd told Charles that's what he wanted but Charles never said a damn thing to me."

"Maybe he thought you could handle the guy."

"And I did, but I shouldn't have to. Especially since Charles knows there are certain things I don't want to do anymore, like SM. The last client of his I let whip me left so many bruises, I couldn't work for a week."

"And here I thought you liked livin' the *vida loca*."

"Yeah, well...it takes its toll."

"Ever think about getting out?"

Talk about a loaded question. "Sure, but what else can I do? I've been out of the real job market for five years. Might as well be forever in this shitty economy. But I need to start considering my options, I guess. An escort's shelf life doesn't extend much past thirty-five. Middle-aged guys don't like fucking other middle-aged guys."

"I got a broom you can push here. Ten bucks an hour and all the beer you can drink."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Mike grabbed a fresh toothpick off the back counter and stuck it in his mouth. "What about that guy you ended up with last night? He sounds...different."

"Different, how?"

"Well, not like the assholes Charles sends you."

I gave him an exasperated look. "He's not a client. He thought we were out on a real date, for fuck's sake!"

"How'd that feel?"

"Weird," I admitted. "And I didn't even realize what was going on. If I had, I would've gotten up and left."

"Why? Didn't you say you liked the guy?"

"I did. I mean, I do."

"What're you gonna do if he calls?"

"He won't."

"How do you know?"

"Because guys like him aren't interested in guys like me."

Mike shifted on his stool, shaking his head. "Why are you so down on yourself?"

"Just being realistic."

"Bitch, please! You think you don't deserve to be happy? Even whores get nights off."

"Not tonight, they don't." I gave my watch a quick glance then slid off my stool. Time to get home and start lining up appointments. "Thanks for listening. Keep me posted on how Ted's doing, okay?"

"Will do, sugar."

I kept mulling over our conversation on the cab ride home. Maybe Mike understood my life better than I'd given him credit for. He'd certainly given me plenty to think about.

Chapter Three

Saturday, May 22nd, 10:13 a.m.

I'd intended to write this blog solely for myself, but it appears I've attracted a few readers. Thanks for your comments, and welcome!

Just FYI, there's a couple of things you should know.

First, Cameron's not my real name. Well, okay, it's not my *first* name. No professional escort—if he's smart—ever puts his real-life contact information out there on the 'net, or gives it to clients. I don't do in-calls and I don't hand out my home phone number.

Second, if you think you can track me down using details I've mentioned here... Well, think again. Yes, I really do live in a top-floor apartment in Tribeca, but so do lots of other people. And even if you do manage to find my building, it's got a state-of-the-art electronic security system and a doorman. Good luck getting past the lobby!

A few enterprising young men have asked to meet me in person to discuss how to get into the escort business. Sorry, I don't have time for that. But here's a thing or two I'll tell you for free.

If you're not gay—or at least bisexual—you won't make a living as an escort. Despite what those cheesy soft-core cable movies would have you believe, women don't like paying for sex. Affection is as important to the job as actual fucking. If you don't like kissing men or touching their bodies, this probably isn't the career for you.

Like any other job, it's not all fun and games. Sometimes you'll find clients you really click with and the time will fly by. More often than not, you'll have to fuck people you don't especially find attractive—and do it with a smile.

There are days when it's the best job ever. And there are days I'm reminded why it's called work—all the other four-letter words are taken.

How did I get into the business? As they say, it's a long story. Please don't do it the way I did. I was desperate, broke and hopelessly naïve, but there's no reason you have to make the same mistakes.

It was about three years after I'd graduated NYU with a bachelor's in English. Yeah, I know—glorified toilet paper. Anyway, I went through a whole slew of jobs, temporary and otherwise, trying to find my niche. I'd finally landed my dream job as an editorial assistant with a major New York publisher. Six months later, the company went bankrupt.

I started filling in a couple nights a week at the Icon. One night, in came this elegant-looking guy. He reminded me of a fortyish Jason Statham—tall, stocky and bald with pale gray eyes that skewered me like a laser. His white silk dress shirt hung open at the collar, showing off a tantalizing hint of chest fur. He had these big, gorgeous hands that looked like they'd have no problem tossing me around a bed.

He ordered a dirty martini and we ended up chatting. He was witty and charming, and he knew a lot about literature. His eyes played games with mine. I couldn't help it—I was intrigued. And turned-on.

I went home with him that night and he fucked me in every possible position. Then I fucked him. The next morning he put me in a cab and handed me some cash. I assumed it was just cab fare, but when I got out, I discovered he'd given me two hundred dollars and a card with his phone number on it.

In case you haven't already guessed, the guy was Charles.

Six weeks passed before I got up the courage to call that number. Charles took me to lunch and explained that he ran a male escort service catering to an exclusive, well-heeled clientele. Every now and then he went out on scouting missions, looking for new prospects. He thought I'd make a great addition to his "portfolio".

I didn't say yes right away. But when I found an eviction notice on my door a month later, I knew I had no other choice.

Charles took one look at me and smiled, as if he'd known I'd end up on his doorstep sooner or later. He sent me to a salon for a haircut and manicure. Then he went with me to the Armani boutique, where he bought me my first suit. I spent the night with him and the next day he sent me out on my first appointment.

He was both boss and lover to me for the better part of two years, and I wasn't the only one. I didn't find out until much, much later that Charles made a habit of "auditioning" his prospective employees before turning us out. I broke up with him after that but kept working for him exclusively for a couple more years until I decided to strike out on my own.

So yeah, told you I was naïve. With luck and five years of hard work, I've managed to land on my feet. But please don't go into this business out of desperation. I did a lot of things I'm not proud of in those early days, simply because I needed the money. Believe me, most stories like mine don't end happily.

* * * * *

Martin, one of my regulars, called this afternoon to book an overnight visit. I usually charged fifteen hundred, but for him I made it twelve. He got me all to himself from nine at night until nine the next morning and I got paid to eat two meals and sleep. A treat for both of us.

Honestly, I was looking forward to it. He was a cultured, fiftyish London financier who made frequent business trips to the States—your typical eighty-hour-a-week workaholic with no time for a real relationship. Always in a pleasant mood, never drank to excess or gave me any trouble. Best of all, he liked his sex brief and uncomplicated.

He'd booked his usual suite at the St. Regis. He sounded tired on the phone and said he'd prefer to order us room service. Fine with me. No need to get dressed up if we weren't dining in public.

Which didn't mean I wouldn't take proper care with my appearance. I showered and shaved then combed my hair and dabbed on a touch of Vetiver Original. I'd already laid out my black jeans, along with a dark blue silk Ralph Lauren dress shirt that made my eyes pop. Plain black Prada slip-ons completed my outfit.

I brought a bag along on these overnight appointments, large enough to hold a clean shirt and change of underwear, toiletries, a pair of sneakers and workout clothes, condoms, lube, a couple of sex toys and my iPod. Twelve hours was a long time and I wouldn't be asleep or otherwise engaged for all of it. Besides, anyone heading upstairs sans luggage was bound to attract attention.

My cab dropped me off a few minutes early. I strolled through the lobby toward the elevators, until I caught sight of Ryan, the concierge, waving me over to his desk.

Cab drivers and hotel concierges are an escort's best friends. They've sent me more business over the years than Charles and my website combined. Ryan was the one who'd originally pointed Martin in my direction. I slipped him a few bucks every time one of his referrals booked an appointment. Greasing the right palms helped keep me afloat.

"I've got a couple more prospects for you," he said *sotto voce*, smoothing down the front of his red hotel blazer, "but I'm out of your business cards."

"Sure thing." I got out my wallet and handed him a few, with a fifty tucked discreetly underneath. "How's it going tonight?"

"Slow." He let out a gusty sigh, running a hand through his short-cropped blond hair. Tall, about twenty-five, on the skinny side, freckles dusted across his nose and cheeks. Cute, but not really my type. "Looks like that's not your problem."

I laughed. "Thanks for handing out the cards. I'll catch you later."

Martin answered the door promptly, greeting me with a warm smile and a kiss on the cheek. "How are you, darling? It's been ages," he intoned in that rich, plummy accent I never got tired of listening to. Actually, it had only been about six weeks but I didn't see much point in saying so. To him it probably did seem like ages. He ushered

me inside and took my jacket and bag, as if I were the guest. He'd changed into his robe and slippers, his face still glowing pink from the shower.

It was the same luxurious suite Martin always reserved, with a spacious living room, bedroom and bath, decorated in tasteful, muted cream tones. There was a full bar. A sixty-inch flat-screen TV hung on the far wall, above a home entertainment system that put mine to shame.

Room service had already arrived, so we sat down to supper. He'd ordered a mixed green salad for me, an omelet for himself and fresh fruit for dessert, with a bottle of Veuve Cliquot to wash it all down. I passed on the latter and stuck with water instead. We chatted about current events and the stock market while we ate.

Then, once we'd pushed away our plates, Martin smiled at me and held out his hand. That was my cue to curl up on the floor by his chair as I had countless times before. I felt his fingers card through my hair, heard his bone-weary sigh as he allowed himself to unwind.

"Rough week?" I murmured.

"Absolute fucking murder. After twenty-odd years of doing this, you'd think it would get easier. Well, you'd be wrong." He chortled. "Does my heart good, having you here."

And that was what he was paying me for. To sit quietly and listen. To hold his hand and simply *be* here for him, the way a real lover would. To make him feel like he was loved and cherished, if only for a few hours.

"You don't have to think about it now," I said. "Sleep in tomorrow. Get some rest."

"I'm so bloody exhausted, I doubt I've got the energy to stagger in to bed."

"Don't worry, I'll make sure you get there."

We sat silently for a few more minutes. Then I got up, circling around to the back of his chair to massage his neck and shoulders. Took a while before he finally relaxed,

melting under my fingers like warm butter. For a moment I thought he'd actually nodded off.

"C'mon," I whispered, tapping him gently on the shoulder. "I think you're done."

He got out of the chair under his own steam, but, true to his prediction, I had to loop his arm around my neck to help him into the bedroom. He was naked under his robe. I pulled the covers back and he climbed in, rolling onto his soft, ample stomach with a grunt. One eye opened, peering woozily up at me. "You'll be joining me, yes?"

"Give me five minutes." I gave him a kiss then darted in the bathroom to brush my teeth and get undressed. I wasn't sure he'd be up for anything, but I grabbed my supplies just in case, and a bottle of lotion. I'd forgotten my massage oil, so this would have to do.

I couldn't tell if he was asleep or not until I crawled in beside him, shivering at the first touch of the cool cream linen sheets. Then he turned his face toward me and smiled.

"Would you like me to continue the back rub?" I asked, running my fingertips lightly down his spine.

"Ohhh..." Shuddering, he let his eyes drift shut and nodded. "God, yes. That would be lovely."

I climbed on top, straddling him as I poured on the lotion and began working it into his muscles. There were dozens of small, tense knots in his neck, shoulders and upper back. I loosened them as best I could without pushing hard enough to cause him discomfort, then moved down, digging my thumbs into the small of his back.

Didn't take long before he began to squirm. I took that as my cue to cease and desist. I rolled off and Martin rolled over, facing me. His cock jutted out, already half hard. He glanced down at it as if he'd never seen such a thing before. "Well. Look what you've done."

A couple quick strokes of my hand coaxed him to full hardness. He caught me by the waist and pulled me close, kissing me deeply.

I kissed him back. "What's your pleasure this evening, lover?"

"If you must know... I've been fantasizing all day about plundering that sweet ass of yours."

I thought about it for a moment before nodding. Bottoming wasn't my favorite thing these days but I didn't mind doing it for Martin. He was always respectful, never too rough. And most of the time he was perfectly happy to lie back and let me do the driving.

Martin propped himself up on his elbows, watching while I got myself ready. I rolled the condom on him with my mouth, then maneuvered myself into position and sat down slowly, guiding him inside me. Luckily his cock was slightly below average size. I never had a problem accommodating him.

Three minutes from start to finish and another two for me to jerk off onto his belly. I went into the bathroom to wet down a towel and brought it back to bed to help him clean up. Then I went back in to clean myself up.

I thought he was asleep for sure this time, but no sooner had I slid back into bed but he moved over to wrap an arm around my waist. "Thank you, darling. That was wonderful."

I gave him a soft kiss on the forehead. He really was a very sweet man. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"I did indeed. Good night." And with that, he rolled over and started snoring.

* * * * *

I must've slept about an hour or so, because when I glanced at the clock radio on the bedside table, it was closing in on eleven thirty. Martin lay next to me, sawing wood louder than a Canadian lumberjack. I shut my eyes again, breathed deeply and tried to tune it out, but it wasn't working. So I dug my iPod out of my bag and went into the living room.

Overnights were my favorite kind of appointment, except for times like these when I couldn't sleep, and long hours loomed ahead with nothing to fill them. I stretched out on the couch, plugged in and selected a Mahler symphony. I usually found music soothing, but tonight my brain just didn't want to quiet down.

There was nothing on TV either, except inane late night talk shows or pay-per-view, which I didn't want to add to Martin's hotel bill.

Fortunately I'd planned for this contingency. The hotel had a twenty-four-hour gym, which I'd taken advantage of on numerous other occasions. A good thirty to forty minutes on the treadmill would help me work off some of this restless energy. I didn't need to worry about Martin waking up and discovering me gone. After half a bottle of champagne chased down by an orgasm, he'd sleep like the dead until tomorrow morning.

I darted back into the bathroom, put on my sweats and sneakers and headed down to the fifth floor. At this hour I wasn't surprised to find the gym deserted. I grabbed a bottled water from the locker-room fridge and jumped on the nearest treadmill, dialing up my favorite dance mixes on my iPod. Lady Gaga sang and I jogged.

I'd drained the full thirty-two ounces out of my water bottle by the time I was done. Soaking wet and finally exhausted, I stopped the machine, turned around and stepped off to find I was no longer alone. There was another guy using one of the weight machines on the far side of the room. He nodded at me. I nodded back then headed into the locker room for a shower.

I took my time, letting the hot water sluice away my sweat and loosen my muscles. I climbed out and knotted a towel around my waist, then remembered I'd neglected to bring along clean clothes to change into. Didn't matter. I'd spied a couple of hotel robes hanging on a peg in the gym. I could wear one back to the room.

The other guy walked in, wiping his sweaty face with a towel. It was Ryan. I hadn't recognized him from all the way across the gym. He must've just gotten off-shift. I'd seen other hotel employees using the facilities after hours. "Hey," he said, nodding to

me again before stripping off his damp t-shirt. I did a double take. That hotel blazer covered up a tight body – wiry and compact, with impressive muscle definition in his arms and chest.

Didn't take him long to notice me noticing him. He shot me a crooked grin. "Take a picture, why dontcha?"

Oh, Jesus. Last thing I needed was to get a rep as a peeping Tom. "Sorry."

"Whatever." He toed off his sneakers and socks before stepping out of his pants. My mouth fell open at the sight of his thick, meaty cock. He was almost as well hung as me.

Our eyes locked. Ryan reached down to fondle himself, squeezing the plump head of his dick. My mouth was already watering.

Then he said, "Wanna get your fifty bucks back?"

I laughed. "I'm easy, but I ain't cheap. Besides, I thought you were straight."

He shrugged. "I am. Most of the time."

"Let me guess – you're between girlfriends?"

"That obvious?"

"When you have to resort to cruising hotel guests, yeah."

"You wouldn't be my first. I've never charged them, though. Maybe I should start."

"Don't." I stepped closer to him, close enough for his sweat's musky odor to creep up my nostrils and send a hot flush pumping through my veins. "It's not as easy as it looks. Not everybody can handle it."

"Oh, I can handle it, all right. Question is, can you?"

No need to ask what he meant. His eyes were half dilated. His breath came in warm, jerky puffs. He was every bit as turned-on as I was.

I should have turned around and left, but I didn't. I sank to my knees and sucked him right there in the locker room. Anyone could've walked in, but the potential danger

didn't even register. I licked and slobbered and worked him over with my tongue until he grabbed my head with both hands and started fucking my mouth in earnest.

I opened up my throat and took everything he had, jerking myself off in time to his thrusts. He came a few seconds before I did, pulling back to deposit his creamy-bitter spunk onto my tongue. I, on the other hand, ended up spraying the floor. Not that I gave a fuck. It was ten times better than the orgasm I'd had with Martin.

He dropped onto a nearby bench like a sack of dirty laundry, huffing and puffing, his face red as fresh strawberries. "Sh-shit! You suck cock better than any girl I've dated."

"Guys know what other guys want." I stood up, still a bit wobbly myself, and wiped myself off. Jesus. I was all sweaty and sticky again. Might as well take another shower. "So where's my fifty bucks?"

He stared at me then started to laugh. "Good one, man."

"I'm serious."

"Aw, c'mon, I thought we were just having a little—"

"Fun?" Oh great. I knew I should've walked away before this went too far. Now he thought we were pals or fuck buddies or something. Best to disabuse him of that notion right now. "This is what I do for a living. And I've already given you a hell of a discount."

"Maybe we should see what my boss says about that. I mean, about you coming onto me and everything."

A deep, deep chill suddenly swept over me. "You reciprocated—and you brought up money first. Plus I'd rethink mentioning this to your boss, unless you want him to find out you've been promoting prostitution at this hotel. There's a pretty stiff prison term attached to that, no pun intended."

"If I go to jail, so will you."

"Don't be so sure. I've got a lot of well-connected friends, whereas all you have is a job I'm assuming you want to keep." I gave him a moment to digest that. "Now why don't you give me my fifty bucks and we'll call it even?"

"Okay, okay, I just..." Now he looked like he wanted to crawl through a crack in the floor. I could sympathize. But he shouldn't have tried to play a player. "I-I don't have it on me right now."

"Fine. I'll pick it up at the concierge desk in the morning."

Ryan, thankfully, was gone when I got out of my second shower. I put on one of the hotel robes, tucked my damp sweats under my arm and headed back up to Martin's room.

He was still snoring, but with his face half-buried in the pillow, it wasn't loud enough to keep me awake. Or so I hoped.

Christ on a cracker, to quote Mike. Well, at least I'd learned a valuable lesson tonight. Next time I got restless, I'd take a fucking sleeping pill.

* * * * *

I woke before Martin the next morning and ordered us a room service breakfast of Belgian waffles, fresh fruit and strong black coffee. When it arrived, I fixed him a plate and brought it in to him.

His nostrils twitched when I sat down on the edge of the bed. Then his eyes opened and he gave me the world's sunniest smile. "There's a lovely sight to wake up to."

"I thought you might enjoy it." I popped a plump raspberry in his mouth then leaned over to give him a kiss. I felt guilty for skipping out on him, even if he'd never find out about it. He'd paid me to stay with him all night and I hadn't given him his money's worth. Time to make up for that now.

I fed him his breakfast with my fingers, one sweet, sticky, drippy bite at a time. He ended up with maple syrup all over his chest and belly, which I licked off before taking care of the rest of him. My jaw still ached from Ryan's rough face fucking, so I sucked

him almost to the brink then led him to the bathroom to give him a luxurious, soapy jerking-off in the shower.

Afterward, we retired to the living room to have coffee and say our goodbyes. I was actually a bit sad to go. I liked Martin. He was a real gentleman. I wouldn't fuck him if he wasn't paying me, but I'd have a conversation with him anytime. In another life, I would've counted myself lucky to call him a friend.

When it was time to go, he walked me to the door and pressed a thick envelope into my hand. "I had a wonderful time, darling. As always," he murmured, giving me a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. "I'll call next time I'm in town."

I grinned. "You'd better."

Ryan wasn't working the concierge desk this morning but he'd left me an envelope with the same fifty-dollar bill I'd given him tucked inside. No note. I wasn't sure if that was a good sign or not.

With a shrug, I trudged out to the sidewalk to hail a cab. I was halfway home before I remembered to check my messages. There was a call from Mike, two from regular clients and one more from a number I'd never seen before. It wasn't a New York area code. No idea who it was from.

My thumb hovered over the Delete button, but I pressed Play instead.

The line crackled a bit, then, "Hi, it's Trev. Um...Trevor Barclay. We met at the Park Regent a couple weeks ago." Nervous chuckling. "You probably don't even remember me, but... Well, I'm just gonna say it. I can't stop thinking about you. I had a great time with you, and I'm back in the city on business next week. If you'd like to get together for coffee or something, give me a call."

My phone landed in my lap. I'd gone numb all over. I couldn't believe I'd heard what I just heard. This wasn't supposed to happen. He wasn't supposed to call. He was supposed to go home and forget about me.

But he hadn't. And I sure as hell hadn't forgotten about him.

What the fuck was I supposed to do now?

Chapter Four

Sunday, May 23rd, 11:37 a.m.

There's a reason I've been so successful in this business. I'm a slut.

Even before I started hooking, monogamy was never my default setting. Sure, I had boyfriends in college—several, in fact. But none of those relationships lasted longer than a few months. Everything was great in the beginning, surging along on the first blush of lust, fucking like bunnies and thinking it'd be that way forever.

Then, when reality set in and the sex wasn't so hot anymore, I'd inevitably get bored. Restless. I'd go looking for new thrills and I usually didn't have much trouble finding them. Just like last night.

I'm not long-term relationship material. I accepted that a long time ago. It's part of the reason I stopped trying to date outside of work.

The other part is... Well, not too many guys can deal with what I do. I can understand that. If the tables were turned, I wouldn't want my partner fucking other guys for a living. If that makes me a hypocrite, so be it.

I listened to Trev's message three times this morning before I finally screwed up the courage to call him back. I'd planned to tell him I didn't have time to meet him, but he sounded so surprised—and glad—to hear from me, I couldn't bear to do it.

He's flying in on Wednesday. I'm meeting him for coffee that evening at Starbucks, not his hotel. I don't want to be tempted to take it upstairs.

It's just coffee, right? Caffeine and conversation. I'll smile and make inane small talk and let him down easy. I owe him that much.

* * * * *

Trev was waiting for me at Starbucks when I arrived. I spied him sitting at a quiet corner table, sipping a venti something-or-other. His face lit up the moment he saw me. My stomach, on the other hand, was already twisted up in knots. I forced a smile and waved then stepped up to the counter to order my usual grande vanilla latte.

I'd dressed casually, in jeans and a plain black tank top, but maybe that wasn't such a great idea. Trev's eyes raked me up, down and back again as I approached the table. For a second there I thought they might pop right out of his head.

"Wow," he breathed. "You look...really nice."

So did he, actually. He was still in his suit, but he'd taken off the jacket and rolled up his sleeves, showing off muscular forearms dusted with light blond hair. Oh, God. Forearms were my weakness. Couldn't help wanting to feel his wrapped around me again.

"Thanks." I pulled out the chair opposite him and sat down. "Hope you haven't been waiting long."

"Only about ten minutes. I'm not too familiar with this neighborhood yet. Didn't take me as long as I thought to walk here from the Park Regent."

I took a tentative sip of my scalding-hot coffee. "I guess they're keeping you busy at work, huh?"

"That's putting it mildly. Good news is, the ad campaign I'm putting together is a go. So I'll probably be traveling here every couple of weeks 'til the end of the summer."

"Oh." I knew a hint when I heard it. This one dropped with all the subtlety of a falling anvil. "Well, congratulations. Unless, of course, you don't like spending time here."

"I'm not terribly fond of airplanes or hotels, but I like New York just fine." He smiled. "I like one particular thing about New York very well indeed."

The knot in my stomach jerked tighter. Time to get this over with. "I appreciate that. I really do," I said softly. "But I don't think I'm what you're looking for."

"I wasn't looking for anything. It found me. Or should I say, you did."

"Trev, listen—"

"No, please. Let me finish." He sucked in a breath. "I'm thirty-eight years old and I've been living a lie my entire adult life. But that evening we spent together... It really shook me. It made me confront feelings I've kept buried since I was in my twenties. And I realized I don't want to lie anymore. I want to be who I am. So I went home and told everyone."

I stared at him. "You told everyone about sleeping with me?"

"No, no, no. I mean, I..." He blushed, staring down into his cup. "You know."

"You came out to your family?"

He nodded.

"Because of what happened with us?"

He nodded again.

I sat back, stunned. I felt as if I'd just been whacked in the face with a baseball bat. "I hope it worked out okay."

"My parents were shocked, but they're getting over it. On some level I'm sure Elaine already knew. We didn't have much of a sex life for the last few years of our marriage. But she was still upset. I guess I can't blame her. I'd be pretty hurt too if I found out my partner had deceived me for our entire relationship. I was afraid of how my son Brian would react. He's just turned fifteen and boys are sensitive about issues like this at his age. But he just rolled his eyes and said, 'Duh, Dad'." Trev laughed. "Guess kids these days are born with built-in gaydar."

I knocked back another swig of coffee and hoped Trev didn't notice me fidgeting. I should've made some lame excuse and left, but I didn't. He'd drawn me in, just like that night two weeks ago. I couldn't go until I'd heard the rest of his story. "So how does a guy from one of Canada's biggest cities end up in the closet for most of his life?"

"Oh, I'm not originally from Toronto. I grew up in this teeny hamlet in the Northwest Territories. I didn't even know there were men who desired other men, besides me, until my freshman year at McGill."

"How come you didn't explore the lifestyle back then?"

"Fear, mostly. It was the nineties. Everybody was still scared of AIDS. I've never been the type to go partying or clubbing so I didn't meet many people. Oh, I fooled around a little. Blowjobs, hand jobs, nothing more involved than that. That evening we spent together was the most intense sexual experience of my life."

So he was practically a virgin. Jesus. "How'd you end up married?"

"I met Elaine in grad school. We clicked. She was the best friend I'd ever had. I think she knew I wasn't attracted to her that way, but it didn't stop her from falling in love with me. And I had myself half convinced that if I tried hard enough, I could fall in love with her too. One night we had too much to drink and nature took its course."

"She got pregnant?"

Trev nodded. "So we had a nice wedding. I got my MBA, got a job. We bought a house and for sixteen years we tried like hell to be happy. She loved me and... I did learn to love her, I really did. But it wasn't enough. We were both miserable. So a few years ago we gave each other permission to get our needs met outside of our marriage. And she did."

"But you didn't?"

He flashed me that shy, heart-melting smile. "Not until now."

I was flattered—and turned-on. Not to mention impressed. I couldn't imagine what it was like to come out at thirty-eight. Or to put your heart on the line to call up a guy you'd had a hot one-night stand with and invite him out for coffee. Trev was one incredibly brave guy.

I smiled back. "I'm guessing it's been awhile since you were in a gay bar?"

"Oh God, not since university."

Not only a near virgin in bed, but in every other way that counted too. Talk about a challenge. Still, I had a feeling I might enjoy it—and I knew he would. “Maybe we should do something about that.”

“What did you have in mind?”

My grin widened. “Got any plans this Friday night?”

* * * * *

Last Friday of the month was karaoke night at the Icon, and the place was packed. I grabbed Trev’s hand before stepping inside and we elbowed our way through the crowd surrounding the bar. There was a makeshift stage about ten feet away that they rolled out for nights like this. Mike swished and sashayed atop it in full, fabulous drag, belting out a soulful rendition of *Total Eclipse of the Heart*.

Trev had dressed for the occasion in jeans, a green polo shirt and lightweight black leather jacket. He looked so fucking adorable I had to force myself not to stare. I tried moving closer to the stage to give him a better look but he’d frozen in place, taking in everything with a stunned, slack-jawed expression. The music was so loud he couldn’t hear me until I leaned over to speak into his ear. “Takes your breath away, doesn’t it?”

He looked at me, then back at the stage, then at the décor and other customers, then back at me again. “It’s like a Halloween party on crack.” He grinned. “I love it!”

I chuckled. “C’mon, I think I see an empty seat at the bar.”

We snagged the stool just in time, straddling it with one ass cheek each, but had to wait a few minutes before JoJo the burly relief bartender got to us. We ordered two Rolling Rocks and turned our attention back to the stage, where Mike had pulled a couple of well-lubricated patrons up to sing with him. They bounced merrily along to Olivia Newton John’s *Physical*.

Trev bounced too, then started laughing so hard I was afraid he’d choke on his beer. “Th-thank you,” he said, once he’d finally caught his breath. “I haven’t had this much fun in ages.”

"And we just got here," I said with a wink.

"Well, I don't see how you could top this."

"Wait a few minutes."

Tonight's theme was apparently "Lamest Songs of the Eighties". Mike segued directly into *I Can't Fight This Feeling* and finished up by leading a raucous sing-along to Madonna's *Like a Virgin*. He then took his bows, passing the microphone over to a customer before sweeping through the hooting, hollering throng, blowing kisses and waving at his admirers like a true diva.

His eyes went wide under his sparkly false eyelashes the moment he saw me. "Hey, sweets. I thought you'd be working tonight."

I shot him a "shut up" look then nodded in Trev's direction. "This is my friend Trevor from Toronto. Remember me saying I might bring him by?"

"Oh yes!" He extended his big, beefy hand, now adorned with jungle-red press-on nails. "My God, you're even cuter than this one let on. I could slurp you up with a spoon!"

Trev blinked and shook Mike's hand. I guess by now he'd figured he should just go with it. "Thank you, Miss...?"

"Michelle DeVaux, of the Denton, Texas DeVaux's."

This time my beer almost went down the wrong way—until Miss DeVaux aimed a deadly glare at me.

"Or," he continued in his usual raspy, low-register drawl, "you can call me Mike."

I didn't think Trev's eyes could get any more saucerlike but they managed it. "Uh... Thanks for welcoming me to your establishment."

"Oh, I don't own the place. I just keep the natives entertained. Now if you'll pardon me..." He made a show of fanning himself. "I need to go change so I can give JoJo his break." Looking right at me, he mimed a "call me" gesture before heading off toward the office.

Which reminded me I still hadn't returned his call from last weekend. Shit!

Trev's hand slid onto my shoulder. "Everything okay?"

"Fine." I forced a smile. "You still having fun?"

"Well, actually... I hate to be a party pooper, but I've been up since five this morning, and —"

"Say no more. Let's go."

I hadn't realized how close it was inside until the cool evening breeze smacked me in the face. We dodged clusters of gawking tourists and tweaked-out club kids on our way to the corner, where we tried in vain to hail a cab. They all sped past us as if we were invisible. Typical Friday night in Chelsea.

"I had a really nice time tonight," Trev murmured.

I grinned. "You already mentioned that. Not that I mind hearing it more than once."

"My flight home's not 'til Sunday. I'd rather not have dinner alone tomorrow night."

I didn't answer right away. Fridays and Saturdays were my busiest work nights and I'd already put off a client who wanted to see me this evening. I hadn't taken two weekend nights off in a row in... Well, ever. On the other hand, Trev didn't come to town every week. And damn it, after all the years of hard work I'd put in, shouldn't I be able to take a freakin' couple of days off if I wanted to?

"Tell you what," I said finally, "I'll not only have dinner with you, I'll cook it myself."

"Are you sure? I don't want you to go to any trouble."

"It's not. Besides, after all the money I've spent on remodeling my kitchen, I should make an effort to use it every once in a while. Bring a bottle of red and we'll be set."

"Deal."

A long moment passed while we stood there staring at each other. Then Trev leaned in to capture my lips in a slow, sweet kiss. He didn't even use tongue but my knees still wobbled, every bone in my body turning instantly to mush. Not too shabby for a thirty-eight-year-old near-virgin.

It was over in a few seconds, but in that time I ceased to be the guy who sold himself for a living. In that moment I was just a regular guy like anyone else, standing on the corner kissing his date good night.

And damn if it wasn't the best feeling ever.

* * * * *

Saturday morning I spent a couple hours poring over recipe sites on the internet. I hadn't cooked in a while, so I was looking for a suitably impressive and tasty entrée that wouldn't take all afternoon to prepare. I picked *osso buco* with basmati rice and steamed vegetables as side dishes.

I did my morning workout and hopped in the shower, then it was off to the market. Veal shanks. Chicken stock. Fresh rosemary, thyme and parsley. Rice. Cauliflower, carrots and broccoli. I couldn't recall the last time I'd bought so many groceries, probably because I'd farmed out the chore to my housekeeping service. There was something calming, even meditative about pushing a cart up and down the aisles. I needed to do this more often.

And talk about sticker shock. Three pounds of veal wasn't cheap. Still, it was better than eating out at some overpriced hotel. More intimate too. I stopped to pick up a colorful spring bouquet of irises, daisies and daffodils from a sidewalk vendor, taking a sniff of their sweet scent before tucking them in my grocery bag. They'd look perfect on the dining room table.

I wasn't expecting Trev until five, so I rinsed off the veal shanks, seasoned them with salt and pepper and put them back in the fridge. Then I made myself a latte and sat down at the kitchen table to call Mike.

The line rang five times before he croaked "What?" into the other end.

"Hey, Michelle. Sounds like you had a fun night."

"Oh, don't I fuckin' wish. I didn't get out of the bar 'til almost three, then around six Garrett calls me in tears, so I had to go over and calm him down. Didn't get home 'til about an hour ago."

"Shit," I breathed. "I'm sorry, man. I had no idea."

"No reason you should. They sent Ted home from the hospital last week, by the way. Nothin' more they can do for him. If you want to say goodbye, do it soon. They're giving him a month at the outside."

"Okay, okay, I will. I'll go this week, I promise."

"They'll be glad to see you. Ted asks about you all the time."

I nodded before I remembered he couldn't see me. "What's going to happen with the bar?"

"Garrett'll have to sell it just to pay Ted's outstanding medical bills. He blew through the last of his insurance two rounds of chemo ago."

"You going to make an offer?"

"Dream on, sweetheart. I don't have that kind of cash."

"How much are they asking?"

"Two hundred and fifty grand, give or take."

I did some quick mental calculations. "If you can get a loan, you'll only have to come up with the down payment. That's usually twenty percent."

"So, fifty grand instead of two hundred fifty. Big fuckin' deal. I still don't have it."

"Well..." I sighed. "I've got about thirty thousand saved if you need it."

Stunned silence and then, "Thank you, sweets, but you know I could never take your money. Besides, isn't that your retirement?"

"What retirement? I'm not getting out of the business anytime soon."

"You could, if you wanted to rearrange your priorities. Speaking of which... That new boyfriend of yours is too adorable for words."

I laughed. "He's not my boyfriend."

"The fuck he's not. I saw the way he was lookin' at you. That's one smitten kitten."

"He'll get over that pretty fast once he finds out how many cocks I suck every week."

"So you're gonna tell him?"

Another sigh. "No point. It's not like we're serious. Not yet, anyway. But he is coming over for dinner tonight."

"And you're wasting time talking on the phone with me when you should be making yourself gorgeous?"

"And cooking dinner. I guess I'd better get to it."

"Have fun, sugar. Both of you."

The housekeeper had visited last week but I decided to do a quick cleanup anyway. I ran the sweeper, wiped off all the surfaces in the living and dining room, straightened up the magazines on the coffee table. I even put fresh towels in the bathroom and my favorite pale blue cotton sateen sheets on the bed. Best to cover every contingency.

The *osso buco* was pretty simple to prepare. Just brown the veal shanks, sauté them in the chicken stock and a cup of dry white wine, add the spices and let the whole thing simmer in a Dutch oven for an hour and a half. I took another shower while it was cooking, threw on a clean pair of jeans and a plain white cotton dress shirt.

Wasn't until I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror that I realized my heart was thumping like the backbeat to *Bad Romance*. Why the hell was I so nervous? It was just dinner. Our second dinner together, in fact.

Yeah, but the first one didn't count. This one did.

At a quarter to five, I put the rice on to boil and the veggies in the steamer. Got out my best bone china, silverware and crystal wineglasses and set the table. The afternoon

had turned warm, so I opened the windows to let in the breeze wafting up Hudson. Paced back and forth across the living room until the lobby buzzer sounded. I checked the video monitor to confirm that it was indeed Trev before buzzing him up.

He hadn't bothered combing his hair back this time. Either that, or he was just a bit windblown. Didn't matter. I had to fight the temptation to run my fingers through it as I ushered him inside, taking the bottle of pinot noir he handed me. Louis Jadot 2007. Not bad.

"You do know something about wine," I said, ducking into the kitchen for a moment to get the corkscrew. "I've heard about this vintage. It's supposed to be pretty good."

"Don't give me any credit. I just got what the guy at the wine store recommended."

"I appreciate the gesture all the same." I popped the cork before setting the bottle on the coffee table to let it breathe. "We should wait a few minutes before we pour it. In the meantime, how'd you like the dime tour?"

Took me about five minutes to show him the entire apartment—with the exception of the bedroom. I wasn't ready to tempt fate yet. Trev seemed impressed with both the workout room and the kitchen. He found the espresso machine especially fascinating. "I've never seen one of these outside of a restaurant before. You must really love coffee."

I shrugged. "Cheaper than going down to Starbucks every time I want a latte."

"That's one way of looking at it, I suppose."

Our eyes met for a long, awkward moment. "Well, um...the pinot should be ready to pour by now," I said, gesturing for us to go back in the living room.

"Just out of curiosity, where did you learn so much about wine?" He relaxed back on the overstuffed leather couch, one arm stretched out along the rear of it in open, obvious invitation. He wore jeans and a dress shirt, pale lilac this time, unbuttoned far enough to show a tantalizing triangle of skin. I wanted to crawl up next to him and bury my face in the hollow of his throat.

"Um, just picked it up over the years, I guess." From Charles and several clients who happened to be connoisseurs. But Trev didn't need to know that. I darted over to the dining table, picked up the wineglasses and brought them over. My knees trembled as I sat down.

"You know, we've spent so much time talking about me. Didn't dawn on me 'til this morning that I don't know that much about you." He grinned. "Except, of course, that you dress well, and you know your food and wine and you have a really nice apartment. What do you do to support this awesome lifestyle of yours?"

Talk about a moment of truth. The past five years whirled in my brain, blotting out everything else. I should tell him. I had to tell him. I had to come clean.

Then that sweet smile on his face would fade and his eyes would go flat and dead. Just like my parents' eyes when I'd come out to them the summer I graduated from NYU. And he'd close his heart to me the same way they had.

No. Not now. Not yet.

"I-I'm in the entertainment field," I said, pouring him a glass of the pinot, handing it to him, then pouring one for myself.

"You're an actor?"

"Off and on."

"Have you been in anything I would've seen?"

Aside from a few porn clips I'd taken off my website ages ago? "I doubt it."

"So have you appeared on Broadway?"

"Off Broadway." I stared down into the plum-colored depths of my glass. "Way off."

"I didn't think Off Broadway paid very much."

"It doesn't. My family has money." It wasn't a lie, strictly speaking. My parents were pretty well off, even if they'd long since cut me out of the will.

"Well, you're certainly handsome enough. One of these days I'm sure you'll be very successful."

"Thanks." I took a grateful sip of the pinot, noting its smooth, ripe red berry flavor and citrusy finish. It made my tongue tingle. "This is nice. Thanks for bringing it."

"You're welcome." His hand caught hold of mine. "I'm glad you invited me."

Oh God. There was nothing I wanted more than to push him down and have my wicked way with him right here, right now. But I'd rather not have the fire alarm go off when the expensive dinner I'd fixed was reduced to charcoal.

We sat down at the table a few minutes later. Trev dug into the main course as if he hadn't eaten in a week. It turned out pretty well, if I did say so myself—so tender and juicy, the meat practically fell off the bone. The rice and steamed veggies weren't bad either.

Still, I couldn't help chuckling when Trev asked for seconds. "Aren't they feeding you over at the Park Regent?"

"The food there's fine, but it doesn't measure up to this. I haven't had a home-cooked meal since Elaine and I broke up."

"Wow. That long?"

He nodded. "And I'm not exactly handy in the kitchen."

"I wasn't either, 'til I moved in here. There's something very satisfying about eating a meal you've cooked yourself. Not that I get the chance to do it very often."

"Maybe I'll give you more opportunities."

I smiled. Didn't think I'd mind that at all.

Afterward, we settled back on the couch to have coffee. I ached to reach over and touch him but I didn't dare. The entire evening had taken on a hazy, surreal air, as if I'd conjured it all out of a dream. I couldn't bear it if he suddenly dissolved in a puff of smoke.

Luckily Trev didn't have that problem. After several minutes of awkward silence, he set down his cup, grabbed me around the waist and pulled me to him. His mouth came down on mine—fierce, wet and hot. My brain reeled from lack of air, not that I gave a damn. Trev was one amazingly passionate kisser. And he knew exactly what he wanted.

Black spots danced in front of my eyes when we finally broke apart. "J-Jesus Christ," I breathed. "Next time warn a guy, will you?"

"Sorry. But I had the feeling I was going to grow old waiting for you to make the first move. Didn't have that problem last time."

A nervous chuckle bubbled up. "Just wanted you to know I respect you."

"Fuck that." He kissed me again, hard enough and deep enough to curl my toes. "And just to be clear—you *are* going to fuck me tonight."

"Oh, am I? Thanks for letting me know." This was moving way too fast. I had to put both hands on his chest to hold him off. "Trev, look... I want you as much as you want me. But what's the damn hurry? We're not running a race here."

"I've wasted so much time. Sixteen fucking years!" He shook his head. "I don't want to waste any more."

"You're not wasting anything. We're taking our time, getting to know each other. Do you want this to be another wham-bam, or would you rather enjoy it, like that meal we just ate?"

"I want..." God, he looked like he was about to cry. I kissed him gently, wrapping my arms around him. "I want you inside me. I want to know what that feels like."

"It'll happen. But we need to work up to it slowly. Otherwise I could hurt you."

"Doesn't it always hurt the first time?"

"Not if we're careful." More than a few guys had hired me to be their first time. I took great pride in the fact that they'd all claimed to enjoy the experience. "I want you good and relaxed before I even try to penetrate you. Which means lots and lots of

foreplay." I flashed him a grin. "Good sex is like a nice, long vacation. Getting there's half the fun."

"Could we get started on the trip now, before I'm old and gray?"

"Okay, okay. I get the hint." I stood and held my hand out to him. "C'mon, we'll be more comfortable in the other room."

I hadn't bothered opening the bedroom drapes today, so it was much cooler in here, and much darker. Hopefully it would help ease Trev's nervousness. He started to sit down on the edge of the bed but my firm tug on his arm stopped him. "Let's get you out of these clothes first," I murmured, proceeding to unbutton his shirt.

He shivered at the first touch of my fingertips, gooseflesh popping up everywhere. I tweaked his nipples and they immediately hardened. I'd never seen anyone so responsive. But of course, this was all so new to him. He hadn't had the chance yet to become jaded and desensitized.

Whatever we did tonight would be the dawning of a new world for him. He was already breathing hard, his heart pounding beneath my hand. My stomach turned somersaults again. My mouth went dry, every nerve in my body abuzz. Jesus. Would've thought it was *my* first time.

And it was, in almost every way that counted. My first time having sex with someone who hadn't paid me for the privilege in almost five years. With someone who wanted me as a whole person, not as some walking, talking human fucking machine.

I swayed and Trev caught me, his strong, warm hands gliding up my back. "Are you okay?" he murmured.

"F-fine."

"And I thought I was the nervous one."

"I should probably tell you something before we..."

"Fuck?"

"Make love," I replied firmly. It was the truth, wasn't it? All those other nights with all those other guys were just entries in my bank account. They meant nothing. But this meant... Everything. No point kidding myself that it didn't. "And, well, I have a confession to make."

"Whatever it is, I don't care."

"Trev —"

"There's nothing you can say that'll make me want to turn around and leave."

"Not even if I tell you you're the only other person I've ever shown this room?"

His mouth dropped open. "You're kidding me. I mean, you're fucking gorgeous! You must have guys falling all over you."

"I've had plenty of sex but I've never brought anyone here before. Never wanted to."

"Well, thank you. I'm honored," he said, leaning in for a kiss that nearly stopped my heart.

I'd meant to undress him slowly and then make him watch while I did the same, but that kiss sent my devious plans flying out the window. Fortunately my shirt and jeans only went flying as far as the floor, landing next to Trev's clothes.

We hit the mattress together, rolling and writhing skin on skin, mouths crashing and grinding, hot, wet and open. He had his hands in my hair, on my back, sliding down to cup my ass. When he reached for my cock, I sucked in the world's loudest gasp and almost came on the spot.

I was on fire, flushed from head to toe. Blood roared between my ears. Even in the room's muted light, I could see twin spots of high color tinting Trev's cheeks. This was all too much, too fast. Better take it down a notch before one of us had a heart attack.

"Slow down, okay?" I whispered, rolling him onto his back while I dusted light kisses over his shoulder and chest. "Half the fun's getting there, remember?"

"I don't think I can wait much longer..." He panted like an Olympic runner, his skin coated with beads of sweat. His cock looked painfully swollen and neither of us had so much as touched it.

I dipped down and started to lick the crown, until he gave a start and looked as if he were about to sit up. "Relax," I said. "I'm just trying to take the edge off."

"But I don't want to come until you're inside me."

"Babe, this is just the first act. We've got a long way to go until the grand finale. Lie back and enjoy it."

Took me only a few minutes to coax him to a long, shuddering orgasm. I swallowed down every last precious drop then scooted up to lie beside him, kissing him gently on the mouth. "How was that?"

He grinned, licking his lips. "Salty."

"Haven't you ever tasted yourself before?"

"Once or twice. But it tastes better on you." He kissed me again. "Thanks. You were right. I definitely needed some relief."

We lay together quietly for a while. Then I sprang to my feet, grabbed Trev firmly by the hand and pulled him into the bathroom.

A nice, cool shower was exactly what we both needed. I soaped up a sponge and ran it over Trev's entire body. He sighed with pleasure when I washed his back with long, slow, slippery strokes from his shoulders down to the swell of his ass. Well, well. Some guys liked their toes sucked. Some loved nipple play. But evidently this was Trev's favorite erogenous zone. I could do something with that.

Cleaner and definitely more relaxed, we wrapped ourselves in thick terrycloth bath sheets and stumbled back to bed. I eased Trev over on his stomach and reached for the bottle of hand lotion on my bedside table. One bleary green eye stared up at me as I moved to straddle him.

I squirted some lotion onto his shoulders and started rubbing it in lightly with just my fingertips, working gradually up to the pads of my thumbs. I wasn't sure how much pressure Trev could tolerate, but when he made a low, contented rumble in his chest and sank deeper into the mattress, I figured I was on the right track.

He started squirming and moaning as I worked my way down, jerking his hips and digging both hands in the covers. "You want me to stop?" I asked.

"Jesus, no! Don't you fucking dare! You've already got me rock hard again."

But when I reached the small of his back and began digging in my knuckles, he said, "You'd better let me turn over, unless you want your sheets all sticky."

I laughed, leaning down to kiss his shoulder. "Go on, get yourself off. I don't mind."

"I wanted to wait for you this time."

My erection had gone down during our shower, though it had apparently reasserted itself sometime over the last few minutes. I'd been too preoccupied with taking care of Trev to notice, not that it mattered. I was used to staying hard for an hour or more. I could go on for a while yet without needing to come. "You don't have to."

"Cam, c'mon, please. I'm dying here." God, he really did sound desperate. I bit my lip and dismounted, running my hand down his back, trying to calm and reassure him. He'd been an incredibly good sport about everything, but it was cruel to draw it out any longer. Time to bring this seduction home.

"I'll be just a minute," I said, padding into the bathroom for condoms and lube. Trev had rolled onto his back by the time I returned, his poor cock bobbing in the air like a flagpole. A tiny stab of guilt sailed through me as I crawled up on the bed beside him. Was I doing this for him or for me? "Let's talk before we get started, okay?"

He nodded shakily. "Okay."

"You might actually want to lie on your stomach this time. It'll be easier for you to relax. I know you want to look at me while we're doing it, but we'll have plenty of

chances for that later. The important thing this first time is to make sure you're comfortable."

"If you say so."

"And don't be surprised if you lose your erection. Lots of guys can't stay hard while they're being fucked. Doesn't mean they don't enjoy it. Some guys don't even come. But don't worry about any of that. Concentrate on relaxing and enjoying the ride. Sound good?"

"Yeah." He licked his lips. "Okay."

I put a pillow down for him and had him lie across it so that his hips were slightly elevated. Once he was settled, I stretched out on top of him, nibbling at his ear, his throat, the thick, fleshy curve of his shoulder. I planted a trail of not-so-soft bites along his spine, dragging my nails simultaneously across his ass. They left raised pink marks. So cute.

I parted his cheeks and started to lick his hole, pushing the tip of my tongue inside once I'd managed to open him a bit. My brain spun at the musky-bitter taste of him. Fresh arousal pulsed through me, spiraling straight to my cock.

I slicked up a finger and pushed it all the way inside him. Trev's breath hitched, his hips lifting off the pillow. He still felt damn tight, just like that first night at the hotel. "Too much?" I asked, wiggling my finger until it began to slide in and out of him. "Not enough?"

"Oh Christ, Cam..."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Good," he rasped. "Keep going."

Didn't need to tell me twice. I added another slippery digit and began stretching him slowly, until he had to shove his fist in his mouth to stifle his groans. My cock throbbed in sympathy. It wanted *in*. "You ready?"

"You have to ask?"

I'd never rolled a condom on so fast in my life. An extra squirt of lube to smooth my way and I was ready. I pressed the crown of my dick against Trev's hole and pushed. Took a moment or two before I breached it, then, amazingly, I sank in balls-deep.

Oh, sweet fucking Jesus. It felt as if I'd just plunged into a burning house. Every last breath of air had been sucked out of the room. Trev gripped me so damn tight I was afraid to move. But I had to. There was no stopping this now.

I wasn't sure how long it lasted. Time telescoped and collapsed in on itself, speeding up, winding down then finally speeding up again, until I slumped across Trev's sweat-soaked back, my teeth sunk into his shoulder as I exploded inside him.

We lay there recovering for what felt like an eternity. At last Trev stirred, giving me a not so subtle elbow in the ribs.

I rolled onto the mattress with a grunt, every muscle protesting. My head rang like a struck bell. I never got this wrung out after sex with a client. I'd never felt much of anything after sex with a client.

But God, this felt fucking wonderful.

Poor Trev looked just as wiped as I probably did. "You okay?" I murmured, ruffling his thoroughly mussed hair. "Hope things didn't get too out of hand."

"Nah. Probably won't be able to walk for the next couple days, but aside from that, I feel great." He grinned. "And for the record, I came like a freight train."

"I assume that means it was worth waiting for?"

"Oh yeah." He leaned in for a slow, deep kiss. "Most definitely."

Chapter Five

Sunday, May 30th, 9:43 a.m.

Trev left early this morning to catch his plane back to Toronto. He's probably in the air right now.

I got up and made him coffee and a bagel before he had to go. Thought we'd have the usual morning-after regrets, but we didn't. We kissed goodbye and he said he'd call the next time he was in town. We left it at that.

Maybe he will, maybe he won't. Either way, I'm fine with it. I really am.

* * * * *

There were three messages on my phone, all from clients. I didn't feel like answering them. I didn't feel like doing much of anything.

My muscles still ached, so I blew off my workout and sacked out on the couch with the *Sunday Times* and a latte potent enough to prop open my droopy eyelids. But by the time I'd worked my way through the entertainment section, I'd already started to nod off.

Next thing I knew, my watch read a quarter 'til one and I could've easily fallen back asleep. But if I wasted all day napping on the couch, I wouldn't sleep tonight. I needed to get out of here for a while, get some fresh air and recharge my batteries.

So I showered, got dressed and headed out for a walk. The warm sun beat down on my face and arms, brightening my mood considerably. I walked and walked, first south, then west, until I got tired and flagged down a cab.

That cab ended up dropping me in front of Ted and Garrett's apartment at Sixth and Twenty-Fourth, a few blocks up from the Icon. I rang the bell four times before I heard faint shuffling footsteps on the other side of the door.

Poor Garrett looked like he'd been dragged through a knothole backward, but his face lit up as soon as he saw me. "Well, this is a surprise."

"I know, I know, I should've called first. Sorry about that."

"No need for apologies. Come in." I couldn't help noticing how badly his hands shook as I stepped past him into the foyer. I'd forgotten he had Parkinson's. The symptoms hadn't been this bad the last time I'd seen him. How long ago was it? Six months? Nine?

He'd always been a rather slight, delicate-looking man but now his chinos and royal blue cardigan hung on him. His hair had grown thinner too—and grayer. He used to sweep into the bar like a force of nature, smiling and charming the pants off everyone, the dashing matinee idol to Ted's big, burly bear. Now he looked like his own father.

The apartment hadn't changed much—same elegant antique furniture, photos lining the walls. They had an impressive collection, including a couple of Mapplethorpes. I noticed a few empty spaces that hadn't been there last time. It made my heart ache to think of them selling off their treasures, the legacy of a shared lifetime. They'd owned the Icon for close to thirty years, for Christ's sake. Almost as long as I'd been alive.

Ted was in the living room, huddled in a chair near the front window with a blanket wrapped around him and Chester, their ten-year-old Chihuahua, curled in his lap. "L-look who d-decided to sh-show up," he said in his trademark rumble. "Glad I-I'm s-still h-here to s-see you."

"Me too." I pasted on my best smile and bent down to hug him. Time was, my arms could barely fit around his barrel chest. Now he felt like a still-breathing sack of skin and bones. Still wheezing, more like. The cancer had taken an irascible, lovable mountain of a man and eaten him alive.

"S-so," he went on, "must've been a st-stiff breeze that b-blew you up h-here from that f-fancy-ass n-neighborhood you m-moved to."

I dragged over an ottoman and sat down. "You know I visit your establishment every fucking weekend. I haven't forgotten where I came from."

"I-I know, kid." Chester woke up, gave me the big hairy eyeball, yawned then went back to sleep. Ted scratched him absently behind the ears, glancing out the window. "You m-moved on, but you g-got no regrets. T-That's the only w-way to live."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far, but...yeah, I guess I've done okay."

"Y-you're one s-smart kid, you know t-that? Not too m-many people c-could b-build a g-good l-life out of what y-you s-started with."

I grinned. "All those years you busted my balls and now you're getting all mushy on me? What's going on here?"

"I-I don't h-have much t-time left. Got t-to get it all off my c-chest now." As if on cue, he started to cough until it doubled him over and sent Chester running. His hand came away from his mouth streaked with blood. He sat there staring at it until Garrett rushed in. He knelt beside Ted's chair and they whispered for a few moments.

Finally Garrett turned to me and said, "I'm sorry, but he's very tired. These coughing spells take a lot out of him."

"Not a problem." I stood. "Do you need my help with anything before I go?"

"No, he'll be fine sleeping here in his chair until the caregiver comes."

I went over and gave Ted a kiss on the forehead. His eyelids fluttered, but other than that, he didn't move. Garrett showed me to the foyer and paused before opening the door. He was barely holding it together. The skin under his eyes looked like bruised tissue paper.

"Thank you for coming," he said softly. "It means a lot to him. And to me."

I'd only intended to shake his hand but ended up with my arms around him. "Mike's got my number. Call if you need anything, all right?"

He nodded, his fingers trembling as he gave my shoulder a squeeze. "I will."

I started walking again. Twenty minutes later I walked through the front door of the Icon. Sundays weren't usually that busy but there were a few customers gathered at the far end of the bar, watching baseball on the thirty-two-inch plasma screen.

I slung myself onto a stool and stared Mike right in the face. "You're still here?"

"Where the hell else would I be? Everybody knows I got no life. Want a beer?"

"Please." He set a Rolling Rock in front of me. I took a long pull, following it up with a sigh.

"That sounds pretty fuckin' ponderous," he remarked. "Care to elaborate?"

"I just came from seeing Ted and Garrett."

He nodded. "Sad, ain't it?"

"But at the same time... This'll sound weird, but it was kind of inspiring. Sure, there was a lot of pain, but I saw an awful lot of love too. Ted's going to have Garrett right there by his side until the end. Wonder if anyone'll be there for me when my time comes."

"Sweets, you got years before you need to start worrying about that."

"The last five years have gone by in a flash. Pretty soon I'll be thirty-five, then forty. Then what chance have I got?"

"If you're tryin' to say the only reason anybody'd want you is for your looks, you can go tie that bull outside."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I said and toasted him with another swig.

"Why do I get the feeling your date last night didn't go so well?"

"It went fine. We ate. We drank. We talked. We fucked. And then this morning he got up and caught a plane home to Toronto." I shrugged. "Pretty much what I expected."

"Well, congratulations, sugar. It's about time you got some recreational sex."

"Yeah. Lucky me."

He shot me a puzzled glance. "What am I missing? I thought you liked the guy."

"I do, but..." I shrugged. "He's thirty-eight years old and he's just come out. I'm his first affair. We both know how long these things last."

"So just enjoy it for what it is. How hard is that?"

"That's what I've been doing for most of my fucking life. It's wearing a bit thin."

"Are you tryin' to tell me you've got feelings for him?"

I sighed. "Yes. No. Maybe. Does it matter? He's probably not coming back."

"You thought he wouldn't call you in the first place."

"Well, nobody ever got rich on my predictions. Good thing I don't play the stock market." I finished my beer and stood. "Thanks for putting up with my lousy mood."

Mike waved as I turned toward the door. "All part of the service, sweetheart."

I'd left my work phone on the coffee table. I checked it the moment I came in, hoping for a call from Trev. He hadn't said he'd call today, but still.

Nothing. I glanced at my watch. It was after five. He should've landed hours ago.

I looked up his number, my thumb hovering over the Call button.

Right then, the phone rang, startling me so badly I nearly dropped it. But the number wasn't Trev's. It was one of the clients who'd left a message earlier.

Was this what I was reduced to—waiting by the phone like some lovesick teenager?

Well, fuck that.

I hit Accept and set up an appointment.

Chapter Six

Wednesday, June 16th, 1:47 p.m.

Trev just called. Seventeen days since I last heard from him. Not that I'm counting.

He's scheduled to come back to the city next week, but he wondered if it would be okay with me if he flew in a little early so we could spend the weekend together.

Then he started talking about doing all the usual touristy shit. Apparently he's never taken in a Broadway show or visited the Metropolitan Museum or the Guggenheim or seen the Statue of Liberty up close. And he wants to do all those things for the first time with *me*.

God, how fucking stupid and corny can you get?

Took me two seconds to say yes.

* * * * *

Trev was two hours late getting in on Friday. I nearly went insane from pacing, then straightening things, then checking on dinner, followed by more pacing. The buzzer finally rang at a quarter 'til seven. I opened the door just as he stepped off the elevator, carrying a small leather bag. He looked tired, and from the huge grin on his face, glad to see me.

He walked right up and threw his arms around me. "I'm sorry. My plane got delayed, then I had a hell of a time catching a cab from my hotel—"

"Doesn't matter. I'm just relieved that you're finally here."

"Me too." He waited until I got the door closed, then pushed me up against it, cupping my face with both hands. Then he kissed me—hot, deep and passionate. Seventeen days of pent-up longing let loose at once. God, what was it with him? Every

time he touched me, I went up in flames. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think. I just buried my fingers in his hair and hung on.

Somehow I ended up flat on my back on the couch with Trev on top of me, tugging my shirt from my jeans then yanking down the zipper. My cock popped up and painted a stripe of sticky pre-come across his cheek.

He laughed as he wiped it off. "Guess this means you're happy to see me."

"Just a little." I sat up to start unbuttoning his shirt but he pushed my hands away. "Trev, c'mon..."

"Unh-uh. I've been fantasizing about sucking you off for the last two weeks. Now lie back and relax and let me do it."

Lying back was easy, but the relaxing part wasn't. I was used to playing the active role in sex. Letting someone else give me pleasure felt...weird at first.

Then it felt good—very, *very* good, in fact. Not the most intense blowjob I'd ever had, but definitely one of the most sensual. Trev sure knew how to use his lips and tongue. Lots of wet, sloppy licking and sucking until he'd worked me to the edge. Then he plunged down, swallowing me as deep as he could. I gasped, flailed and shot down his throat.

Guys are fond of saying they see stars when they come. It's become kind of a cliché, but from my own experience I know it really does happen. Only a few times in my life, but still. This time I not only saw stars, I saw fucking supernovas.

"J-Jesus," I said once I could actually see Trev again. "Where the hell did you learn to do *that*?"

Trev grinned. "Gay porn is our friend."

"It's definitely yours." I sat up and kissed him, sucking on his lower lip to get some of my own taste. It had a smooth, creamy-sweet flavor—or maybe that was Trev. "Now I know what's been keeping you so busy these past couple of weeks."

He sighed. "Sorry I haven't had time to call. There's been a lot going on."

"At work?"

"And at home. Suffice it to say, I haven't been sleeping too well lately."

I'd assumed his apparent exhaustion was due to a long day of traveling, but now that I'd had a chance to look at him more closely, I could see that the lines around his mouth and eyes had deepened. His face was thinner. He looked like he'd dropped at least five pounds.

I could certainly help with that. "C'mon, let's have some dinner and talk about it."

This time I'd made beef stew and a mixed green salad with homemade vinaigrette, accompanied by a loaf of crusty French bread and another bottle of the Louis Jadot pinot. Trev still had two helpings, but he ate more slowly this time, savoring his food – or maybe he was just too tired to chew any faster.

"I think I know why my son wasn't too surprised when I came out to him," he said, taking a long sip of wine before he continued. "I'm pretty sure he has a boyfriend."

Not what I'd expected to hear, although on one level it certainly made sense. "How did you find out?"

"Brian invited this friend of his over one Friday evening when he was visiting. I got a vibe from this kid right off. He's got bleached-blond hair and he wears makeup."

"Lots of kids do. Doesn't mean he's gay."

"Oh, I know. But then they went in Brian's room and shut the door. I thought they'd start playing music or video games, but I didn't hear anything. Then when I walked past, I thought I heard the bed creaking. And the door was locked."

"You think they were having sex?"

"I don't know. It took Brian a minute or two to answer the door after I knocked. His mouth looked all pink and swollen, and so did his friend's. They were at least making out."

"Have you had The Talk with him?"

"Yeah, but that was a couple of years ago. And it only covered sex with girls."

"Sounds like you'd better give him the updated refresher course," I joked lamely.

"Yeah, I know. But I'm not looking forward to it. Now he'll think everything I tell him is something I've done myself."

"You don't need to go into that much detail. Just remind him about condoms and the importance of playing safe. That's the same no matter what sex your partner is."

Trev took a last bite of his stew before pushing his bowl away. "Mind if I ask how old you were the first time you...did anything?"

Now there was a loaded question. And I knew a truthful answer would shock him. Was it better to just blurt it out or make up a more palatable alternative? Maybe I should change the subject altogether.

No, I didn't want to do that. Maybe I couldn't tell him the whole truth about me yet, but at least I could tell him this much. And if it changed the way he felt about me, so be it.

"Fourteen," I said. "I was fourteen."

"Jesus!" He let out a gusty breath. "Well, I guess it's normal for kids to experiment with each other. I would've done it too if I'd known anybody who felt the same way I did."

"My first time wasn't with another kid. I mean, he was nineteen, but...not exactly the same age. He was this junior-college kid majoring in phys ed. I think he was getting college credit for helping out my high school's football coach. He was a real handsome, hunky type, with muscles on his muscles. And I had the mother of all crushes." I shrugged. "What can I say? I've always had a thing for older guys."

"So what happened?"

"One afternoon I saw him in the showers alone. He didn't know I was there. He was jerking off, so I watched. I was so damn nervous I must've made some noise or something because he caught me. There he was, standing naked in front of me, so naturally I couldn't stop staring at his dick. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I'd

ever seen. So I touched it. And he let me." I paused to take a sip of water. "I ended up sucking him off right there in the shower. He must've liked it, because I did the same thing every Wednesday for the rest of the semester."

Trev's jaw dropped open. I'd succeeded in shocking him, all right. "Man, you were one precocious kid!"

"I knew what I wanted, even back then."

"Did anybody find out?"

"No. I'm good at keeping secrets. And he was too, apparently." Deep breath. "You're still here, so I guess I haven't scandalized you too badly."

"I'm glad it was a positive experience for you. But it doesn't put my mind any more at ease where Brian's concerned."

"The important thing is not to judge him or make him feel guilty. Let him know he can always talk to you."

Trev nodded. "I know, I know. And I shouldn't worry. He's a good kid and I should be glad he feels comfortable enough to do his experimenting safely at home rather than... God knows where. Besides, better now than at thirty-eight, right?"

"Brian doesn't know how lucky he is to have a dad like you. When I came out to mine the summer after I graduated college, he told me to get out and never come back."

"Call me naïve, but I find it incredible that there are such hard-hearted people in this world. I mean, how could any parent say that to their child?"

"A lot of them do."

I did a quick cleanup of the dinner dishes, then we stretched out on the couch again. Trev snuggled next to me with his head in my lap while I caressed his face and hair. Except for the ubiquitous beeps and squeals of traffic floating in through the open window, all was utterly peaceful. It was as if we'd stepped into another world where time had stopped and nothing existed but the two of us. I wanted to stay there forever.

Finally Trev looked up at me and said, "When you were a kid, what did you want to grow up to be?"

Anything but what I am now was the reply that jumped instantly to mind. Luckily, I didn't say it aloud. "That's a strange question."

"Not really. You seem to understand kids pretty well. They usually want to grow up to be something cool and exciting, like astronauts or cops or doctors. Did you always want to be an actor?"

I sighed. "For a while I had this idiotic, crazy dream about becoming a best-selling novelist. I've got three unpublished manuscripts rotting on my hard drive. I tried getting an agent but they all turned me down flat. I even worked for a publisher once and I couldn't get them to read my stuff. So that's as far as the dream went."

"I wouldn't mind reading some of it if you'll let me."

"You'd be bored out of your skull. It's not very good." I started to yawn. "And on that note, we'd better get to bed before we're too sleepy to stagger into the other room."

We undressed quickly and tumbled on the bed, wrapped happily in each other's arms. Apparently we weren't too tired for a little passionate kissing, but when I tried to ease Trev onto his back so I could straddle him, he groaned and shook his head.

"Sorry," he murmured. "After the flight and that big dinner, I'm not up for anything. Shit!"

"Don't worry about it." I rolled off and pulled the comforter up over both of us. "It's not like this'll be our last time."

"I know, but... Jesus. The second night we've spent together and I'm already a dud in the sack."

"Nobody's keeping score. And, trite though it may be, I've always preferred quality over quantity." I kissed him again. "More specifically, I prefer *you*. In my bed or out of it."

"You charmer, you."

I grinned. "I try."

* * * * *

We spent Saturday afternoon at the Metropolitan, strolling hand in hand through the galleries. There was a special exhibition of Impressionist paintings that I'd wanted to see for a while. Monet. Cézanne. Van Gogh. Degas. Ballet girls. Water lilies. Starry nights. Breathtaking landscapes. I wanted to pitch a tent and move into the gallery permanently.

I spent half an hour staring at the awe-inspiring ten-foot expanse of Seurat's *La Grande Jatte* until Trev returned from his idle meanderings around the room. I could tell he was fighting the urge to clear his throat. "Just a couple more minutes, I promise," I said.

"Not a problem. This isn't something you see every day."

"No, it certainly isn't."

"Hard to believe it's thousands of tiny dots of paint."

I shot him a surprised look. "You know about pointillism?"

"I did go to university. And I'm in advertising, remember? We study art for that."

"Why, Trevor Barclay. You just keep unfolding like a flower."

"I could say the same about you."

We took a brief walk through the park, enjoying the sun and clear blue skies. There were plenty of families and couples out today, flying kites, playing Frisbee with their pets, lounging on benches. I would have loved to linger, but alas, our coffee-and-bagel breakfast had long since worn off.

So we wandered south on Fifth, checking out restaurants along the way. Finally we came across a small but trendy-looking French-Asian place. I'd never been here before, but the *Times* review posted outside was mostly positive and the menu looked intriguing. But Trev took one look at the prices and blanched. "No, sorry. There's no way I can afford this."

"S'okay, it's my treat."

"I can't let you do that."

I had to stifle a sigh. "Fine. I can fix us something back at my place. But there's not much difference in me buying food to cook versus paying someone to cook it for us. Plus, it'll take us at least another hour to get the food home, cook it and get it on the table."

Two empty bellies rumbling in unison settled that question. "All right, you win," he said. "This time."

It was fairly early, so the restaurant wasn't too crowded yet. The maître d', however, made a haughty show of putting our names on the list then sniffed and waved us off to the bar for ten minutes before finally seating us. It was a nice table near the center of the room with a view of the entire restaurant, including a huge tank of Japanese koi.

Trev glanced at the menu again. He looked ready to hyperventilate. "Order whatever you want," I told him. "Don't worry about what it costs."

"Jesus. I don't know how anybody can afford to live in this city."

"You'll be here every couple weeks until the end of summer. Plenty of time to get used to it."

"But I'm on an expense account. I just sign the bill and the company picks up the tab. Except for... Well, times like these."

The glass of Sapporo I'd ordered froze halfway to my mouth. "So you're paying for two extra days at the hotel out of your own pocket, when you knew you were spending the weekend with me?"

"I didn't want to take it for granted that you'd want me around 24/7."

And, much as I preferred otherwise, I couldn't disabuse him of that notion. Having him around for an entire week at a time would put a serious crimp in my work

schedule. I already had to juggle clients and make lame excuses for not being available this weekend.

"Besides," Trev went on, "the office knows I'm in town early. If they need to contact me, I'd rather have them do it through the hotel. I like my private life to remain private."

"What's the matter, are you ashamed of me?" I joked.

"No, of course not. But you know company gossip. One little whisper and suddenly it's all over the office." He smiled, reaching for my hand. "Not that I'd be embarrassed for them to find out I've got a hot younger guy for a lover, but I want to keep you all to myself for a while."

"They'd just be jealous anyway," I replied. "But of *me*, not you."

I ended up ordering for both of us. Luckily for our hollow stomachs, the food arrived quickly. An appetizer of ahi tuna sashimi, followed by grilled salmon in a lemon-basil vinaigrette and stir-fried green beans in garlic and black bean sauce. Spicy, tender and very, very good. Just like Trev.

We were contemplating dessert when Trev's phone rang. "It's Elaine," he said, rising from his chair. "I'll take it outside."

I was about to tell him I didn't mind if he took it at the table but he'd already walked away. Obviously he didn't want me to overhear. I sighed and knocked back the last of my second glass of beer. Not such a great idea. My bladder was already aching. Better take care of it before we climbed in a cab to head home.

I had to pass through the bar to get to the men's room. The dinner trade had picked up, and the room was pretty well packed. I elbowed and sidestepped my way through the crowd until my glance fell on a familiar tall, stocky figure seated at a postage-stamp-sized table in the corner of the room. Bald. Immaculately groomed. Custom-tailored Armani suit.

Charles.

And right next to him was Ryan, clad in his own Armani. He'd had a haircut since I'd last seen him and probably a manicure too. Oh Jesus. Another stud for Charles' stable.

They hadn't looked in my direction yet. I was about to turn around and get the hell out of there when Ryan got up and made for the restroom. I hesitated a few seconds then followed.

There was another guy inside, standing at the urinals. Ryan still hadn't noticed me. I hung back and waited for the other guy to leave, then grabbed Ryan by the arm and shoved him into the handicapped stall.

"What the fuck, man?" He stared at me for a moment or two, as if he didn't recognize me. Then suddenly he did. "What're you doing here?"

"I'd ask you the same thing, only I've got a pretty good idea. I'm well acquainted with your date."

"So? What the fuck is it to you?"

He reminded me of myself five years ago. Same arrogance. Same naïveté. "You have no clue what you're getting involved in. If you're smart, you'll turn around and walk out of this restaurant right now."

"And do *what*? The hotel fired me after that night you sucked my cock in the locker room. They had a fuckin' security camera in there. I didn't even know."

Neither did I. Great! Now I'd probably be blackballed from the St. Regis for life. Well, big deal. I'd handled worse setbacks. But I'd never gotten anyone fired before. "I'm sorry. I really am."

"Yeah, well, thanks for nothing. Now the hotel won't give me a good reference, so I can't find a job anyplace else. I've got to eat and pay my rent somehow."

"There are better ways to do it than working for Charles. How the hell did you even meet him?"

Ryan snorted. "You think you're the only whore in Manhattan? I asked around. He's not that hard to find. And he treats me a lot better than that asshole front-desk manager at the St. Regis."

"Ryan, he's a fucking *pimp*. That's what he does. He takes you out and he wines and dines you and makes you think he cares. And tomorrow night you'll be taking it up the ass from some fat slob in a midtown hotel."

"I've gotten fucked before. Lots of times."

"Not like this, you haven't." I sucked in a breath. Oh God. How the hell could I make him understand? "You start out thinking you'll only do it for a few months, until you find a real job. Then a few months turns into a few years. Pretty soon you can't do anything else."

He stuck out his chin. "Yeah? Looks like it's worked out okay for you."

"Because I don't have a *choice*!"

"I don't either. Now get the fuck out of my way."

Just then, I heard the outside door swing open. What if it was Charles? Or—God forbid—Trev?

I stepped back and let Ryan pass, then stood there alone for a minute or two, waiting for the blood to stop roaring between my ears. The whoosh of the flushing urinal outside reminded me of my full bladder. I relieved myself quickly then headed back for the table before Trev really did come looking for me.

His forehead crinkled with concern as I approached. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I just..." I jerked my thumb toward the restroom. "Had too much beer."

"Oh. Well, I ordered coffee. But if you don't want it—"

"No, no, that's fine. I'd love some."

I sat down, but he was still giving me that look. "You sure you're all right?"

"Yeah, I am. I'm perfectly okay. Now will you drop it?"

His concerned look had morphed into a stare, with tight lines popping up around his mouth. "Sure. No problem."

Now he was pissed at me. Terrific. Just what I needed. "What about you? Everything okay at home?"

"Depends on what you mean by okay. Elaine wanted to talk about Brian. She's come to pretty much the same conclusion I have. He and that other kid are definitely involved." He sighed. "I don't know what the hell she thinks I can do about it from five hundred miles away."

"I didn't think you wanted to do anything about it. Other than encouraging him to be responsible."

"She wants him to break up with the kid, and she wants me to tell him to do it. She thinks he's too young to be doing what he's doing, especially with another boy. Guess she thinks it'll carry more weight coming from me."

"But you don't want to?"

"I don't want to send him the message that it isn't okay to be who he is. I don't want him to go through years of guilt and denial like I did."

"Well, you've got a week before you have to head home. Don't worry about it."

Here came that stare again. "How can I not worry? He's my *son*, for crying out loud!"

"Trev, c'mon, I didn't mean—"

"I don't know why I'm even listening to you. You don't have any kids. You don't have any responsibilities at all. You've got no fucking idea what my life's like!"

Oh Christ. My head was throbbing to beat the band, and now Trev had to go make a scene? "Will you lower your voice?" I whispered urgently, leaning across the table. "Unless you want to get us kicked out of here."

"Fine with me. I'm ready to go anyway." He pushed back his chair with a loud scrape. "I'll wait for you outside."

Took me ten minutes to flag down our waiter and pay the bill. Figured Trev might've ditched me by then but there he was, pacing the sidewalk with his hands in his pockets. We hailed a cab and rode back to my place in stone-cold silence.

We went upstairs. I tossed my keys in the bowl on the coffee table. Trev perched on the edge of the couch and stared down at the floor. He still didn't say anything.

"Look," I said finally, "why don't we have some wine and relax?"

"That's okay. I, um...think it might be best if I went back to the hotel tonight."

Talk about a kick in the teeth. After the past hour and a half, it was almost too much. But I took a deep breath and held it together. Barely. "If that's what you want."

"I'm too upset right now to be decent company." He stood up. "I'll go get my things."

Well, maybe he didn't need a glass of wine, but I did. I trudged into the kitchen and poured myself the last of the pinot then plopped down at the table.

"Bravo," I muttered. "Shortest affair on record. Take a fucking bow."

The message light on my home phone was blinking. God, what now? I took a long sip to fortify myself then dialed into my voicemail.

"Hey, sugar, it's me. Just wanted to let you know Ted passed this afternoon. It happened around four." Mike's gravelly voice cracked. "I can't talk now. I'll tell you the rest when you call." The line clicked off.

I stared at the receiver for what seemed like forever. Then it began emitting an ear-splitting screech and at last I hung it up. I stared down at my hands. Here I was, still alive, still breathing, while Ted was dead. The entire world had changed, yet everything still looked the same. Didn't seem right. Didn't seem fair.

"I'm going now," Trev called from the living room. I hauled myself out of the chair to say goodbye. Trev got this weird startled look the second he saw my face. "What is it?"

"I just got some bad news. An old friend d-died this afternoon."

"Oh God, Cam. I'm sorry." He was at my side in an instant, his strong, warm hand caressing my arm. "Will you be okay?"

"I don't know," I whispered, and promptly broke down.

* * * * *

Trev led me over to the couch, bundled me in his arms and let me cry it out. I clung to him so tightly my nails dug tiny red crescents into his arms but he didn't say a word. When the tears finally subsided, he went in the kitchen to get me a glass of water.

"Th-thanks." I gulped down half of it, then pulled out my handkerchief and wiped my eyes. They felt like a pair of boiled onions. "I should be fine now, if you want to go."

"I'm not going anywhere." He sat back down and put his hand on my shoulder. "Do you want to talk about...him? I'm assuming your friend is — was — a guy."

I nodded. "He was a great guy and one of the best friends I've ever had. More like a father to me than my real dad was, that's for sure."

"Oh. Then he wasn't a..."

"No, he wasn't a lover. Just a friend." I couldn't help chuckling as all the memories started flooding back. "Ted was one tough, ornery bastard. I used to pull all kinds of stupid shit back in the day but he never let me get away with it. Remember that bar I took you to? That's his place. He and his partner Garrett bought it back when queers used to get bashed every fucking day. He remembered when just walking into a gay bar meant risking arrest. People think they've got it bad now. They don't have to put up with half the shit he did."

Trev shook his head. "Sounds like he lived through a lot."

"He had all these great stories about Stonewall and marching in the first New York pride parade in 1970. If anybody taught me what it means to be an out-and-proud gay man, it was Ted."

"I wish I could have known him."

"Me too. I think you would've liked him." I fell back against the couch cushions with a sigh. "I'm sorry about this afternoon."

"So am I. Guess we were both a little stressed."

I chortled. "Just a little."

"Did something happen while I was talking to Elaine? You seemed fine before I went outside."

My mind raced, searching for a plausible explanation. I settled on the truth—sort of. "I ran into someone I used to know. It got a bit...awkward."

"Bad breakup?"

"Not really."

"Okay, I know a hint when I hear it. I'm prying. I'll knock it off." He bent down to kiss me before I could say anything else. "At least now we've got our first fight out of the way."

"And we survived." I grinned. "Imagine that."

"Would you like to, um, make it official?" He cocked his head toward the bedroom.

For a second I didn't know what he meant. Then I burst out laughing. It had been so long since I'd had a real relationship, I'd forgotten about make-up sex. "Might as well make all that fighting worthwhile."

We sprang up and sprinted for the bedroom. Trev beat me, but not by much. I tore at his clothes, stripping him bare before kissing a warm, wet trail down his chest. He growled, his hands curling in my hair as I sank onto my knees. Anointing his navel with the tip of my tongue, I swirled it around until he gasped and gave an involuntary start. So he was ticklish. I filed the information away for future reference.

His cock bobbed heavily, already half hard, but this time I paid attention to his balls first. I sucked one, then the other, into my mouth in turn, rolling them gently, bathing them with my tongue. But when Trev's fingers dug a little too deeply into my scalp, I had to stop.

"Sorry," he rasped. "But that felt... My God, no one's ever done that before."

"I take it that means you liked it?"

"Liked it? I probably could've come if you'd kept on with it."

"Patience, babe. We've barely gotten started." I stood to give him a kiss. "You're always in such a hurry. Slow down. Make the journey last."

"Easy for you to say. You've already had a few round trips." He sighed. "I envy you."

"No, I envy *you*. There's so much you haven't done yet and I get to be the first one to show it to you. Which reminds me..." I motioned for him to sit down on the edge of the bed. "I've been dying to give you a little show."

I started to unbutton my cuffs, followed by the front of my shirt, easing each button through the hole with excruciating slowness until it hung open at last, exposing my chest and torso. I left it on while I unbuckled my belt and zipped down my fly then spun around, giving Trev an admirable rear view as I slid it off. Finally I hooked my thumbs in my belt loops, inching my jeans down over my hips. A little sexy shaking and shimmying and they fell to the floor.

I was about to turn around when Trev came up behind me, one arm snaked around my waist, his face buried in my neck. Fully erect now, his cock pressed into the small of my back. A few inches lower and with a little lube, he would have been able to push right into me. The mere thought of that sent the blood singing in my veins.

"Would you like to fuck me tonight?" I whispered, turning my head to look at him. His mouth came down hot and heavy on mine. The force of it made my knees buckle. Then when he pushed me face down on the bed and buried his own face between my cheeks, I knew I had my answer.

Even when I bottomed to clients, I never let them do this to me. Too intimate, too private. Too apt to make me lose control. Between the sweet, wet glide of Trev's tongue and my hard cock rubbing against the sheets, I nearly lost it. I ran multiplication tables in my head, thought of box scores or the weather. Nothing could distract me from the

fact that my lover was about to penetrate me for the first time. But first we needed to settle logistics.

I rolled onto my back and held out my hand to Trev, pulling him up to lie beside me. "How would you like to do this?"

"Why don't you decide? You're the expert."

I thought about it for a moment. "Might be better for you if my legs aren't in the way. I could lie on my stomach, like you did that first time. Or I could get on my hands and knees. Your choice."

"Well..." Even in the dim light seeping in through the curtains, I could tell he was blushing. God, it was adorable. "Just about every gay porn movie I've watched had them doing it doggy-style. It was really hot."

"Oh, it is. It's one of my favorite positions, in fact. I think you'll like it." I gave him a quick kiss. "There's condoms and lube in the bedside table. Why don't you grab them?"

While he did that, I dragged a pillow under my head and stretched out, spreading my legs. "I'm going to lie here and relax while you get me ready, okay?"

"Okay." He stared at the tube of lubricant in his hand. "So...what exactly do I do?"

"Slick up your fingers then slide them inside me. Start with one and work up to two. By that time, I should be ready for your cock. Hell, I should be begging for it."

"Whatever you say."

So I closed my eyes and put myself in relaxation mode. Tension was the worst thing in the world for bottoming. Rigid muscles meant pain, and pain meant no fun for either partner. I focused on taking in deep, cleansing breaths that cleared my mind and helped put me in a calm, centered place.

Trev handled the preparation with a lot more finesse than I'd expected. One finger eased smoothly inside me, followed by another. Didn't even make me uncomfortable. Most guys were so eager to get to the main event, they rushed through this part only to

regret it later. I waited for the burn to fade into an ache, then ramp up into a craving for something thicker and longer.

When my hips started lifting off the mattress, I gasped, "Okay, ready when you are."

I maneuvered into position, shivering at the tentative touch of Trev's hands on my ass. His fingers trembled. I turned my head to give him a reassuring smile. "C'mon, you've watched gay porn. You know what to do."

He let out a shaky breath. "Y-you sure you want me to?"

"Of course I do. I'm the first guy who's ever bottomed for you. Do you have any idea how hot that is? How turned-on I am?"

"Ohh, Jesus..."

"C'mon, babe. I can't wait to feel you inside me."

I heard the telltale crinkle of a condom wrapper and could've kicked myself for not offering to put it on myself. A few seconds later, the blunt, thick crown of his cock nudged my hole. I sucked in a breath, willing myself to relax as he pushed through and glided home.

Christ, he felt good. Not too big, not too small. Not too aggressive either—his hands gripped my waist firmly, though not hard enough to leave bruises. He knew how to move his hips too, with slow, deep strokes that made me want to push back and urge him to go faster. So I did, and then he did. I smiled, pushing back more insistently. I loved a man who could take direction.

Soon he had himself draped over me with his fingers wound in my hair, yanking my head back for a scalding-hot kiss. He fucked like an animal, sixteen years of thwarted desire boiling up out of him and into me. I tried to hold back but when he reached under me and started stroking my cock, that was it. A lightning strike went off in my brain, and the world flashed white.

I collapsed onto my stomach with Trev still inside me. A few seconds later, he let out a strangled yell and tumbled to the mattress like a wrung-out sack of bones.

As usual, time tiptoed away while we lay there regaining our equilibrium. I opened my eyes to find myself pillowed on Trev's sweaty chest, his hand still in my hair. My scalp smarted but I didn't care.

"Trevor Barclay, you've been holding out on me. I had no idea you were such a beast in the sheets."

He laughed. "Neither did I. Hope it wasn't too bumpy a ride."

"You can ravish me like that every night for the rest of my life. And I usually prefer being on top!"

"I don't mind taking turns. It's not like I know everything there is to know yet."

I grinned. "And believe me, I'm going to have so much fun teaching you."

Chapter Seven

Tuesday, June 22nd, 8:45 p.m.

We buried Ted today. Me, Mike and four other Icon stalwarts served as pallbearers. Garrett sat between us at the service, clutching Mike's hand so hard I thought he'd shatter his own fragile bones. He leaned heavily on us both when it was time to go, weaving on his feet, his eyes red-rimmed, focused on nothing. My heart ached to see him so devastated.

But it nearly stopped altogether when I reached the back of the church and saw Trev sitting in the last pew. He wore the same dark suit I remembered from the night we met.

He walked out with me and waited patiently while Mike and I bundled Garrett into a car to be taken home. Then he went with me to the Icon and sat listening while all the regulars toasted Ted's life and told stories about him. All this history Trev wasn't even a part of, but there he was, sharing it with me. Holding my hand when the tears welled up again.

He'd taken an entire afternoon off work to support me and I hadn't even asked him to. Didn't take a genius to figure out why.

* * * * *

June staggered to a forgettable close and July swept in like a tornado. Between work and spending every other weekend with Trev, I barely had time to breathe. I had to double-book clients two or three evenings a week, which I hated to do, but there was no other way to fit everyone in. Some clients could only see me on weekends. There were a couple of my regulars who only flew in once every month or so. I did my best to accommodate them, but not if it cut into my precious time with Trev.

The weather had turned muggy and humid, like it usually did this time of year. Most days I stayed inside until the worst of it had passed, but it still sapped my energy. My place had come equipped with central air-conditioning but I'd caught too many colds going from the wet-blanket heat outside to a freezing-cold apartment. I much preferred to strip naked and throw open the windows in the evening, or turn on the ceiling fan.

The heat and exhaustion had begun to get to me in other ways too. I'd always prided myself on never having performance issues on the job. A few strokes of my hand and I was ready to go. But now it took all my concentration to get hard and stay that way for an entire appointment. A lot of male escorts routinely took Viagra, but I never had. I didn't like taking drugs of any kind if I could help it.

Fortunately I never had any problems in bed with Trev. Our time together was pure magic. In the space of only a few weeks, he'd become a skilled, sensitive lover who could coax me to ecstasy with his mouth or roll me over and pound me into the mattress. Best sex of my life, bar none.

And best everything else too. I loved cooking us dinner and sitting down to the table to eat while Trev told me all about his week. I didn't understand advertising any better now than I had a few weeks ago but it didn't matter. He was sharing a significant part of his life with me. The fact that I couldn't do the same tore at me like a dull blade.

One Friday night he showed up with suitcase in hand and a particular sparkle in his eye that I'd never seen before. When he swooped in and bent me back in a deep dip to kiss me, I knew something was definitely up.

"What's with the Fred Astaire moves?" I asked once he'd returned me to an upright position. "Should I be worried?"

"About what?"

"If I were the jealous type, I'd start to wonder if you were getting a little something-something at the office."

A Cheshire cat grin spread across his lips. "You're not far off."

"Do tell."

"Dinner first. I'm starving."

I'd made baked chicken in a white wine and mushroom cream sauce, with wild rice and asparagus tips. I'd planned to serve it with chardonnay, but we both agreed it was too hot for alcohol and went with iced tea instead. A not so cool breeze blew in from outside, fading sunlight painting long golden fingers across the table. I'd put on a tank top before I started cooking but Trev still wore his dress shirt, albeit with the sleeves rolled up. Beads of perspiration dotted his face and throat. I would've eagerly spread him out on the table and licked every drop from his body very, *very* slowly, but first I wanted to hear his news.

So I set down my fork and waited, prompting him with an arched eyebrow. "You're really enjoying this, aren't you?"

"Any reason I shouldn't?"

"Other than the fact that you're about to get strangled?"

"Okay, okay, give me a second. I'm burning up here." He scooped up his chilled glass and held it against his cheek. "It's good news—*very* good news, in fact. Our client's delighted with the work we've done so far on the campaign. They're especially impressed with how I've managed the project from five hundred miles away. And so is the New York office."

I had this tingly, stomach-flipping premonition of what he was about to say. "Y-you mean—"

"They're talking promotion. Which would involve me moving here permanently."

The floor had just dropped out from under me. Everything started to shimmy before my eyes. "When will you know for sure?"

"The end of August. But they wouldn't have told me if it wasn't pretty damn close to a done deal." He grinned proudly. "Just think—soon we'll be able to see each other anytime we want. We can have dinner together every night."

I pasted on a smile even as my heart lurched. Now he was giving me this look, like he expected me to say something. Like he expected me to be overjoyed.

And God, I wanted to be. I really did. The past few weeks had made me realize what a lonely existence I'd led for the past five years. Work and hanging out with Mike at the Icon used to be enough, but now it wasn't anymore. I wanted a regular life, and I wanted it with Trev.

"Sounds...wonderful," I murmured finally.

"You sure? You don't sound all that enthusiastic."

"I'm just a little surprised. It's a big adjustment for both of us."

"But a good one, right?"

"Absolutely." I smiled wider, hoping my face muscles didn't get stuck. "I can't wait."

* * * * *

Trev's news whipped around in my brain for a solid week. I barely slept. It ate up my every waking thought. Finally I said, "Fuck it," and headed to the Icon to talk to Mike.

He was standing behind the bar drying glasses when I walked up. "How'd you like to help me buy this place?"

He stared at me then reached over to lay his hand on my forehead. "You got a fever or somethin', sugar?"

"I'm serious."

"What brought this on all of a sudden?"

"I'm tired of doing what I'm doing. I've been tired of it for a while. I want out."

"That's not what you said a few weeks ago."

"Yeah, well. Things change."

"Oh shit," he breathed. "It's that Trev guy, isn't it? You love the poor son of a bitch."

I nodded. "He's moving here at the end of the summer. He told me a few days ago."

"Well, call me Miss Obvious if you want, but have you even thought about telling him the truth? If he feels the same way about you, maybe he'll be okay with it."

"Would you be okay with your boyfriend fucking other guys for money?"

"Assuming I had one..." He shook his head. "No. Not on your fuckin' life."

"So I have to get out, and I have to do it now. No other options."

"Other than buying the Icon?"

"If we don't, somebody else will. This place is a piece of our history. You want to see it torn down or turned into another crappy, overpriced restaurant?"

He sighed, drumming his fingers on the counter. "Okay, sweets. If you're up for it, so am I. But where the hell are we going to get the money?"

"Let's go to the bank and see what kind of loan we can get. I've still got that thirty grand in my savings and I'll look into getting a second mortgage on my apartment. I know Garrett needs the money but maybe he'd be willing to cut a couple of old friends a deal."

"Can't hurt to ask, I guess. Wish I had something to kick in, but my wallet's got moths flying out of it."

"You can manage the place and I'll put up the cash. How's that sound?"

"Like we'll both be sleepin' in a fuckin' homeless shelter by this time next year." He stared at the soggy bar towel in his hand then back at me. "You realize this is nuts, right?"

Of course I did. But at least it was a chance at a real future. Something I hadn't had in a long time.

* * * * *

We went to see Garrett a few days later. Garth, a grizzled old Icon regular and one of Ted and Garrett's closest friends, answered the door and ushered us inside. I noticed more empty spaces on the wall as we walked through the foyer. Both of the Mapplethorpes were gone now. Chester approached me warily, giving my hand a quick sniff before scurrying off. Poor thing was lost without Ted's lap to curl up on.

Garrett looked so impossibly small and frail sitting in the chair by the window. The hand he extended to me felt like a bunch of matchsticks. My throat closed up a little when he motioned for us to sit then asked Garth to bring us some tea. He seemed so grateful to see us. I didn't want to imagine how lonely he was. Ted had been such a huge presence in all our lives, in every possible sense. Everything here seemed smaller and dimmer without him.

Garrett listened patiently while Mike and I laid out our plan to buy the bar. When we finished, he said softly, "You have no idea how glad I am to hear this. I was afraid I'd have to close the place. I can't handle its expenses and pay off Ted's medical bills too."

I exchanged a half-tense, half-hopeful look with Mike. "Look, we know you can get a better offer on the open market, but —"

"But in this economy, it'll take a year or longer to sell. I don't have that kind of time." He set down his cup, his shaky hand rattling the delicate bone china. "I'm willing to take a hundred thousand, plus five percent of your monthly net profits for the first three years. All current furniture, fixtures and inventory included."

Mike and I both started chuckling. In matters of business, Garrett wasn't the least bit feeble. With Ted tending bar out front and Garrett managing the back office, no wonder the Icon had been so successful for the past thirty years.

I nodded to Mike, he nodded to me then we both looked back at Garrett. "We'll talk it over and let you know by the end of the week, okay?" I asked.

"That will be fine."

We finished our tea and walked back to the Icon. Mike didn't go on shift for another hour, so we grabbed a table and sat down to hash it all out.

"I talked to the bank yesterday," I began. "Fifty thousand's the most they can give me against my apartment right now. Then there's the thirty thousand I've got in savings. I'll try selling my Neiman and Hockney prints too. That should bring another ten grand."

"Still leaves us ten short, sugar."

"I know. Maybe Garrett'll be willing to take it in installments. Better than waiting a year or more for another buyer to come along."

"Yeah, but we still have to come up with the cash eventually. My piss-poor paycheck sure as hell ain't gonna cover it."

I sighed. "Well, if I keep working for another few weeks, I can probably do it."

"You're fuckin' kidding me. You can make ten grand that fast?"

"I cleared a hundred and sixty grand last year, after taxes."

"You pay *taxes*?"

I laughed. "Of course I do. You think I want to go to jail?"

"Holy fuck! Looks like I'm in the wrong business." He let out a slow whistle. "'Course, it'd probably help if I looked like you and had a ten-inch dick."

God, Mike killed me sometimes. "I'm pretty sure I can manage it. One more month of peddling my ass and then I never have to again."

"Well, it ain't a cakewalk working here, if you remember correctly. Fistfights every weekend. Throwing out drunks. Mopping the bathroom after somebody's puked in it. Give it six months and you'll probably wish you were back turning tricks."

"No fucking way," I replied. "I don't care how rough it is. I don't even care if I'm here fifteen hours a day. Not as long as I've got Trev to go home to."

Chapter Eight

Thursday, July 15th, 3:43 p.m.

Making ten grand in a month? Not that easy, even at three hundred bucks an hour. I expected to spend the next few weeks with my legs in the air, but my clients, it seemed, had other ideas. Like taking family vacations or hiring other escorts because I couldn't fit them into my previously overbooked schedule.

It's my own fault for letting things slide. There's always some hot new guy to try out—someone younger and tighter, more adventurous. Someone who doesn't mind doing a little coke or grass on the client's dime. Obviously having standards nowadays means losing business.

And what clients I do have I'm trying to squeeze in on days when Trev's out of town. I haven't scheduled three appointments in a row since my first year in the business, but I'm doing it now, and that last one's always a challenge. There are only so many times a guy can come, after all. I stagger home sore and wrung out and fall face-first into my pillow. And the next day I get up and do it all over again.

Until this morning, when I sat down with my calculator and realized there's no way I'll make ten grand by the end of the month or even the middle of August. Not from my regular clients anyway, and I'm not getting enough new business from my website to take up the slack. Even if I did, I'd be worn down to a bloody stump by then.

So, no ten grand. No Icon. No quitting the business. And I'd disappoint Mike besides.

Unless I bite the bullet and call Charles. Something I swore I'd never, ever do. But it wouldn't be forever, not this time. Charles takes his biggest clients on a private Caribbean cruise every summer—and of course, he brings along entertainment. I used

to go on those cruises. Normally the clients would pick out one escort to spend the entire week with. Good money for not terribly strenuous work.

Charles usually schedules it at the beginning of August. Trev won't be in town then.

Not the way I'd prefer to do it, but it doesn't look like I have much of a choice. And I'll probably have to do some groveling to work my way back into Charles' good graces.

Nothing like eating a little crow for breakfast.

* * * * *

Or, as it turned out, for lunch. Charles wanted to meet me at that French-Asian place on Fifth where I'd eaten with Trev a few weeks ago—and had that confrontation with Ryan. Knowing Charles, I had a feeling the choice wasn't coincidental.

I arrived to find him already seated, sipping a Bloody Mary, dressed in a lightweight summer suit and crisp cream-colored shirt that showed off his spray tan. Time was, I would've leaned over to kiss him. Now I wanted to slap that self-satisfied smirk off his face.

I ordered a club soda and sat back, waiting for him to start gloating. When he didn't, I figured I might as well prompt him. "Go on, say it. You knew I'd be back eventually, right?"

"Face it, Cameron. You simply can't resist me." He bared his teeth. "Or, more accurately, you can't resist the money my clients pay you. I knew you couldn't maintain that expensive lifestyle of yours from your website and your pathetic handful of regulars."

"Fine," I snapped. "You were right. So here I am. Ready to work."

He studied me for a long moment, running a fingertip along the rim of his glass. "Do you really think me that stupid? I saw that guy you were sitting with here a few weeks ago. I saw you talking. I saw the way you looked at each other. He was no client."

A chill ran through me. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"And now comes the charmingly clumsy deflection. You shouldn't try to bluff me, Cam. Reading people is what I do best." He sat back, skewering me with a hard stare. "But you, on the other hand, have so many fine attributes. Your hands. Your cock. That hot, wet mouth. That tight ass. Does your new lover appreciate all your talents? Maybe I should call to congratulate him. After all, he's getting for free what others have paid thousands for."

"All right, knock it off. You've made your point."

"Actually, I was just getting to it. You're here because you want to work the cruise, correct?"

I let out a shaky laugh. "Is it that obvious?"

"We don't speak for ages, and then you call me up out of the blue two weeks ahead of time? Doesn't take an Einstein to figure it out. But I think you've gotten a little ahead of yourself. Who says I even want you back?"

Cue groveling. "You're right, I have lost money these past few weeks. But I'm sure you have too. Please, just give me the chance to make it up to you."

"In five days? It'll take longer than that to recoup the business you've made me lose."

"Not if you market it as my last engagement. You'll have clients trampling each other to outbid you for my time."

His eyes narrowed. "Someone's got a vastly overinflated notion of his own value."

"Not when I've been getting fifteen hundred for an overnight."

"Really?" He actually looked impressed. "Sounds like you've picked up some of my entrepreneurial skill. Not to mention my negotiating tactics." With a laugh, he added, "So it's true, then? You're quitting?"

I nodded. "It's time. I've had a good run, but I'm not getting any younger."

"And I doubt it sits too well with your new beau—that is, if he even knows. Does he, by the way?"

His incessant needling was starting to get on my nerves. "What fucking business is it of yours?"

"Take it easy, darling. You're not the first whore to give up the business for true love. In fact, I find it rather admirable." The waiter came by to take our lunch order, but Charles waved him off. "All right, you're in. Let's negotiate fees."

"Thirty thousand." Enough to pay off Garrett and still have enough left to cover my mortgage and the Icon's expenses for a few months. If this was my last job, I might as well make it count.

"You're joking. Twenty thousand, and that's being generous."

If he was offering me twenty, that meant he'd be getting at least forty. Which meant he could afford to cough up a little more. "Twenty-five."

"You must think your ass is made of solid gold."

"So did you, once upon a time."

For a second there, I could've sworn he looked positively wistful. "The more fool me. All right, twenty-five it is. And you'd damn well better earn it."

"When have I not?" I finished my club soda then pushed back my chair. "If you don't mind, I think I'll skip lunch."

"Off to meet the boyfriend, eh? Tell him I said hello."

"Don't be like that," I said softly. "You had your chance."

"I did indeed. And you might not believe me, but many's the time I've wished I'd kept you for myself."

I tried to smile but it didn't come easily. "I'll bet you say that to all the whores."

"No, I don't." I hadn't noticed it before, but he looked pale beneath his tan, and tired. Even a little skillfully applied makeup couldn't conceal the lines tugging at his mouth and around his eyes. Another lonely gay man staring middle age in the face. In

the five years I'd known him, I'd never pitied him before. But I did now. "Don't worry, darling. I won't say a word to your lover. You should know me well enough by now to know I was teasing."

I stopped to give his arm a quick squeeze before I left. "Thank you, Charles. You have no idea how much I appreciate this."

"Just do a good job. That's all I ask."

And for the first time in five years, I actually believed him.

* * * * *

The cruise was scheduled to leave Miami on the first Monday in August. I flew down that morning. A limousine met me at the airport and whisked me directly to the marina.

Heat smacked me in the face as I climbed out of the car—not a wet blanket this time, but a solid wall. The air tasted thick as soup, its fishy-briny undertone coating the insides of my nostrils. Sweat prickled my pores and slicked every inch of my skin.

The limo driver carried my lone black leather suitcase down to the pier, where a one-hundred-and-eight-foot motor yacht awaited. I'd been aboard a craft like this one before, on one of Charles' previous cruises. Three decks. Four luxurious staterooms. A salon complete with a wet bar and home entertainment system. A Cordon Bleu trained chef. Charles spared no expense on these little jaunts.

The steward showed me to my stateroom, which I would be sharing with one of the clients. I didn't see any other luggage, so apparently he hadn't arrived yet. It was indeed one of the plushest rooms I'd ever seen aboard ship. Soft, thick carpets. A king-sized bed. A shower big enough for two.

I unpacked my bag and was just heading in to rinse off my sticky coat of sweat when I spied an envelope on the bed with my name on it. Inside lay a stack of crisp new bills. I was pleased if a little surprised. Last time Charles didn't hand out payment until the trip was over. Still, it was reassuring to see this gesture of good faith from him.

So I showered, slathered on sun block, threw on khakis and a tank top and went up on deck, where Charles was holding court. Everyone appeared to have paired off already—or rather, Charles had paired everyone off. He loved pretending to play matchmaker, when the luck of the draw had already been settled by how much each client was willing to pay.

“Cameron!” he cried the moment he saw me, making a show of sweeping over to hand me a flute of champagne. From the look of his pink cheeks, he’d already had a glass or two himself. “How was your flight down?”

“Uneventful.” Thank God. I hated flying.

“I think you’ll like the gentleman I’ve chosen for you. He’s just arrived, in fact. C’mon, I’ll introduce you.”

His name was Roger. Tall, salt-and-pepper hair, late forties to early fifties. Blue eyes, glasses. Husky but not overweight. He had a shy, engaging manner and a nice smile. With a pang, I realized he reminded me a little of Trev.

Which also reminded me that I needed to call and leave Trev a message about being out of town. I should’ve done it before now but I knew he’d ask questions, and I didn’t like answering with lies. I’d lost count of how many times I’d told him I was out on auditions or at an acting class when I was really seeing clients.

But too late—we’d cast off and were cruising out of the marina. I tried dialing Trev’s number a couple of times but the call dropped before I got through his voicemail greeting.

So I plastered on my best social grin and let Charles introduce Roger and me to our cruise mates. There were three client-escort pairs in all, plus Charles—who, for some reason, hadn’t brought along a playmate this time. I didn’t recognize Harry, one of the other clients, or his escort Adam. But the other pair I definitely did recognize.

It was Lionel, the guy I was supposed to meet the night I’d met Trev. The drunken ass who wanted to tie me up and beat me and got royally pissed when I said no. He must’ve been even drunker than I thought that night, because now he looked at me

with absolutely no spark of recognition in his hard, mean little eyes. I wasn't sure whether to be grateful for that or not.

And of course, Charles would have to put him together with Ryan, a wet-behind-the-ears newbie with no idea how to handle a difficult client. Oh God. Just fucking perfect.

I left Roger chatting about the stock market with Charles, and Lionel and went over to see Ryan. He stood by himself at the stern of the yacht, watching its frothy wake flow back toward the marina. The boat's motion had kicked up a cool, refreshing breeze. I sighed in relief as it wafted over my flushed skin and lifted my hair off the back of my neck. I'd already started sweating again.

"Hey," he said without much enthusiasm.

"Hey yourself." Talk about inane. Well, what else was I supposed to say? I pondered it while I had a sip of the champagne. Veuve Clicquot, from the taste of it. Quality stuff, but sparkling wine always gave me a headache. I set it down on a nearby table and cleared my throat. "Looks like you decided to go through with it, huh?"

"I've been out on a few appointments. It's not so bad."

"So how'd you end up on the cruise? Charles doesn't usually pick brand-new guys for this."

"Charles said Lionel asked for me. He must've seen my photo on the website." Ryan shrugged. "He seems like an okay guy."

"Yeah, well, be careful."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I had an appointment with him once. It didn't go so well." Oh great. Now he looked like I'd just told him he had a date with Freddy Krueger. Not what I'd meant at all. "Look, if he asks you to do something you don't want to do, just tell him no. And if he gives you crap about it, get up and get out the room." I took a deep breath. "And come find me, okay?"

“O-okay, but...you think that’ll happen?”

“Probably not. But it’s always best to be prepared.” I smiled. “Like the Boy Scouts.”

The rest of the afternoon and evening plodded on in unremarkable fashion. I made small talk and pretended to be interested in Roger blathering away about his house on Fire Island and his new Porsche Boxster. Welcome to midlife crisis, gay version.

The food was good, if a bit too rich and oversauced for my tastes. I ate my salad and had fresh fruit for dessert, but still got up from the table with a rumbling belly. Fortunately I’d brought along some protein bars in my suitcase. I’d try to sneak one later.

Roger proved to be one of the easiest clients I’d ever had. He’d overindulged on the free-flowing champagne, then wine with dinner and after-dinner brandy, so I ended up half-carrying him back to the stateroom where I undressed him and got him into bed. One backrub later, and he was snoring away.

I scarfed down a protein bar, brushed my teeth and took a sleeping pill. I wasn’t that tired but there was nothing to do on these excursions except eat, drink, sleep and fuck. Now I wished I’d brought along a book. If the rest of the week went like this, I might just die of boredom.

* * * * *

I woke around eight the next morning, with Roger still sawing wood next to me. I waited another half hour for him to wake up. When he didn’t, I got up, took a shower and went up to the dining room.

The chef was on duty so I decided to take him up on his offer of an omelet. Three fresh organic eggs with milk, salt and pepper whisked in, filled with goat cheese, chopped green onions and mushrooms. Some fresh fruit and a huge mug of coffee and I was all set.

It was every bit as delicious as it looked, light and creamy, floating like air over my tongue. I’d just taken my last bite when Ryan trudged in. He nodded at me as I waved

him over. I couldn't help noticing the stiffness in his shoulders and how carefully he sat down. Looked like he'd been through the mill. He already had a pair of steamer trunks under his eyes.

"Rough night?" I asked, pouring him some coffee from the carafe the chef left for me.

"Yeah, Lionel kept me up for most of it—literally. I tell you, he's into some kinky shit, man." He shrugged. "But I guess that's what he's paying me for, right?"

I wanted to say something but I hesitated. I'd already said too much yesterday. It wasn't my place to get involved here. On the other hand, if somebody had cared enough to give me a few pointers when I'd started out, it would've saved me a lot of grief. "Mind if I give you a little advice?"

"Sure, why not?"

"If you're getting sore, it's okay to ask him to stop. Offer him a blowjob or a hand job, or just take a break. We've still got four days on this boat. It won't be much fun for either of you if you're worn down to a nub by tomorrow."

"Try telling him that. I think he's taking Viagra or something. He never fucking stops. Or stops fucking." He folded his arms on the table and rested his chin on them. He looked ready to nod off on the spot. "He finally crashed about an hour ago. Hope he stays asleep for a while."

"I've got some sleeping pills I could give you if you want. Put one in his drink tonight and he'll be out within half an hour."

He thought about it a moment, then nodded. "Thanks, man. I appreciate it."

Roger was awake when I got back to the stateroom—in every possible sense. He put me through my paces for the next hour or so until we collapsed in a sticky, exhausted pile. Beneath that unassuming exterior lurked the libido of a caged tiger. Why was it always the quiet ones you had to watch out for?

We got in the shower together and he fucked me again under the stinging-hot spray. I pressed my face to the tile and closed my eyes. It felt wrong to be thinking of Trev at a time like this, but I couldn't help it. Four more days until I could be with him forever. Until I never had to fuck another guy for money ever again.

Four more days until I never had to tell another lie.

* * * * *

I spent the next day or so lounging on deck in between bouts of bedroom Olympics with Roger. We dropped anchor outside Nassau on the third day but I didn't bother going ashore. I'd been there a couple years ago on one of the previous cruises. I much preferred to bask in the peace and quiet and get a decent tan.

After baking first on one side then the other, I started to get drowsy – and nodding off under the blistering tropical sun wasn't such a great idea. Roger was ashore, so this was the perfect time for me to take a nap. I grabbed my towel and headed for my stateroom.

I had to pass by Lionel and Ryan's stateroom to get to mine. Evidently they hadn't gone ashore, if the grunts, groans and bed creaking on the other side of the door were any indication. Jesus. Lionel really didn't know when to say quit.

Then there came a sharp cracking sound – a sound I recalled vividly from my single short-lived appointment with him – followed by a pained shout. Then I heard crying. It was Ryan, begging for Lionel to stop.

Maybe it was all just play-acting. I'd done SM play before, and I'd seen other people doing it. Some were fond of putting on a show of protesting, saying no or stop when they really didn't mean it. But it didn't sound to me like Ryan was faking. I tried the door, but it was locked.

Another crack, another scream – stark and raw this time, ripped from the bottom of a terrified throat.

That was it. I'd heard enough. "Open up!" I yelled, banging on the door with my fist. No answer. The room had gone quiet. Too damn quiet. "Open this door right now, Lionel, or I'll get the steward to do it."

The door opened just wide enough to reveal Lionel's beady eyeball. "What the fuck do you want?" he snapped.

"What're you doing in there? I heard screaming."

"We're just having a little fun. Nothing to worry about, all right?"

"I'd like for Ryan to tell me that himself. Let me see him."

"Are you crazy? Leave us alone!"

"Fuck that." I gave the door a hard shove with my shoulder and it flew open. Lionel flailed, wheeled back and landed flat on his ass on the floor.

Laughter died in my throat at the sight of Ryan lying facedown on the bed, his back covered in bruises and welts. His face was all red and puffy, streaked with tears. His wrists were still tied to the headboard with rough twine that had cut into the flesh and made him bleed.

There was a penknife on the bedside table. I used it to cut Ryan free then grabbed a robe with the yacht's insignia on it from the back of the bathroom door and wrapped him in it. Even with my help, it took a couple minutes before he could sit up. He looked at me, but I wasn't sure if his eyes were focusing.

"C'mon," I murmured, "let's go to my room. I'll get you cleaned up."

"Get your hands off him!" Lionel shouted. "I paid for him, and I'll do whatever —"

It took my last shred of will to keep from strangling the twisted fuck right then and there. "You might want to think about keeping your mouth shut, Lionel."

But of course, he didn't. "You can't do this to me!"

"We'll see what Charles has to say about that."

I looped Ryan's arm around my shoulder and helped him stagger across the hall to my stateroom. He perched on the edge of the bed while I blotted his poor abused back

with a warm, moist towel. There were a lot of marks. Some were bright red and relatively fresh, while others had darkened into an entire range of sickly-looking hues.

I had to take a deep breath before I could ask, "How long was he beating on you?"

"A few of 'em are from the first night. Don't remember 'em hurting that bad, but I'd had a few drinks." His throat sounded scratchy, so I went in the bathroom to get him a glass of water. He downed the whole thing in one gulp. "The second night I gave him that pill and he slept straight through 'til the next morning. But he must've figured out I drugged him, 'cause he's been in a really fucking bad mood ever since. Then this morning after everyone left, he broke out the whip again."

Shit! If I hadn't been so busy with Roger, I probably would've heard something. And if I hadn't given him that fucking sleeping pill, this might not have happened at all. Why the hell hadn't I noticed that Ryan hadn't shown up for breakfast this morning?

"I'm sorry," I said. "I should've paid closer attention."

"To what? It's not your fault."

"Ryan, it's nothing but my fault. First what happened at the hotel, then you going to work for Charles, and now this. If you wanted to deck me, I wouldn't blame you."

He let out a ragged chuckle. "Think I'll wait 'til you finish what you're doing first. It feels kinda good."

I rubbed antibiotic ointment into the welts on his back then moved on to his wrists. Christ! What kind of fucking idiot used packing twine to tie people up? Lionel deserved to be in jail. Or, failing that, blackballed from Charles' client list for life.

* * * * *

I let Ryan change into a pair of my jeans and a long-sleeved shirt to cover the cuts on his wrists and we waited in the salon for Charles to return from his day trip to Nassau. Harry, Adam and Roger traipsed in with him and headed en masse for the bar.

Charles was about to do the same, until I stood and blocked his way. "We need to talk. All three of us."

He rolled his eyes. "I can't leave the ship for one afternoon without the entire world falling apart? Whatever it is, it can wait."

"No, it can't. And believe me, you don't want to discuss this out here."

He glanced at me, then at Ryan, then back at me. "All right," he said with a sigh. "Let's go down to my stateroom."

I explained to Charles what I'd seen and what Ryan told me. He didn't seem terribly shocked. Then I remembered how he'd reacted when I'd told him about my own encounter with Lionel. Charles' main concern had been money – and making sure Lionel was taken care of.

He fidgeted in his chair and finally cut me off. "What do you expect me to do – throw him overboard?"

"Put him off the boat here in Nassau. He shouldn't have any problem getting a plane back to the States."

"Out of the question. You haven't even convinced me he's done anything wrong. How do I know he and Ryan didn't negotiate a heavy scene, and now Ryan's simply had a change of heart?"

"I agreed to it the first night, but I was drunk and so was he," Ryan said softly. "But what he did to me today... I kept asking him to stop, but he wouldn't. He fucked me a couple of times while I was tied up. I couldn't see what he was doing, but I'm pretty sure he didn't wear a condom either time."

Poor kid couldn't even look at us while he was talking. As if he was the one to blame.

"That's grounds for kicking him off right there," I said.

Charles shook his head. "I don't get involved in that sort of thing. I leave condom use up to the individual clients and escorts."

"I'm sure Ryan would've chosen to use them, wouldn't you, Ryan?"

Ryan nodded, looking right at Charles.

A very long moment ticked by.

At last, Charles said, "Ryan, if you want to continue with the cruise, I'll consider the matter closed. If not, I'll have you taken to the Nassau airport first thing tomorrow. You will, of course, forfeit the last two days of your fee, and you will never work for my agency again. Or any other agency in New York, if I have anything to say about it."

I couldn't fucking believe what I'd just heard. And then, suddenly, I could. "What the hell does that bastard have on you —"

"I want off," Ryan interjected at the same time. "I don't give a fuck about the money. I just want to go home."

"Fine," Charles said to Ryan, even as he shot me a skin-flaying look. "You can eat and sleep in the crew's quarters tonight. I'll have your things brought to you there. Now go."

I waited until Ryan had shut the door and I heard his footsteps fading in the distance before I turned back to Charles. "You going to answer my question?"

"What question was that?"

"Don't play coy with me, Charles. That asshole's obviously holding something over your head."

Charles got up, went over to the minibar and poured himself a double Glenfiddich. "You know me, darling. I can't resist a pretty face. One evening about six months ago I was out... Well, doing what I do, when this gorgeous young vision caught my eye. One thing led to another, as it usually does, and he started working for me. A few weeks later, a lawyer representing the boy's family shows up on my doorstep. It was Lionel."

That couldn't be the whole story. "And?"

"And the boy was a rich, underage brat looking for a thrill. Sixteen years old."

"Holy shit," I breathed.

“Exactly. And Lionel told me that if I didn’t cater to his particular desires, he’d see to it that I spent the next twenty years of my life in jail.”

“Charles, I’m sorry. Jesus.”

“But it’s all worked out for the best, because now I have something on him.” He took a healthy sip of his scotch. “There’s a camera in Lionel’s stateroom. Call it insurance.”

I stared at him. Even for Charles, this was pretty fucking cold. “You mean, you knew he’d beat up Ryan, and you still—”

“It was always my intention to stop it before it went too far, and I’m truly sorry that I didn’t. But where Ryan’s concerned, I’ve done him a favor. He’s not cut out for this business. He doesn’t have your temperament or your resilience.”

“Then what was all that bullshit about giving him a choice on leaving or staying?”

“It’s not as if I didn’t know which option he’d pick. Better for him and me if he leaves of his own accord. And don’t worry—I’ll put Lionel off the boat once Ryan’s safely winging his way home tomorrow.”

“That’s something, at least.” I stepped toward the door. “But I’m paying him back the money he’s forfeited out of my fee, considering I’m the reason he ended up working for you in the first place.”

“No need.” Charles smiled. “I’ll send it to him once he gets home.”

Chapter Nine

Friday, August 6th, 6:43 p.m.

Back home—finally!

The boat docked in Miami around ten this morning. I caught the first plane back. Oh, muggy, miserable Manhattan in August, how I've missed you!

And that's not the only thing I've missed. There are half a dozen messages from Trev on my phone. Can't wait to answer them.

* * * * *

I took a quick shower then flopped naked on the bed and reached for my cell phone.

Trev picked up on the second ring. "Cameron? Where have you been? I've been trying to get in touch with you since Wednesday."

"Sorry, but I had to go out of town for a few days. It was kind of...unexpected." God. I wanted to bite my tongue off the moment I said it. So much for not telling any more lies. But this was it. The absolute last time.

"For work?"

"Yeah, um, something like that."

"And they don't have cell phone service where you went?"

"I'm sorry, I really am. I just got busy and forgot to check my messages." I sat up with a sigh, tucking a pillow behind me. "You still planning to be in town next week?"

"That's actually why I called. I was thinking of flying in tomorrow with Brian. I'd love for him to finally meet you."

Talk about being blindsided. I hadn't expected this at all. "S-sounds great. But what's he going to do all week while you're at work?"

"Oh, he's just coming in for the weekend. I thought we could have dinner at the hotel tomorrow night and Sunday maybe go out somewhere together? He's been dying to see the natural history museum."

And here I'd hoped to have a day or two to catch my breath before I had to venture out into the real world again. But Jesus, what was I complaining about? Trev wanted me to meet his *son*! All of a sudden my stomach started doing somersaults.

"I'd love to," I said. "Shall I meet you around eight tomorrow night, in the lobby?"

"It's a date." When he used that soft, shy tone I loved so much, I could almost see him smiling. "God, Cam, I've missed you. Can't wait until we can see each other every day."

"Me too. Only a little while longer, right?"

"I know. But it still feels like forever."

"Well, tomorrow night's not forever. See you then, okay?"

"Okay. Goodnight, love."

The line clicked off.

I sat there staring at my phone for a minute or two. He'd called me "love". He'd never done that before. My heart thudded. My hands trembled. I tingled all over.

I'd never spoken that word to him myself. I'd been too afraid of putting it out there, making it real. But now there was nothing stopping me. No reason to hold back.

So I'd do it. I'd tell him tomorrow night. And everything would be perfect.

* * * * *

I put on the same dark suit I'd worn the night Trev and I met, with my favorite pale blue shirt and silk tie. The cab dropped me at the Park Regent ten minutes early, just long enough to duck into the gift shop to pick up a dozen red roses for Trev and something for Brian too. Sadly, there wasn't much among this motley assortment of stuffed animals and other nifty-gifty items that a fifteen-year-old boy would like. That's what I got for leaving this until the last minute.

I ended up getting a five-hundred-piece dinosaur jigsaw puzzle. Trev said Brian liked natural history, so maybe he wouldn't think it was too lame.

The elevator dinged as I walked out of the gift shop and out stepped Trev and Brian. They were both dressed casually, Trev in slacks and a green polo shirt, Brian in jeans and a black t-shirt with some band I'd never heard of on it. He looked exactly like Trev, albeit half a head shorter and twenty-three years younger. Same blond hair and green eyes. Same shy smile—

That faded away the moment he saw me.

I pasted on a smile for Trev's benefit and handed him the roses I'd bought him. My pulse tripped double-time when he threw his arms around me and kissed me right in the middle of the lobby. Right in front of his kid, who looked like he wouldn't mind if the floor swallowed him up.

Trev, however, was apparently oblivious. He introduced Brian and me then stood there expectantly as I held out my hand to him. Brian stared at it, shook it once and let go. Then he wiped his own hand off on his jeans.

Jesus. This carried awkward to a whole new level.

"I got something for you too," I said, handing him the puzzle. "It's dinosaurs."

"Yeah, that's what the box says." He looked at it as if it were something he'd stepped in on the street. "Thanks."

Awkward turned up to eleven.

"Well," I continued, "I skipped lunch because I knew we were eating here tonight. So why don't we go in?"

"I'm all for that," Trev said as we walked over to the dining room entrance.

They seated us promptly at the same cozy booth where Trev and I sat the night we'd met. Made me wonder if he'd asked for this specific table when he made the reservation.

Same low, romantic lighting. Same cool jazz pumped in from the bar. I remembered how nervous Trev was that night. But tonight things were definitely reversed.

So Trev's son didn't care for me. Not that surprising. He probably blamed me for his dad moving away. Time to let him know that I wasn't a threat to their relationship.

"Is this your first trip to New York, Brian?" I asked.

"No."

I exchanged a glance with Trev. "When were you here before?"

"I was twelve. We came here on holiday. Went to the zoo and a Yankees game. With my dad *and* my mom."

Now things were a little clearer—or maybe not. Did Brian think I was the reason his parents had divorced?

"Sounds like a lot of fun," I went on. "I hope you'll come back more often once your dad moves. I've lived here in the city for over ten years now. I'd love to have the chance to show you around."

He shrugged. "Whatever."

Well, I'd tried. Best not to keep pushing. He'd come around eventually.

We ordered petite filets with baked potatoes and steamed asparagus tips, a bottle of pinot noir for Trev and me and a soda for Brian. Brian didn't seem interested in joining the conversation, so Trev and I discussed the goings-on in his office and eventually worked our way around to the details of his move. Three more weeks. The butterflies in my belly were already dancing the cha-cha. We exchanged knowing smiles across the table. What I really wanted was to drag him upstairs and fuck him into next week, but obviously that wasn't in the cards tonight.

"The company's trying to find me an apartment but it might take a while," Trev said, finally pushing his dinner plate away. "Apparently they're in such short supply, people scan the obituaries trying to find vacancies. I had no idea."

"Yeah, it's pretty bad. It eased up a little at the beginning of the recession, but that's because everybody was getting evicted." I looked over at Brian. He'd apparently discovered something fascinating stuck under one of his fingernails. "Look, this is silly. I've got plenty of room at my place. Why don't you just move in with me?"

Trev burst out in the happiest, sunniest smile I'd seen in ages. "You're serious?"

"Of course I am. There's even an office down at the end of the hallway that I've never used. We can turn that into a bedroom for Brian."

That got Brian to look up. His glance bounced from me to his father then back to me. "Won't it be kinda crowded with us there, and all your *friends* too?"

Trev laughed. "We don't plan on doing any elaborate entertaining, do we, Cam?"

"I meant *his* friends."

A shiver twisted up my spine but I shrugged it off. "I hardly ever invite people over, Brian. So if you're worried about your privacy... Well, don't be."

"That's not what I heard," Brian snapped.

"That's enough," Trev interjected. Those tight lines sprang up around his mouth, the ones he got when he was pissed off. "Brian, I don't like your tone. Apologize to Cameron."

"Fuck that," Brian stated, staring Trev in the face. "Why should I do anything you say? You're never around anymore. You don't even know me anymore. And you sure as fuck don't know *him*." He jumped up from the booth and stomped out of the restaurant.

Trev stared after him. "I should probably —"

"Go follow him. I'll take care of the check."

"Thank you." He leaned in to give me a kiss. "I'm so sorry. He doesn't usually behave like that. He seemed really excited to meet you on the flight down. Maybe it was too soon."

"Maybe it's that. Or maybe it's because he's a teenage boy who's just realized he's never getting back the nuclear family he lost a few months ago. He's scared and he's angry, and I'm the nearest convenient target. So cut him a little slack, okay? I wasn't offended."

"Thanks for being so understanding. I appreciate it."

Now was the time to say it—the three magic words I'd been rehearsing all day. But they wouldn't come. They'd caught in my throat like a giant lump. All I could do was nod.

"Okay, then." Trev got up, giving me a sheepish smile. "Still want to brave the natural history museum with us tomorrow?"

"Absolutely." I smiled back. "I don't scare that easily."

* * * * *

I showed up back at the hotel at noon on Sunday and headed straight up to Trev's room. I knocked several times before he answered. He stood there in the doorway giving me a strange, almost suspicious look, as if he were trying to decide whether to let me in.

At last he stepped back and let me pass. But something didn't feel right. There were two beds, but only one looked like it had been slept in. Only one suitcase, sitting open on a chair near the rumpled bed.

"Where's Brian?" I asked. "Is he still in the shower?"

"No. I sent him home on the redeye last night."

I studied his face for a moment. He still hadn't cracked a smile. He didn't look happy to see me at all. "Did something else happen?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

"Well...are you going to tell me?"

Trev beckoned me over to the desk. He opened his laptop, fired up his web browser and started typing in an URL. I recognized it before the page began loading.

My website. With a nice big photo of my face on the front page, and a whole bunch of nude ones once Trev clicked through. Not to mention my email address and phone number. The same number Trev had been calling me on for the past three months.

“Brian showed this to me last night. He stumbled across it months ago, in the course of...exploring his sexuality.” Then he turned to look at me. The expression on his face was...

Devastated. Wrecked. *Betrayed.*

“Were you ever going to tell me about this?” His voice cracked on the last word.

My legs swayed and nearly went out from under me. I had to grip the edge of the desk to stay upright. This couldn’t be happening. Not now. Not when we were so close to being happy. “T-Trev, I don’t know what to say...”

“How about the truth, for a change?” He stood and stared me in the face. “That night we met, you acted different. More confident, more...professional. And you took my envelope off the bar. You thought it had money in it, didn’t you? You thought I was some *trick* who’d hired you to fuck me.”

“Yes.” Might as well get it all out now before that sob clawed its way out of my lungs and I couldn’t talk anymore. “It was a mistake. I thought you were someone else.”

“Then why did you bother calling me back or going for coffee with me? Is this some kind of game? Make the poor slob fall for you, then milk him for everything he’s got?”

“No! God, no! I went out with you because I liked you. Because I enjoyed spending time with you, and then because I fell in lo—”

“Stop it. Just stop it, all right? You honestly think I’ll believe anything you say now?” He folded his arms across his chest. “You’re good, I’ll give you that. You really should be an actor. Inviting me over and cooking me dinner. Swearing you’d never invited another man into your bedroom before. Pretending you fucking *cared*. You sure had me fooled.”

"I didn't pretend anything!"

"The hell you didn't! You lied to me about *everything*!"

I let my eyes drift shut for a moment. "Okay, I did lie to you about a lot of things, but never about how I felt about you. Never about anything that really mattered."

"Other than you fucking other guys for a *living*?"

"That doesn't matter to me. They don't matter. *You* do." For a second I thought I saw a flicker of empathy in his eyes. If he was ever going to believe me, this was the time. "I love you, Trev. I don't want to be with anyone else anymore. So I quit. I just finished my last job. Mike and I are buying the Icon. I want to spend what's left of my life doing honest work and being happy with the man I love."

"Is that where you were these past few days, when I couldn't get hold of you?"

I nodded. "But I told you, it's over. It's in the past. It doesn't matter anymore."

"It matters to me."

"Trev, please —"

"You don't get it, do you, Cam? I can never trust you again. And I'm certainly never letting you anywhere near my son."

Of all the hurtful things he'd said to me, that stung the worst. "I would never, *ever* do anything to Brian."

"So you say." He swallowed hard. "Is Cameron even your real name?"

"It's my middle name."

"Well, I guess that's not exactly a lie." He sat down heavily on the desk chair, rubbing a hand over his face. "You should leave now."

My mind raced, searching for something, anything that might persuade him. But I'd already confessed my love, and that hadn't worked. "Please just give me a chance to —"

"Get out, or I'll call security and have you thrown out."

I was about to protest again until I saw the look in his eyes. No more compassion or understanding. They'd gone flat. Dead. Like stone. Just like my father's eyes the day he shut me out of his life forever.

That was it, then. No point arguing any further.

"A-all right," I said. "I understand. I'm going."

This time he didn't even look at me. I turned around and walked out.

Chapter Ten

Sunday, August 8th, 8:27 p.m.

It's all over but the crying, as the saying goes. I began writing this blog as a chronicle of my life in the escort business and to help me work through my feelings about Trev and our relationship. Since neither the job nor Trev is a relevant factor in my life anymore, I've decided to make this my final entry.

Tomorrow morning Mike and I go to see Garrett, to sign the final sale papers for the Icon. A new chapter in my life looms ahead of me like a giant question mark. I have no idea if it will work out or not. All I can do is keep working, keep moving forward. Because I have no intention of going back the way I came.

I told myself I was doing this because of Trev, so we could be together. But today I realized I'm really doing it for me.

Wish I could tell Trev, but he doesn't answer my calls. I can't blame him. I lied to him about some pretty fucking important things. I can't expect him to ever forgive me.

Tonight I sent him an email with a link to this blog. I'll leave it up for another month or so. Maybe he'll read it. And maybe then, even if he can't forgive, at least he'll understand.

But Trev, if you are reading this... I want you to know that our time together wasn't a lie. It's the most real thing that's ever happened to me.

I've been with more guys than I can remember, but I've only loved one. And I still do.

* * * * *

Mike and I had to scramble to get the Icon ready for its grand reopening Labor Day weekend. Ted's long illness had taken its toll on the place, maintenance-wise. The front

was clean and in relatively good repair, but the office was a disaster. Dust an inch thick, papers strewn everywhere. Fortunately Garrett had handed over the bill paying to his accountant. Otherwise we would've been in real trouble. Still, it'd take awhile to put it all back in order.

The storeroom wasn't in much better shape, with half-empty crates of booze stacked five and six high. I spent a solid afternoon separating out the scotch from the vodka and gin and discovered three extra cases of Johnnie Walker Red that Mike swore he hadn't ordered. Obviously the place hadn't been inventoried in ages.

Dusty, sweaty and exhausted, I trudged out to the front and grabbed myself a beer. It was still early, so the place wasn't that busy yet. I swung onto a stool and gulped down an icy-cold mouthful. God. I'd forgotten how good a beer could taste after a hard day's work.

Eventually Mike wandered down to my end of the bar, shooting me an "I told you so" look. "Takes a lot out of you, doesn't it, sugar? Runnin' this place, I mean."

"It's not that bad. In fact, I'm actually starting to enjoy it. Might as well keep busy. It's not like I've got anybody waiting for me at home."

"He's had enough time to cool down. Why don't you just call him?"

I shook my head. "He doesn't want to hear from me."

"How do you know? Maybe he's sitting in another bar right now, thinking of you."

"I doubt it. You didn't hear the things he said."

"And you've never said anything you regretted when you were mad?"

"Doesn't matter now. Besides, I've got a pretty full plate right here. That storeroom's not going to clean itself."

"I always knew you were a fuckin' masochist." His gaze drifted to the front door and froze there, as he let out a low-pitched wolf whistle. "Who is that tasty morsel? Don't recall seein' him around here before."

It was Ryan. I'd scribbled the Icon's address on the back of my business card before Charles had packed him off to the Nassau airport and told him to look me up when he was feeling better. The big smile on his face clearly pointed in that direction.

"Hey," he said, nodding at the seat next to mine. "This one taken?"

"Not at the moment." I grinned. "How have you been? Your back healing up okay?"

"Good as new and ready to go back to work—if, you know, I actually had a job."

"Funny you should mention that." I quickly introduced him to Mike, and vice versa. "So," I went on, glancing at Mike, "what do you think? Could we use an extra pair of hands around here?"

Mike pondered it a moment then shrugged. "Don't see why not. JoJo's only available Fridays and Saturdays. I'm used to flying solo the rest of the week, but a girl's got to get her beauty sleep every now and then."

Ryan gave me the cutest bewildered look. "Drag-queen humor," I replied. "You'll get used to it."

"Why don't you have a beer, sweetheart?" Mike cracked open a Rolling Rock and set it in front of Ryan. "So, where'd you say you two met?"

"We didn't," I interjected. "Knock it off. He's my friend."

"Aw, sugar, you know I didn't mean nothin' by it."

I waved him away. "We've got customers down at the other end. Why don't you take care of 'em, *partner*?"

"Fine." Mike rolled his eyes, slinging his bar towel over his shoulder. He waggled his fingers at Ryan before heading off. "I'll see *you* later."

Ryan took a long swig of his beer, his gaze following Mike's retreating back. "Should I be worried about him?"

"Nah, he's harmless 'til he puts on a wig and a dress. Then all bets are off." We both laughed. "You ever worked in a place like this before?"

"You mean a gay bar? Nope, never."

"Does the idea bother you?"

"Compared to what I've been doing the last couple of months? No way. I'm fine with it."

"Ever tended bar before?"

"Back when I was in school. It's been a while, though."

"Don't worry, we'll get you up to speed—literally. It can get a little hairy around here on the weekends."

"Hey, bring it on, man. I'm ready."

I clinked my bottle against his and grinned. "Me too."

* * * * *

The grand reopening was an astounding success. The place was packed all weekend with customers gathered around the bar five deep and spilling out onto the sidewalk.

By Sunday night we were all worn down to a ragged edge—punch-drunk and wrung out, but happy as hell. We'd made enough in the past three days to cover our expenses for the next month. It wouldn't always be like this, of course, but for now I was content to bask in the afterglow of a job well done.

It was closing in on nine. The crowd had wound down, trickled out. Headed home to sleep off an afternoon of way too much fun. Ryan circulated among the tables, wiping them off, refilling baskets of pretzels. Mike was serenading the few remaining stragglers with his last song of the night, a kick-ass version of *Lady Marmalade*.

Three hours until I could go home and fall face first into my pillow. Might as well do something to keep myself awake. I'd just turned to the sink to wash the last blender carafe I'd used when a voice behind me said, "May I have a glass of pinot noir, please?"

Trev.

First I froze. Then I turned around. "I wasn't expecting to see you here. Or anywhere else, for that matter."

"Saw your *Times* ad about the bar reopening under new management. Thought I'd drop by." He glanced around the room. "Hope it's been a success for you."

"Yeah, it's been nonstop hilarity. First time it's calmed down in three days."

"I can imagine. You look all in." He bit his lip. "So, you really did quit, huh?"

"I told you."

"I know and...I should have believed you. I wanted to, Cam. You don't know how much."

God, no. I was *not* going to break down out here in front of everyone. "Trev, don't..."

"Is there someplace we could talk in private? Just for a few minutes?"

I nodded and beckoned Ryan over then motioned for Trev to follow me to the office. There was a banker's box stuffed full of papers on the only chair. I set it on the floor and let Trev take the chair while I perched on the edge of the desk.

"I read your blog," Trev said. "I don't know why you said you weren't a good writer. I blitzed through the whole thing in an afternoon."

Flattering, but not exactly what I'd hoped to hear. "And?"

"And...it clarified a lot of things for me."

"Such as?"

"Well, I understand now why you lied. You didn't want to deceive me, you were just afraid. As afraid as I would've been in your position."

I chortled. "Except you've never been in my position."

"Not your specific circumstances, no. But I've lied. Hell, I lied for sixteen years. To myself. To my wife. To my whole family. I've hurt so many people with the lies I told. And yet they've all forgiven me. Seems only fair to do the same for you."

All of a sudden I felt fifty pounds lighter. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

"Think you can ever forgive me?"

"For what? Doubting me when I gave you every reason to? I already have. But I did more than just lie to you. A lot more."

"You've got a past. So what? So has everybody, except me."

"Trev, you don't mean—"

"The truth is, I've been miserable these past few weeks. I know I said awful, hateful things to you. I was upset and angry and hurt then, and I wasn't thinking clearly. But I am now. And I know I don't want to go through the rest of my life without you. Do you think... Well, would you consider giving us another chance?"

I wanted to move, wanted to take his hand and pull him into my arms. But I didn't. I just stood there like a stupid idiot, trying to hold back tears. Then Trev stood and wrapped his arms around me and my last fiber of resistance snapped.

No, damn it, I was *not* going to cry! Wasn't this the moment I hadn't dared to dream of a couple weeks ago? I could feel the happiness rise up, blooming inside me like a ball of fire. I started to shake and probably would've fallen over if Trev hadn't been there to hold me up. I felt his hands slide up my back. Heard his voice murmur gentle, soothing words.

I pulled back, intending to say something, but the words never materialized. I looked at Trev, and he looked at me. Then I buried my fingers in his hair and leaned in to kiss him.

Mike barreled through the door, still in full Michelle drag. He took one look at us and planted his hands on his lamé-clad hips. "Well, it's about fuckin' time you two made up!" He nodded at me. "We'd be waiting forever if I'd left it up to you!"

I stared at Mike, then at Trev. "You said you saw the ad in the paper."

"I did." He grinned. "After Mike called to tell me about it."

"That'll teach you to leave your phone layin' around where anyone can find it." Now Mike grinned. "Go on and get out of here before I dropkick your asses out the

front door.” Didn’t need to tell Trev twice. He grabbed my hand and yanked me along behind him. “You can thank me later!” Mike called after us.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head on Trev’s shoulder during the cab ride back to my apartment. My hand skimmed his chest, absorbing his warmth and the soft, steady beat of his heart.

He rode up in the elevator with me, stumbled through the door with me and back to the bedroom. The sight of my big soft bed almost made my knees buckle. But first I needed to shower off today’s sticky layer of sweat.

I peeled off my t-shirt, jeans and briefs and left them where they fell, then padded into the bathroom. The lukewarm spray flowed over my skin like a benediction, washing away my sins along with the grime. It seemed only appropriate.

Trev waited for me in the bedroom, already under the covers. I climbed in beside him, gasping at the contrast between the cool, smooth sheets and his warm body. His erection rubbed my belly as he rolled me onto my back and kissed me deeply. He tasted better than champagne. Better than that bottle of pinot noir we’d shared our first real evening together.

“Why didn’t you hop in the shower with me and cool off?” I asked.

“Who says I want to cool off?”

He kissed me again and again until I melted under his touch, then eased on top of me and started rubbing our cocks together. I wrapped my arm around his waist, holding him as we moved, our hips flexing and thrusting.

I came with a broken cry, swallowed up by Trev’s mouth on mine. He followed a few seconds later, collapsing in my arms for a moment or two before rolling off. I panted, dizzy. The room swam before my eyes. Felt like I’d just stepped off a rollercoaster.

Trev kissed me again then got up and went into the bathroom. He came back with a warm, moist towel and wiped off my chest and belly, followed by his own. It felt good to be cherished, taken care of. I was so used to taking care of everyone else.

I traced the outline of his soft lips with my fingertips. "Still can't believe you're really here. Guess this means you took the promotion after all?"

"Couldn't afford to pass it up. My company doesn't extend offers like that twice."

"I'm glad for you. You've worked hard. You deserve it."

"I'm not the only one." He propped himself up on one elbow. "You sure you'll be able to keep up such a hectic pace?"

"It's tough, but I love it. I mean, it's *my* place. My business. My roof. My floor. My four walls. Sure, I'm tired when I close up shop after a long day, but it's a *good* kind of tired. The kind of tired you get after you've really accomplished something."

"Sounds like a great feeling."

"It is. But I know one that's even better." I kissed him again. "My name's David, by the way. David Cameron Donovan. It's my dad's first name too, which is why I stopped using it. Too many bad memories. But that doesn't matter now. If you'd rather call me David, it's fine with me."

He thought about it a moment then shook his head. "Nah, I like Cameron. It suits you better."

I smiled. "No more lies, I promise. No more holding back. This time everything will be perfect, I swear."

"Stop, okay? Nobody can swear to that."

"Trev —"

"Let's take it slow this time. We went from zero to sixty right out of the gate our first time around. And yeah, I know that was mostly my fault. I was afraid I'd never get another chance with you. Now I know better." He grinned. "There's nothing wrong with a leisurely courtship. Believe me, I'm not going anywhere."

I nodded. He was right, of course. Time to ease up on the pressure and simply enjoy each other's company for a while. Living together could wait. In fact, the waiting might

make everything that much sweeter. “You’ve become much wiser about these things – a lot wiser than me, apparently. Not to mention an amazing lover.”

“I did learn from the best.”

“I’ve got a feeling you could teach me a thing or two,” I said, and pulled him close so he could do just that.

The End

About the Author

Multi-published author Cat Grant lives by the beautiful sea in California with one persnickety feline and entirely too many books and DVDs. She's now hard at work on another hot, sexy tale for Ellora's Cave.

Cat welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer ebooks or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com