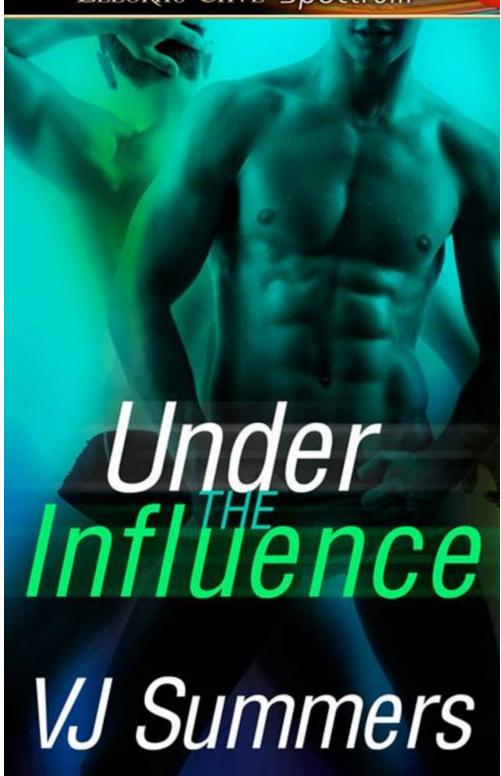
# ELLORA'S CAVE Spectrum



#### **Under the Influence**

### VI Summers

Working undercover in a club to bust a dealer should be routine. And it would be, if Max wasn't distracted by a gorgeous Goth-boy. He wants to bury his hands in Ben's spiky black hair, bury something else in his pouty red mouth. When his sweet candy boy refuses to stay away from the dangerous club where patrons are ODing in record numbers, Max doesn't know if he should beat some sense into Ben—or fuck it into him.

With his thesis on the Goth subculture finished, Ben has no reason to hang around Candyland anymore. Except for Max. The brooding bouncer is too tempting, even if he can't seem to decide whether to push Ben away or pull him closer. But Ben will take what he can get, because when Max *pulls*, it's mind-blowing.

As the ODs continue, Max tries to fight his raging libido long enough to collar the perp. And the deadly dealer is closer than he thinks, scrambling to tie up loose ends—including one named Ben.

#### An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Under the Influence

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# **U**NDER THE **I**NFLUENCE

**VJ** Summers

Dedication

To Mel, who helped turn BS-ing into brainstorming.

To Sierra, who is still the other half of my brain.

And to the amazing and remarkable Joey Double-You Hill, who doesn't have an "N" anywhere in her name, and whose amazing talent is matched only by her remarkable heart.

XO

VJ

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Sprite: The Coca-Cola Company Corporation

The Simpsons: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation

# **Chapter One**

"Beeeen-ja-minnnn." The voice insinuated itself into Ben's brain, blurry at first then more sharply, cutting through the invisible layers of cotton batting wrapped around his head.

"C'mon, Benny. It's time to wakey-wakey." He recognized the voice, though he couldn't have said who it was or where he knew it from. The rich tenor sounded nice, though; a little rough, but almost soothing to his throbbing head. The thread of worry he heard tightened his throat, tugged at emotions still half numb with sleep. He tried to turn toward the sound and someone hammered an iron spike through his skull.

Oh yeah. He was awake now. Head pounding, mouth as dry and nasty as a used gym sock, confused and painfully awake.

"Whuh?" He'd have been embarrassed by his inability to form an actual word if it hadn't freaked him out so much. It didn't help that his eyelids felt glued together, and whatever hard, scratchy surface his face was pressed against seemed to be doing its level best to suffocate him.

"Ben, hey." The voice sounded pleased. In spite of the situation, Ben's dick tried to give a little twitch of appreciation at the almost musical sound. "I was starting to worry, babe. You've been out for almost twenty-four hours."

Gentle hands combed through his hair, picking at the tangles idly. It felt nice, and Ben wanted nothing more than to let that rhythmic stroking lull him back to sleep.

Unfortunately the invisible man with the pretty voice and magic hands had other ideas.

"Let's go, babe. Get some fluids into you." The hands stayed gentle but he quickly found resistance was futile as he was maneuvered onto his back. A blessedly cool, damp cloth landed over his eyes and he decided to chance moving on his own, lifting

one hand to fumble at the cloth, scrubbing it over his face in the hopes the cold water and friction might stimulate his brain cells.

Footsteps padded away, quick and light. Ben crumpled the cloth in his hand, feeling water drip through his fingers at his tight grip. It was time to take stock. He slitted one eye open, cautious in case the room was bright. Hell, he was being cautious because he was afraid of what he might see.

It certainly wasn't the first time he'd woken up with no idea where he was, but usually by the time he was able to process, he at least remembered how he got there, though it hadn't happened in years. Not since long before he'd started grad school. He racked his brain. Nope, not a clue.

The room was reassuringly dim. He risked opening both eyes all the way now. He was in what appeared to be a studio apartment, one medium-sized room with two doors, one of which likely led outside, the other he assumed led to the bathroom. He was lying on a futon in one corner. The fitted sheet had pulled loose on one corner, revealing the rough navy fabric beneath. That must have been the scratchiness under his cheek. A stove and refrigerator stood against one wall, and that's where he found his host.

Shit. Max.

Not that he wasn't glad to wake up in Max's apartment, in Max's bed. He'd just rather remember how he got there. Especially since the other man had never shown any inclination to get him here.

He struggled up onto his elbows as Max turned from the fridge with two bottles of water in one hand. One big, long-fingered hand. Shit. Life was just too fucking unfair if that gorgeous hand had been all over his body and he didn't fucking remember it.

A quick smile lit Max's face when he saw Ben's attempt to get vertical. "Look at you all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed." Ben sent him what he hoped was a baleful glare. He was afraid it came across as more pathetic than threatening when Max's smile just grew.

"Fuck you," he managed to force out of his dry throat, and snarled a little when Max laughed. It would be easier if it were anyone else slinking across the room toward him. Preferably someone who hadn't spent the last three months alternately teasing and ignoring him while starring in Ben's every jerk-off fantasy.

Helplessly, Ben took in every long, lean inch of the man approaching him. At least six-three, Max had an inch or two over Ben's own six-one. Clairol-blond hair spiked on his head, dark roots clearly showing, Max was the ultimate Goth-boy all grown up. His eyes, a rich sable brown, seemed to be perpetually laughing, like he knew some cosmic joke the rest of the world hadn't yet been let in on.

A faded Nirvana t-shirt, washed thin and soft, clung to a surprisingly wide chest, and black jeans worn to a comfortable charcoal gray hugged thick thighs and a tight ass Ben had made a hobby of studying. Even his bare feet were long and lean and sexy. Dammit.

Max dropped onto the futon next to him and Ben's stomach did a greasy roll. Once he was sure he wasn't going to embarrass himself even more than he already had by puking all over the guy, he forced his eyes back open in time to grab the icy bottle of water Max slapped against his chest.

A few long, blissful swigs later, he finally trusted his voice enough to ask the question that mattered.

"So, was I any good?"

Max fell back on the hard mattress, laughing like a loon. "Well, clearly *I* wasn't if you've gotta ask." Ben felt his eyes go wide and Max laughed even harder. "Don't worry, babe," he snickered, sending Ben's confused irritation climbing toward flat-out anger. "If I did you, you'd remember it."

"So why am I here?" Ben glanced around the shabby, mostly empty room. "And where the fuck is here, anyway?"

Max stopped laughing and his eyes grew serious as he propped himself up on one elbow to study Ben with an intensity that had him fighting the urge to squirm.

"You don't remember anything?"

Shit. He *didn't* remember anything. At least not anything that would explain how he'd got from Candyland to Max's bed.

Max pushed to his feet in a lithe movement that caught Ben's wandering attention and reached down to offer him a hand up. Ben took it cautiously, but not so cautiously that he didn't enjoy the rough glide of calluses across his own smooth palm and the easy strength with which Max tugged him to his feet.

"Go take a shower, babe. See if that steams anything loose. We'll talk when you get out."

Ben really didn't like the guarded look in those silky eyes, but he'd talked with the man enough to know he wasn't getting anything more out of him until he was ready. So he staggered off to do as he was told. Dammit.

Max dropped back onto the futon as Ben lurched into the bathroom, slamming the door irritably behind himself. Pressing the heels of his hands to his eyes, he tried to crush out the vision of Ben as he'd been last night, pupils blown until only the thinnest rim of emerald showed, ink-black hair tangled around skin the color of moonlit pearl. It was completely unprofessional, criminally stupid, even, but he couldn't just call 9-1-1 and foist the boy off on some EMT, not on the off chance that Ben's dance partner Blue might obligingly lead Max to his dealer.

Fuck. He could at least be honest enough with himself to admit that, club-kid appearance aside, Ben was no little boy. There was an intensity to those pretty eyes, the occasional flash of depth that never failed to knock Max for a loop, arrowing straight to his groin like a bolt of lightning. And, chemical complications aside, Ben had shown ample evidence he was every inch a man last night. In fact, before Ben had crashed and burned and things had spun so fucking far out of control, there'd been a good eight or nine inches of evidence trapped in those skinny black jeans, Max judged.

Ben had seemed...off last night, vibing with a suppressed excitement completely at odds with his usual quiet, winsome way of sitting, nursing his drink and *emoting* all over the place. He'd danced, which he rarely did. In fact, aside from a time or two when Ben had tried to lure him onto the floor, Max didn't recall ever seeing Ben dance. Didn't actually recall seeing Ben do much more than observe, which he supposed was fitting for a sociology student. Ben had also ordered a Long Island Iced Tea, rather than his usual cranberry juice and Sprite. By twelve thirty, Max's sweet little piece of Goth eye candy had been loose and happy. And affectionate. And too fucking verbal for Max's peace of mind.

### **Chapter Two**

Last night...

"You know you wanna." Ben sort of twirled off the dance floor to wedge himself into the narrow space between Max's barstool and the next one over. "I've seen you watching my mouth." Max was watching it now. Red and just a little swollen. Beestung, that was the phrase. But there were no bees in Candyland, so he was betting Ben's swollen lips came from some up-close human interaction.

Max wondered how he tasted.

"I betcha watch my ass too." Ben peered at him through light-colored eyes that glittered in the colored bands of light sweeping the dance floor and flickering over the bar. Light eyes surrounded with thick, black eyeliner that gave him a smoldering, exotic look. Or maybe it was the expression that was smoldering. Because Ben was looking at Max like he was an ice-cream cone, and Ben was ready to lick, lick, lick.

"I watch a lot of ass, babe. Doesn't mean I want to fuck it." A slow blink. Red lips pressed tight. And fuck me, Max thought, if even wounded didn't look totally hot on the little shit.

"I don't get it," Ben said with another slow blink of those sorcerer's eyes. Max wondered what color they were. The club smog just showed pale. Max imagined an innocent sky blue or maybe an uneasy gray. "You're here as often as I am, you never have more than one drink." Hell, the kid really *had* been watching him. And if a Gothboy like Ben was so tuned in to his habits, others could be too.

"I work here, Benny."

"You're not *always* working, but you never hook up," he continued. "You don't dance." Ben tossed his head, momentarily flipping the heavy swoop of black bangs from his forehead as he studied Max like a bug pinned to a corkboard. The hair fell back

in his face, allowing him to send another smoldering glance from between the strands. "So why are you here, Max?"

Time for some deflection, from the question and from the uncomfortable tightness all those smoldering gazes were causing in his pants.

"Maybe I'm dealing, princess." He raked his eyes over Ben dismissively. "Maybe I like to watch. Whatever my reasons, they don't involve you." Which was true, to a point.

Those pale eyes narrowed. Hurt still, but pissed now too.

"You know what?" He leaned close, those red, red lips almost touching Max's ear and his breath hitting Max's neck in a hot, damp gust that tickled his nuts. "You're right." Max scrambled to catch up. He was right? Of course he was right. Right about what, exactly? "Your little push-me, pull-you shtick obviously isn't some arcane mating ritual." What the fuck? "So whatever perverse thrill you're getting from 'watching'," and damned if the little shit didn't make little quotation marks with his hands, "well, yeah, it's got nothing to do with me."

Ben turned and signaled for the bartender, catching the sticky edge of the bar when he swayed unsteadily. He slammed back nearly half of his Long Island Iced Tea—his third of the night if Max wasn't mistaken—in one deep gulp, and Max felt a little pang that the kid needed liquid courage to face him. He'd never had to fortify with alcohol when he'd approached Max before. Of course, he'd never flat-out called Max on his mixed signals before, either.

"Might wanna slow down there, babe," he warned when Ben swayed again, sucking down the last of his drink and running his tongue over his lower lip in a move that was clearly unconscious, and even sexier because of it.

"Oh, just fuck you," Ben muttered, rolling his eyes dramatically enough to tug a smile to Max's lips. The smile faded, though, as Ben stalked back toward the throng of dancers on the floor. He wasn't quite steady on his feet, but that didn't seem to matter

much since a blue-haired waif with pouty lips and a fishnet shirt exposing a mouth-wateringly ripped torso drifted from the DJ booth to press up against his back.

One last *fuck you* look and Ben melted into Blue's embrace, head falling back as slender, pale hands latched onto his hips and dragged his ass back against the smaller guy's crotch.

Max forced his gaze away from the sight of Lil' Boy Blue's hands crawling like a pair of albino spiders up Ben's chest. Fact was, he *was* here to watch. Just not the way he'd implied to Ben.

Max was watching the trade, watching who brought the party favors, who was buying and who was selling. He'd spent the last three months undercover looking for a link, one tiny fucking link between the poppers and pixie sticks circulating freely around the club and the steadily growing string of ODing club kiddies being carted out on stretchers.

The music had gone all trippy and the lights cast weird shadows through the cotton-candy-scented fake fog rolling across the floor. Ben and Blue had been absorbed into the dancing mob and Max told himself he was relieved. With Ben out of sight, it'd be about a million times easier to concentrate on his job.

The lieutenant was almost as frustrated with the utter lack of progress in the investigation as Max was. Sure, he'd IDed a handful of small-time pushers, but whoever was passing out the spiked pixies was too fucking clever for their own good. Max hadn't even gotten a whisper of who he was looking for.

Shit. Ben had pointed out one thing to him good and clear. Max was too predictable. Apparently working the door didn't make him invisible enough, didn't give him enough of a reason to be here. If he was going to hang out, he needed to fucking socialize. Picking up his rum and Coke, hold the rum, he decided to mingle. Maybe if he shook things up, he'd rattle something loose. Right.

Half an hour later, he was ready to tear his hair out by the roots. He'd done the obligatory hang out with the members of AAGoNe-pronounced "agony", of course-

the pretentiously named Ann Arbor Goth Network, and even managed a semi-amusing conversation with a tipsy little girl wearing purple cat ears, but rather than working possible sources of info, what was he doing? Searching the crowd for a pair of pale, glittering eyes.

He drifted off to lean back on the DJ cage. DJ DarqueMaster was spinning out Nine Inch Nails, and his assistant was working his pale, skinny, tattooed ass on top of the glass-block half-wall that stretched between the cage and the bar. The crowd was loving the music, and even Max had to admit the dude knew how to run a light show. When Darque gave him an odd, inscrutable look, and skinny little assistant boy, inexplicably named Sugar, started trying to hump his hip, Max decided it was time to float some more.

He found Ben and Blue near the center of the mob. Ben had turned so he was facing the other boy, one hand tucked in Blue's back pocket, the other holding his empty cup. Ben didn't have any pockets in his skinny black jeans, so Blue had improvised, jamming one hand under Ben's waistband and using the other to balance himself on a wiry biceps while he rubbed against Ben's thigh.

Ben shifted, rested his forearms on Blue's shoulders and swayed with the music. His head tipped back, eyes closed, hair plastered to his forehead, and he was so fucking pretty it stole Max's breath. He danced well, moved like he didn't have any bones, just sleek, supple muscles. Or maybe water. All fluid and graceful.

And Max didn't fucking have time for this. He was turning away when Blue reached down and copped a feel of the promising bulge between Ben's thighs. Ben smiled, an amused, knowing quirk of his lips that Max had never seen before. It was the smile of a man who knew without a doubt he was on the fast track to a suck off. Max's mouth watered. He pretended not to notice.

He couldn't neglect to notice what Blue did next, though. Without a pause in his rhythmic grind on Ben's leg, the little waif reached back and pulled a sour-apple-green-striped cardboard tube about the size of a cocktail straw from his back pocket. Lifting it

to his mouth, he tore off the top with his teeth, touched his tongue to the tip and gave a little shudder of apparent pleasure.

Oh fuck. Max cut through the crowd like a shark through water. There was no decision, just the sudden realization that Blue was teasing Ben's lower lip with the tube of doctored sugar, and Ben was following the trail with the tip of his tongue.

Have a taste. He couldn't hear it over the music but he could read Blue's lips. It's good shit. Ben's eyes opened, those pale, glittering eyes in their Mardi-Gras mask of kohl liner, and met Max's for a long, scorching second. Max was shaking his head. No, babe. Just, no. Ben smiled again, that cynical smile that didn't belong on his angel face, and took the colored tube.

He'd only managed to pour a fraction of the pale green crystals on his tongue before Max smacked the drug out of his hand.

"What the fuck?" Blue snatched the tube out of the air before it could hit the floor and rounded on Max, big, dark eyes furious. "Get your own candy, dickhead," the Goth-boy snapped, and it was clear from the possessive palm he wrapped around Ben's hip that he wasn't just talking about the pixie sticks.

Ben didn't say anything. Didn't seem aware of Blue or the jostling crowd or the hypno-tripno music. He'd locked his gaze on Max's, so Max got a primo view as Ben's pupils blew wide. That red-cherry mouth went soft and Ben swayed, only this time it wasn't to the music.

Ben's smile lost that disturbing hard edge and instead became disturbingly sweet. He swayed again and this time Max moved faster than Blue, dipping a shoulder under Ben's arm and neatly removing him from the Goth-boy's grip.

"C'mon, Benny." He pressed his mouth against Ben's ear, and couldn't help but echo the little shiver that traveled down that long body at the lip-to-ear contact. "Let's blow this pop stand."

He was steering Ben around like a clunky old RV, so he didn't see Blue flip him off before knocking back the rest of the doped sugar. "Where we goin'?" If he hadn't known the guy's mannerisms so well, spent so much time watching him so closely, he might not have realized how impaired he was. As it was, he didn't like the glazy, hazy look in those Cleopatra eyes, and wrapped his arm firmly around Ben's back, maneuvering him into the relatively narrow space between the bar and the bathrooms.

"Home, sweet thing," he answered absently, intent on maneuvering Ben out of the club with the least fuss possible.

With a surprisingly lithe move, Ben swung around to face him. Close. Close enough for Max to hold him up if he stumbled. Close enough for Max to feel Ben's breath on his lips.

"Don't bother to take me home unless you're gonna take me to bed, Mr. Voyeur."

He had a hand around the back of Ben's neck. Not sure how it got there. It seemed that, around his candy boy, his body went on autopilot. Since it was so close, he swiped his thumb over Ben's full lower lip. Damp, and just a little sticky.

"Oh, you're gonna end up in bed, babe," he promised, and Ben's smile spread like sunrise.

"Bout damned time," he muttered, and took Max's lips in a kiss so unexpected, so unexpectedly demanding, that all Max could do was close his eyes and take the ride.

There was a hint of sour-apple tang on his mouth, but not enough for Max to worry about catching a secondhand buzz. Under that was the alcohol-sweet memory of the drinks Ben had been slamming back, but under *that* was Ben himself. Warm and rich with a spice that had Max craving more, wondering how Ben would taste without all the interference.

Damn, the boy knew how to kiss.

He'd been distracted enough by the taste of him that Ben managed to shove him up against the wall before Max knew what had hit him. Bodies jostled them, club kids and legends of the Ann Arbor Goth scene coming and going in the narrow hallway that led to the bar. He was only vaguely aware of them, though. His focus was on Ben. On the

long, hard press of Ben's body against his. On the way he curled his fingers in Max's waistband and tugged until their hips ground together.

This was fucked in more ways than Max could count. He needed to be back on the dance floor finding out where the fuck Blue had got his little treat. He needed to be putting Ben in a cab, or hell, even an ambulance, because the boy was clearly so impaired Max was already doubting he'd remember much more than his own name come morning.

What he didn't need to be doing was dragging his fingers up through the crunchy black spikes of Ben's hair and crushing his mouth closer. And he sure as shit didn't need to be wrapping a leg around Ben's thigh, yanking him into the cradle of his hips for a slow and dirty grind.

Ben seemed happy to cooperate, bracing a knee against the wall just high enough to nudge Max's balls and dragging what felt like a good nine inches of hard, hot cock against Max's own more-than-interested dick.

"Way to go, Professor!"

A hard, comradely slap on Ben's shoulder jarred him loose and Max sucked in smoky air gratefully, trying to clear his head. Not an easy task with six feet of sex in motorcycle boots leaning in to fuck up his orbit again.

"Back off, babe," he managed, forcing himself to unwrap his leg and straight-arm Ben off him. "This is not the time." It would never be the fucking time. "Let's blow this joint," he repeated.

Ben giggled. And it was *not* fucking cute. "Yeah," he snickered, letting Max steer him by the grip he still had on Ben's neck. "Let's go blow."

Max rolled his eyes. He wasn't sure what was more painful—the way he was knowingly mishandling the situation, Ben's stoned-out adolescent humor, or the spike currently trying to burrow out the fly of his jeans. He tightened his hand on Ben's neck, feeling the prickle of short hair against his palm, and keyed a quick text with his free hand. Someone would be here in fifteen minutes or less to pick up Blue and his little

sweet treat. It wasn't nearly enough, but it was all the attention he could afford to spare for the little twink if he wanted to get Ben the fuck out of here.

Ben lurched against him as they stumbled down the stairs leading to the exit. "You're my graduation present, Mad Max," he mumbled, lips hot on Max's neck.

# **Chapter Three**

Present

There was a shuffle and a couple of thuds from the closet-sized bathroom, and Max imagined Ben stripping out of those tight black jeans, the formfitting black spandex shirt. He'd smelled like the club, smoky and with a tang of sweet, drug-tinged sweat. But under all the chemical interference he smelled really, really good. A burst of citrusy hair goop. A lick of what Max would swear was Ivory soap.

No Ivory here. Max wondered how his soap would smell on Ben's skin. What magical alchemy would his candy boy's flesh perform on the "spring-fresh" lather?

The shower started with its usual asthmatic wheeze as Max dug his head into the rough fabric of the futon, still grinding his palms against his eyes. The bed smelled like the club. Like Ben.

Thirty seconds later, a yelp of outrage drew a reluctant smile to Max's face. Yep, the first blast of icy water had shown up right on schedule. A string of decidedly grown-up curses, then quiet. He listened to the rush of the water, the clink of the pipes. Pictured Ben, lean and pale, white lather trailing down his long body. He wondered if Ben had body hair, or if his chest was as smooth and porcelain as his face.

He could go in there. Invade the room. Invade Ben's space, his body, slam him up against the wall of the shower. And Ben would let him. It would be so fucking easy.

He could kiss that pretty mouth, this time tasting only toothpaste and Ben. Could lick his way down that rough, stubbled neck; drink the water from that pale, silky chest.

Ben's nipples would be pink, he thought, and sweet as candy. His candy boy. And they'd be sensitive. When Max took them into his mouth, scraped the rigid tips with his teeth, Ben would writhe against the tile and make those little gasping moans that made Max crazy.

Ben's long, thick cock had dug into his hip like an iron bar last night. It would fill Max's hand and Ben would moan louder, thrusting into the strokes. His balls would be heavy and full, but when Max slipped his free hand down to play with them they'd draw up tight to the base of his dick, and Ben's climax would be there, right there, Max's for the taking.

But he wouldn't take it. Not yet.

Not when he could spin Ben around and lick the tepid water from the back of Ben's neck. When he could suck stinging kisses along the strong lines of Ben's shoulders, marking him and making him squirm.

He'd run his tongue down the line of Ben's spine, just to see him arch into the caress. He'd play with the tender divot at the top of his ass, dip his tongue into the shallow indentation until Ben was pushing back into the touch. Then, when Ben was panting for it, Max would cup those hard cheeks in his hands and spread them, exposing the puckered opening.

When he started licking, Ben would cry out; no mere moans now. The skin would be hot, so hot, and taste of musk and man. He could feel the muscle, tense and resisting. Then it would give. Max would reach around, grab that thick cock and pull. Ben would jolt in his grasp, caught between Max's hand and his mouth, needing more of each.

Max had big hands, long fingers. He could cup Ben's ass cheek, squeeze and stretch him, and still flick his thumb around Ben's rim. He'd take turns, tonguing and sucking then pressing with his thumb, not enough to penetrate, but enough to send Ben into orbit.

He'd wait 'til Ben was humping the wall, humping his mouth, then Max would give Ben what he was begging for. He'd wriggle his tongue in deep, fuck Ben with it, gobble up his curses and pleas, make Ben beg. And when Max's thumb worked its way in, too, Benny would scream.

No condoms in the shower. Max never brought anyone home so he'd never needed them. No lube, either. That was okay, it just meant he'd do Ben raw, nothing but hot, tight skin.

All it would take was a handful of conditioner. A swipe over that sweet, tight hole. A couple overhand strokes to get Max's screaming cock ready. Then scalding, strangling bliss.

He'd work his cock in slow, make Ben push back onto him and suck him in. Max knew what to do then, how to roll his hips and find Ben's sweet spot, the one that would make those long legs shake and those long fingers claw the wall. And God, Ben's face...

He'd have his head turned, cheek against the shower wall, water beaded on his lashes. His green sorcerer's eyes would be closed and his Cleopatra eyeliner would have melted, streaking down Ben's pale cheeks. Ben's mouth, his pretty, pretty mouth, would be open, panting, and with every one of Max's thrusts a groan would jerk past those lips and straight to Max's cock.

Max's fingers would dig into Ben's hip, leaving bruises. More marks to brand Ben as his. His other hand would be full of Ben's cock, sliding on water and pre-cum.

He'd slam into Ben, pegging his gland with every punishing thrust, and Ben would take every inch, dragging Max in deeper with those strong, tight muscles.

Everything would get tighter, hotter, and when Ben came, he'd clamp down hard and drag Max right along with him. Every pull of Max's hand on Ben's cock would bring on another spurt, another clench, until Ben was painting the wall of the shower with thick, musky spunk, and Max was filling Ben's ass, creaming him, sliding those last few strokes on cum and bliss...

Max groaned and scrubbed his hands over his face, as if he could erase the images dancing through his brain. When that didn't work, he reached down and pressed the heel of his hand hard against his cock, using enough pressure to hurt, to pull himself back from the dangerous edge of arousal. Finally, nowhere near under control, he

swore, soft and vicious, and adjusted his jeans, taking at least a little of the pressure off his swelling dick. Bad idea to let his thoughts go there. Very, very bad.

The shower ran for a long time. Longer than Max had expected. He knew from brutal experience that after about ten minutes, the water gave up even the pretense of staying hot. Fifteen minutes? Felt like standing in a winter downpour.

Moving quickly, he dug a pair of ratty gray sweats out of the clean laundry bag, added an equally ratty long-sleeved t-shirt and opened the bathroom door. He didn't let himself even glance at the dinky little stand-up shower as he entered and dropped the clean clothes on the lid of the commode. He was inordinately proud of himself for it too. He held out until he was out of the room, pulling the door closed behind himself, when a movement behind the smoked glass shower door caught his eye.

Ben, back braced against the dingy tile wall, was sliding down to plant his ass on the cold, slippery floor of the shower stall. Max moved fast, ready to yank the door open and scoop him up like a swooning Victorian maiden, but jerked to a stop when Ben moved again, dragging long, pale fingers through the wet tangle of his hair and clutching his skull like his grip was all that kept it from exploding.

He breathed a little sigh of relief and left the bathroom.

Ben had been pretty out of it. He'd only managed less than half a hit before Max had knocked the pixie stick out of his hand, but even that had been enough to knock his six-foot-one, one-eighty-pound frame on his ass.

Max started pacing as his stomach spit acid at the thought. Ben had been about ten seconds away from becoming another statistic.

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Ben sat on the slick, none-too-sterile-looking floor of the shower stall with his forehead pressed to his knees, fingers clenched in his hair as if that would do anything to stem the manic jackhammer that had started up in his skull. The cold water wasn't helping, but then the pitiful stream of tepid water he'd started out with hadn't helped much either.

And he needed some help, because pretty much all of last night was a fucking blur.

He'd gone to Candyland. He always went to Candyland. Every Friday. Or, he always *had*. He didn't need to go any more now, not since his thesis was finished. But he thought he might still go anyway. The music was good, the drinks were relatively cheap and, while it wasn't strictly a gay bar, there were enough hot young honeys to make things interesting no matter what your preference.

And, dammit, his preference was *not* for bleached-out Billy Idol wannabes.

Okay, so he'd gone to Candyland. He remembered that much. He remembered taking extra time on his hair, the Kate Gosselin spikes in the back, the swoop of long bangs in the front. He remembered painting his eyes, even dusting a little glitter at the corners since for once he was going to party. His thesis was done, and even if no one else knew it, Ben was going to celebrate. He'd wriggled into his skinniest black skinny jeans, zipped himself into a long-sleeved t-shirt made of more metal and spandex than cotton, stomped into black motorcycle boots.

He remembered the first drink, and even the second, which he'd used to console himself when, once again, Mad Max had looked right through him. He remembered dancing, flashing lights and then...nothing. Nothing until he woke up facedown in Max's bed.

What. The. Fuck.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once the shower cut off, it was quiet in the bathroom long enough for Max to start to worry. True, Ben hadn't downed enough of the drug to put him in a coma or on a slab, but Max knew good and well he should have taken him straight to the ER, not to his fucking bed.

But with Ben pressing up against him all the way out of the club, with his alcoholsweet lips pressed to his ear, whispering incoherent, dirty promises, Max had been lucky to keep from banging Ben up against the damn wall.

Max shook his head hard. *Rein it in, asshole*. This was so not the time or the place for thoughts like that.

"You still alive in there, babe?" He moved to stand by the door, leaning on the wall next to it, arms crossed to keep from reaching for the doorknob.

"Fuck off, Max," came the reply. Not as rough, closer to Ben's usual smooth baritone, but really tired. Weary, even. Still, the reply held enough sass to please him, so Max picked up his pacing again. Three steps to the door. Three back to the bed. Six to the stove. Six again to the beanbag slumped against the dirty white wall.

"You know you can't stay in there forever," he called when his arc took him back to the bathroom door. A low growl was his only answer. Max smiled.

He wondered if Ben made that sound when he came. He'd already memorized the little sounds Ben made when he kissed. Just the thought of that soft catch to his breath, the almost soundless moan when Max drew his tongue in for a leisurely suck, was enough to bring Max's erection back with a painful vengeance.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Okay." Ben was about as lucid as he was going to get, so he figured it was time to find out what his brain had conveniently erased. "So are you gonna tell me what I missed while my consciousness was out to lunch?"

"How far back are you wiped?" Max leaned on the wall alongside the bathroom door, arms and legs crossed in a negligent manner that almost fooled Ben into thinking he was the only one feeling any stress over the situation. Almost. The quick rhythm Max was tapping out with one thumb against his biceps hinted at nerves almost as ragged as Ben's own.

Ben shrugged awkwardly, feeling Max's shirt drag softly over his skin. "Last thing I remember clearly? I was drinking. It's a little vague, but I'm pretty sure you slapped me down pretty definitively." Max raised a brow but didn't comment, so after a painful pause Ben finished, "I think I danced, but fuck knows with whom." He shrugged again. "That's about it."

"You don't remember taking anything?"

Ben's gaze jerked back to Max's face, giving his best glacial stare. "I'm clean," he said clearly. "I do not use."

"You were using last night, babe." Max shook his head and moved to drop down on a painfully worn beanbag chair. "Pixie dust."

"Fuck." Ben followed Max's example and flopped onto the edge of the futon. "I don't remember that." He dragged his fingers through the wet drape of his bangs and sent Max a tentative look. "I don't use, man. Not even pixie dust." For some reason it was vitally important to him that Max know he wasn't some trashed-out twinkie.

"Yeah, I know," was the man's only reply. He sat back on the beanbag, lips lightly pursed, staring at the ceiling. Ben had a brief flash of licking that long, stubbled neck, could almost taste the salty-sweet smack of Max's skin.

"So..." Ben dragged his attention off the line of Max's throat and back to the point.

"Care to share what I did while under the influence?"

"Nothing too shocking," Max finally answered. "You made a couple passes at yours truly. Danced with a little blue-haired fairy. Shared his candy..."

"Tristan." Max shot him a questioning glance. "That's his name, Tristan. He's been after a date for a while, but I wasn't interested."

"You looked pretty interested to me." Those silky sable eyes, for once, didn't look amused. They looked...dark.

"Yeah, you said." Ben dropped back on the futon, snagging a pillow to cradle his still-aching head. "Huh. I s'pose I might have fooled around with him a little if I'd had

enough to drink when you turned me down." Okay, he actually supposed he might have fooled around with Tristan as a way to salve his ego or even, though it strained the bounds of belief, to make Max jealous. "But I must have been fuckin' toasted to..." He couldn't even say it out loud. Man, he did *not* use drugs.

"Three Long Island Iced Teas," Max confirmed.

Well, there you go. Ben rarely drank, and never anything more than a watered-down beer. 'Course, that didn't explain why he'd gotten so trashed, but that wasn't a mental path Ben particularly wanted to travel. Because no matter what he tried to tell himself, he went to the club for Max. He counted the days until Friday nights when the doors to Candyland opened and he'd get another chance to make Max notice him.

"I guess I owe you a thanks, then." Ben tensed his abs and pulled back into a sitting position. Max was watching him, a look that Ben wanted to call hunger on his face. But he didn't go there. Max had turned him down for the last time.

"None necessary. Just find someplace safer to play from now on, babe."

What the fuck?

"Um, excuse me?" His head must still be addled, because it almost sounded like Max had just warned him off Candyland.

"You heard me." The indulgent, amused smile was back, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Yeah, but I think I must have misunderstood." Ben heaved himself to his feet and began to pace restlessly around the room. "Because I know you didn't just imply I should stay away from the club."

"Look, babe," Max rose as well and stepped in front of Ben, stalling his pacing, "there are lots of clubs for pretty little candy kids like you." Ben felt his blood pressure rising, felt the pulse of it behind his eyes. Max, for once oblivious, continued. "You don't need to go back there."

Ben let out a disbelieving laugh, and that seemed to do the trick, snapping Max's attention firmly back where it belonged.

"So, first, I'm not some little *candy kid*. I'm practically twenty-six, for Christ's sake." *And published in three different scholarly journals. And about to defend my PhD.* Not that he particularly wanted to share that info. He wondered for a second *why* he didn't want to share that info as brief surprise lit Max's eyes, but Ben forged on. "Second, you're not the boss of me, and I'll hang out wherever the fuck I want to."

"Yeah, I can see what a grown-up you are. Real mature, Benny," Max taunted, staying in Ben's space, right up in his face. "Just remember who decides who gets in, babe."

Ben shook his head and tried to step around Max to continue his pacing, but the blond Goth demi-god matched his movement. "Jeez, Max, you turned me down, you made your point. You don't have to try to exile me. I'm done chasing you."

"It's not about that, dammit." He couldn't get around the man, so Ben turned his head, refusing to meet that intense gaze. Max wasn't letting him off that easy, though. He reached up with one rough hand and caught Ben's chin, forcing him into eye contact. "There's bad shit happening there, and you don't need to be in the middle of it. The pixie dust you took? Babe, you didn't have more than a quarter of a hit, and you were out for nearly twenty-four hours. If you'd taken the whole stick, you'd probably have woke up in a body bag."

"I don't use," Ben repeated, deliberately ignoring the irony that he was telling the guy who'd dragged his sorry, stoned ass home how lily-pure he was. "So, it won't be an issue." Max's hand had shifted, moving to cup his jaw. He wondered if Max even realized he was still touching him.

"Ben," those dark, silky eyes were intense and dead sober, "please just let it go. Candyland's not a safe place right now. Go play somewhere else."

Play? That was the problem, wasn't it? Ben hadn't been playing, though there was no reason for Max to know that. No, as far as Max was concerned, Ben was nothing but a club kid, nothing more than another player. Suddenly all the tension, all the fear and

confusion and the fucking hangover coalesced into a mushroom cloud of rage, and Ben was letting all of it fly.

"It's not a safe place? What the fuck, Max? It's an eighteen-and-up club, for God's sake. *You* fucking frisk everyone who comes in. What's not safe? And, dude, you're not my daddy or my boyfriend, so you don't get to tell me where I can go or what I can do." He'd moved without even realizing it, had mirrored Max's grip on his jaw and then pressed the taller man up against the wall. "Or *who* I can do, for that matter." He pushed in, relishing the hard grip of Max's fingers on his chin, the bruising crush of his body against Max's through the soft, borrowed sweats.

And that was the problem, Max realized. He *wanted* to tell Ben what he could do, who he could do. Hell, he wanted to *be* the one Ben was doing. And having Ben's long, lean frame pressed up against him, eyes clear and intent this time, was sending Max's resistance up in flames.

Fuck, he was hard. Aching, agonizingly hard, and hungry and pissed enough his brain-mouth filter was pretty wide open.

"That's your issue, isn't it?" he gritted back. "You've been shaking that sweet little ass at me for months, and now you're gonna get all princess on me if I don't take you up on it." He spun in Ben's hold, impressed with the younger man's strength, but not letting it stop him from slamming him up against the wall. Those glittering green eyes went wide with outrage, but underneath it simmered a lust so hot it all but gave Max blisters.

"Fine, Benny. This is what you want?" He kept his hand on Ben's chin, tipping his head back to lick a hot line up his throat. Ben jerked against him, and that long, thick cock pressed demandingly against the threadbare sweats. "This?" he repeated, dropping his free hand to cup Ben's cock with greedy fingers, dragging along the length and jerking over the head with hard, quick strokes. "If this is what you want, you got it," he bit out, setting his teeth against the sensitive skin below Ben's ear.

Ben shook against him, a full-body shudder that had Max's own nuts tingling, and he pressed closer. Ben was scrambling for an anchor, hands clawing at the bare wall before locking on Max's hips, curling into the waistband of his jeans. Just enough skin to tease.

Max mouthed his way along Ben's jaw, enjoying the light scrape of stubble, enjoying even more the jerky thrusts Ben's hips were making, trying to drive his cock harder into Max's grip. His head turned, emerald eyes burning into Max's, and everything he wanted was there, clear as a billboard for Max to see.

This was out of control, *he* was out of control, wanting more, so much more than what he could allow himself to take. Before he could give in to the silent demand in Ben's eyes, the demand that echoed in his own gut, Max dropped to his knees. Not his usual position, true, but this wasn't the usual hook-up.

He wouldn't kiss Ben, not sober. Too intimate. Too much of a promise implied, though he wasn't clear just who he'd be making the promise to. But he had to taste him, had to feel his candy boy come unglued for him, had to have that now.

Fingers spread, he stroked up Ben's abs, pushing the ratty gray shirt out of the way and exposing pale, smooth skin. No chest hair, just a thin, silky line of dark golden brown arrowing down from his navel to disappear under the sagging waistband of his sweats. Ben's skin prickled under his touch, so fucking sensitive, and Max rose taller on his knees to lay a hard, wet suck on a copper nipple.

He smiled at Ben's strangled curse, and did it again. Ben's hips slammed against him, cock hard across his pecs, and Max planted his hands on those trembling thighs, pressing him back against the wall.

He licked his way down, committed now, tugged at that silky brown hair with his teeth and cooled spit-wet skin with a puff of laughter when Ben's hands slapped back against the wall. "You've been offering this since the first minute I saw you," he muttered, pressing his face against the damp tip of Ben's cock beneath the sweats, rubbing his cheek against the fabric and breathing him in. "Been begging for it."

"No..." But Ben didn't resist when Max tugged the sweats down around his thighs, didn't try to pull away when he burrowed deep, wrapping his tongue around his balls. No, Benny hissed out another curse and spread his legs as wide as the confining fleece would let him.

That was just fine with Max. Less words meant less chance of thinking about what he was doing. Less chance of remembering all the reasons he should stop. Because stopping wasn't an option, not with Ben's scent all around him, soap and spice and the musk of the pre-cum beading on his cock head.

He licked harder, rubbing his tongue on the tense, tender line of flesh behind Ben's balls, grinning a little when one thigh jumped in his grip, an aborted motion to lift it over his shoulder and give him even more access.

He was high on it, higher than any drug could make him on the taste of Ben's skin, the smell of him. Reaching up, he cupped Ben's balls, shifting the tender orbs in his palm before using his hand to get them both in his open, greedy mouth.

Blunt nails dragged over his scalp. Long, elegant fingers clutched at the short length of his hair. His own dick was an iron bar, scalding from the forge, desperate for attention.

"Stop." The word, gasped above him, barely penetrated. "Max, fuck." Ben was yanking at his hair, dragging him out of the magical cave he'd found between Ben's thighs. "I'm gonna come," he panted, one hand dropping to wrap hard around the base of his erection. He dropped his head back against the wall, breath shuddering out of him. "God," he panted. "Never. I've never come like that." He sent Max an indecipherable glance, eyes glittering slits of color. An odd smile, very like the cynical one that had been so out of place on his winsome face at the club, twitched the corner of his damp lips. "Thought the hands-free orgasm was an invention of the porn industry."

"You really want me to stop, babe?" Fuck, he hoped not. His own breath was ragged and every cell in his body was demanding he finish what he started. "Or is this just a breather?"

"I can think of about a million reasons why we should stop." *Please don't*, Max thought. *Not when I'm about to spontaneously combust.* "But no, that's not what I want." Ben's hand left his head where it had been resting curved around the back of Max's neck. "Get up here."

No kissing. No fucking kissing. But that wasn't what Ben was after. Max staggered to his feet and Ben dove for his fly, mouth open and wet on his neck while he jerked at Max's zipper.

"What's the plan, babe?" In his head, the question came out gritty and demanding. In reality, he had to admit it sounded more like a plea.

"This." Long fingers around his dick. The sensation was so intense it temporarily blinded him to anything else, a rainbow flash of light behind closed eyelids. Then more —smooth, hot skin, the silky rub of Ben's cock along his, wrapped in that hard, smooth fist.

Ben's mouth on his neck, his throat. Long, hot tongue fucking into his ear. Somehow Ben had taken control of the situation and was seducing Max into loving it.

Ben's fist worked over their dicks hard, the slick from their pre-cum just enough to keep the rub sweet. Max layered a hand over Ben's, needing something to hold on to, something to channel all the energy swirling through him into. His free hand hit the wall by Ben's head and Ben didn't even flinch at the slam. He was focused with that laser intensity on their hands, their cocks, the pump of Max's hips finding the *oh God just right* rhythm to send them both over.

Max shot first, which never happened. But there it was, creamy white ropes of cum splashing up on their bellies, lacing their fingers together like glue. Ben grunted, gritted his teeth and waited him out. Max knew this because the minute he started breathing again, Benny let go. And shit, he thought *he'd* shot hard. Ben's head smacked back

against the wall hard enough to bounce, and the first hot blast hit him on the chin. That sight jerked another, almost painful twitch for Max's dick. And the taste of Ben's cum, because fuck if he could resist leaning in and licking that slick, salty drizzle off Ben's chin and throat, brought on aftershocks so hard it was almost like coming again.

They stood like that for a long time, chests heaving, breaths wet and hot. Max finally moved, started to wipe his slick hand on his thigh, but Ben stopped him, caught his hand and brought it to his mouth. Slowly, with that same, smoldering intensity, he drew Max's fingers into his mouth, treating each to a long, slow suck that got Max thinking that maybe five minutes was enough recovery time after all. But when Ben dropped his hand, he could see in those green, green eyes that nothing had changed. And his next words proved it.

"Give me one good, valid reason not to go to Candyland."

"Because I said so." Okay, maybe it wasn't good or valid, but it was all he had.

"That's not gonna cut it, Max." Ben slid from between him and the wall, tugging up his pants and grabbing the dirty black shirt he'd tossed on the futon when he came out of the bathroom to wipe his stomach. No disguising the wet streaks down his chest, Max thought with disturbing satisfaction.

"It's gonna have to, babe. Do *not* come to the club next week." Ben's eyes lit up at the challenge, and shit, Max realized he couldn't have picked a worse way to handle this. Instead of answering, Ben stomped bare feet into his boots and unclipped his keys from where they hung on a chain attached to his soiled jeans.

"I mean it, Ben. Stay away."

Ben just raised his eyebrows, and didn't dignify Max's statement with an answer. After a long, searching look, he shook his head and walked out the door.

Max watched him leave. *Oh, I am so fucked*.

# **Chapter Four**

It came as no surprise that Ben was front and center when Max got to Candyland the following Friday night. More front and center than usual. The flood of ice water through Max's guts wasn't a surprise either.

Max had spent three hours that afternoon in intense meetings with the lieutenant, having his ass handed to him on a platter for the way he'd fucked up by leaving Blue alone so Max could, as his boss said, "tap some pretty little ass". Then he spent another twenty minutes standing by Blue's—Tristan's—bed, watching machines breathe for Ben's blue-haired little friend. Shit. Shit. Seeing Blue there had slammed home how stupid he'd been to take Ben to his apartment. How insane he'd been to walk away from a potential lead. How profoundly he'd let Blue and every other little twinkie and Goth-baby down when he'd hustled Ben to so-called safety.

It wasn't helping his guilt trip any that he couldn't bring himself to regret getting Ben out of here, or that he knew he'd do it again.

He knew the second Ben saw him. His pretty eyes narrowed in their thick black mask, and he tipped his head to let Sugar yell directly into his ear. He was leaning back on the DJ cage, a pinkish drink that Max knew from months of observation was cranberry juice and soda dangling from one lax hand, hips swaying just a little to the music. All the while, the DJ's precious little assistant walked his fingers up and down Ben's chest over a t-shirt where a short, giant-skulled mouse was saying something about how tonight he was going to take over the world.

Reading that t-shirt, Max was struck again at what a contradiction Ben was. He was a total club kid, complete with Clairol-inky hair and black nail polish, but he used words like *arcane* and knew when to say *whom* instead of *who*. Several of the regulars called him Professor, and Max knew from the cursory background check he'd had done

on him that Ben was a grad student at U of M, but the kid didn't look or act like a scholar.

Of course, he didn't look or act almost twenty-six, either.

Max loved puzzles; loved to solve them. That's why he'd become a cop in the first place, and why he'd made it to detective before thirty. Under any other circumstances, he knew he'd be more than up for the puzzle that his candy boy presented. As it was, he was just pissed because Ben was messing with his focus and keeping him from doing his fucking job.

"I didn't think I'd see you here tonight," Sugar yelled into his ear. Ben was hardly listening to the scrawny little guy. He'd seen Max come through the beaded curtain between the stairs and the short hall leading to the bar, and his whole body went on alert.

Mad Max. The nickname he'd given Max, if only in his own head, seemed to fit more than ever. Working security by the bar, eyes narrow and glittering, lips pressed in a hard line, Max looked like he wanted to kick the shit out of something. Or someone. And all that pissed-off-ness was aimed directly at Ben. He wondered how it would translate into sex. The idea of angry sex with Mad Max was annoyingly appealing.

Sugar was poking him in the ribs and Ben dragged his focus back to the smaller guy. "Huh?"

"I said," he rolled his eyes, "I didn't think I'd see you here tonight." Sugar managed to look snarky and available all at once. If Ben had been even remotely interested in the kid—'cuz Sugar couldn't be more than twenty, if that—it would have been kind of cute. But Sugar wouldn't have been his type even if he'd never seen Max. The little apprentice DJ was too skinny, too needy; the light in his eyes just a little too manic and desperate.

Still, he wasn't going to dis the guy just because he didn't want to do him. Unlike certain blond bastards. Ben studiously didn't allow his eyes to cut in Max's direction.

"Now why wouldn't you expect me?" he asked Sugar, leaning down to speak into his ear over the music. "I'm here every weekend."

"Well, yeah," the smaller guy agreed. "But your boyfriend didn't look too happy when he dragged you out of here after you got all trashed last night and danced with Tristan."

"My *what*?" He was pretty sure his eyes goggled when Sugar referred to Max as his boyfriend. 'Cuz he couldn't be talking about anyone else.

"Your *beau*." The DJ wannabe's voice got as syrupy sweet as he could manage while still yelling to be heard over the music. He jerked his pointy chin toward where Max leaned on the bar, elbows planted on the sticky surface behind him, scanning the dance floor but still managing to shoot furious glances in Ben's direction.

"Not my boyfriend," Ben snapped in response. "Not my friend, not even a hookup." Sugar raised a brow, and reached down to take Ben's drink from his unresisting hand. The smaller guy spread his palm over the top of the plastic cup, fingers wrapped under the rim. Ick. God knew where those fingers had been. Ben let Sugar set his drink on the glass blocks butting up to the DJ cage. He had no desire to put his mouth where Sugar's fingers had been.

"If he's not your boyfriend, come dance with me."

Ben didn't really want to dance. Not with Sugar, at any rate. But with Max glaring in his direction, he didn't want to keep propping up the DJ booth either. So he let Sugar tug him out into the crowd of dancers, into the flashing lights and clouds of clove-scented smoke.

The smaller guy moved surprisingly well, slipping in from time to time and rubbing against Ben's hip or grinding his ass into Ben's crotch. Those teasing touches, coupled with Max's intense stare, had a predictable effect, and it wasn't long before dancing was a little uncomfortable.

Seeming to sense his discomfort—probably because he'd been grinding his bony ass into Ben's…boner—Sugar eventually guided him back to the glass-block wall where he'd left Ben's drink.

Ben hadn't had any intention of finishing the drink, so he didn't much care that the cup was gone. Sugar, on the other hand, was outraged. Wrapping his fingers in the mesh keeping DJ DarqueMaster a step removed the writhing masses, he shook the chicken wire and lambasted the DJ for not watching Ben's drink.

"Dial it back, little man," the DJ snarled with his trademark sneer. "I'm not the bar police or your personal beverage babysitter." The whip-thin, shirtless man narrowed his eyes at his assistant. "While we're on the subject, I've been pulling my own music for the last hour, Sugar-pie. Not real sure what I'm paying you for, here."

Sugar narrowed his eyes resentfully before turning back to Ben, who'd just about decided it was either time for a real drink or to cut bait and admit defeat. After all, he really hadn't particularly wanted to party tonight. He just would be damned if he'd let Max think he could order him around like a pet puppy.

"Guess duty calls, baby," Sugar simpered. Fuck, Ben was gay, but God save him from fags who simpered. "Maybe we can hook up later?" Long, obviously curled lashes fluttered. Suddenly Ben needed to leave, get away from Sugar's freak-on, away from Max's glares and distance. Right the fuck now.

"Right, later," he muttered. With a completely false smile, he beat a hasty retreat, cutting through the edge of the dancers knotted up on the cheap linoleum, only to slam up against an immovable object.

He froze, then let his eyes slide slowly upward, starting at battered Converse tennis shoes and ending at a pair of furious sable eyes. He couldn't quite suppress the smirk curling the edges of his lips when Max caught the back of his neck in one hard hand and growled, "What the *fuck* are you doing here, Benny?"

Suddenly the night was looking up.

Okay, he was being totally unreasonable. Max knew it. But fuck, seeing Sugar rub his skinny ass against the baseball bat Ben was packing in those skintight, green snakeskin pants was pissing him off beyond the ability to think straight. So reasonable wasn't happening tonight. Not when he was imagining Ben's pale face on that starched white hospital pillow instead of Blue's. Not when he could still feel Ben's hand on his dick, still taste the salt and sweet of his cum.

He'd watched Sugar lead Ben out into the writhing crowd of dancers. Forced himself to drag his eyes off Ben's hips, which swiveled like a well-oiled machine to the bizarre Covenant–Switchblade Symphony mix. Bizarre, but it somehow worked. Just like the shredded t-shirt peeking out from Ben's worn black leather jacket and the glittering emerald studs in his ears.

A pretty girl picked up what was left of Benny's drink and drained it in one long pull. Max thought she might have been last weekend's purple kitty, though he wasn't sure; pretty girls tended to blend for him. If he hadn't known Ben wasn't drinking anything stronger than club soda, he'd have read her the riot act. Only a fool, or a baby like her, left their *own* drink unattended, let alone drank someone else's abandoned beverage.

He was heading in her direction to give her a big-brotherly lecture anyway when Ben and Sugar sidled back up to the DJ booth. He stopped, avoiding the confrontation he knew would come the minute he got within cussing distance of Ben and swearing at himself for the coward he was, and girly-girl disappeared into the crowd with a drunken wobble.

He watched the short conversation with DJ DarqueMaster with interest. Sugar didn't seem exactly pleased with the outcome, and Ben looked ready to bolt. Max ignored the fact that that made him grimly happy. It didn't take much effort to step out in front of Ben as he cut through the dancers, heading for either the bar or the exit, and Max pretended not to savor the light slam of Ben's body against his when they collided in the bars of smoky, colored lights.

One look in those pale, gleaming eyes and all his anger came back in a rush. Never mind that he hadn't—couldn't—explain why Ben needed to stay the fuck out of Candyland. Ben wouldn't fucking listen, and Max had a sick fear that not listening could hurt Benny badly.

Ben didn't react well to his abrupt question, eyes slitting dangerously and full lips going tight.

"What does it look like I'm doing? Socializing," Ben answered in a patronizing tone. "Dancing. Drinking." He raised a dark brow and gave Max a look that seemed to say, well duh.

"Fine," Max snapped back, wrapping his hand around the back of Ben's neck, on the spot that was starting to feel like *his* spot. "C'mon." With a none-too-gentle tug he used his grip on Ben's neck to drag him onto the dance floor. "Dance with me."

Ben gave him an inscrutable look but Max could all but feel his surprise, and he supposed he didn't blame the guy. After all, he'd been turning down anything but casual conversation for months. Now in the course of a couple of days he'd taken Ben home with him, got a hand job that was number one on Max's mental playlist, and *now* he was dancing with him. Shit, he was giving *himself* whiplash. He could only imagine what Ben was thinking.

Still, Ben allowed himself to be led into the throng, and when the music slowed down, he let Max pull him in, slide a thigh between his and pull him close with a hand on his lower back and his grip on Ben's neck.

It was complete self-indulgence and he let himself revel in it, but only for a second. Ben, pressed against him, chest damp where it pressed against Max's, leather jacket rubbing the back of Max's wrist as he let his fingers play over the dip at the small of Ben's back.

He wished he could write it off as needing to get laid, but the picture in his head when he got off at night wasn't some random guy. No, he was regularly shooting his load to the vision of glittery green eyes in a Cleopatra mask of inky liner; to the memory of Ben's candy-sweet mouth on his; the rough, hard jerk of Ben's hand on his dick; the taste and scent of Ben's cum.

Max dragged his eyes open, not really sure when they'd slid closed but he knew he needed to get his head back on the job. Casting his gaze around, he caught a glimpse of DJ DarqueMaster reading Sugar the riot act in the cage. The little assistant wasn't paying attention, though. No, his eyes were locked firmly on Ben, and he didn't look happy. That jealous, proprietary look riled Max all over again.

Using his grip on Ben's neck, he tugged until he could meet Ben's gaze. "Seriously, dude, why the hell are you here?" He was all but yelling to be heard over the music, but he could tell Ben heard him well enough by the way his jaw set and all those long, sleek muscles went hard against him.

"Seriously, dude," Ben mocked with a sneer, "you aren't my boyfriend, or my daddy. You don't get to ask questions like that."

It was too much. The wanting and not taking. Ben's clueless defiance. Catching his arm, fingers digging into the worn leather of his jacket, and ignoring Sugar's poisonous glare, Max dragged Ben back off the dance floor, down the narrow passageway into the john. A quick glance confirmed they had the room to themselves.

"Jesus, Max," Ben began, but Max didn't let him finish, shoving him back against the sink.

"I get it, Benny," he snarled out. "You're pissed at me. Fine. You don't get what's going on here. Fine. But don't let your fucking ego put your ass on the line."

Some of the fight went out of Ben, confusion swirling with the anger and outrage in those pretty eyes.

"Okay, Max," he finally said, tilting his head to study Max with unnerving intensity. "Why don't you explain it to me then?" He shook his head, long bangs falling into his eyes only to be tossed back irritably. "I asked you once before, I'll ask again. Give me one valid, logical reason why I shouldn't be here."

Max wanted to scream. Wanted to shake Ben until he rattled some sense into him. Wanted to come clean about why the fuck he was haunting Candyland, why he was wasting his weekends on a dead-end security job, and to find out why Ben was all but living there too. But he was undercover, on the job, and his hands were tied.

There was one thing he could tell Ben, though. "Haven't you wondered where your little blue fairy is tonight?" Ben looked surprised, then shrugged.

"He doesn't come every week." But he sounded uncertain.

"Babe, he's been here every fucking week since you started coming. So where is he tonight?" Ben shook his head. "For that matter," Max added, frustrated, "haven't you noticed the never-ending parade of Goth-babies that don't come back?"

Ben blew out a breath. "Yeah, it's a pretty transient place," he finally concluded, and Max realized that for all the club-kid affectations, Benny generally left by two a.m., a good hour or so before the bodies usually started falling.

"Ben," he kept his voice low, "this place is a veritable garden of bad shit. There's at least one OD a weekend, usually more."

Ben flipped his hair back again, gave him a dismissive look. "It's a club. There'll be idiots who don't know when to stop."

"Yeah, and there'll be idiots who take a taste to prove a point and end up out for twenty-four hours," Max shot back.

Ben didn't like that.

"That won't happen again." He shoved against Max, eyes sparking green fire when Max didn't back off, keeping him pinned to the sink. "I don't get you," Ben exploded. "You don't fucking want me? Fine. I said I was done chasing you. So why the fuck are you hounding me?"

"That's what you think, Benny?" He should be glad, Max knew. He should be relieved that Ben had got the message—Max wasn't an option. Instead, he was

swimming in the rejection surging in Ben's eyes, drowning in his own doomed obsession with his candy boy.

A scuffle at the doorway snapped his attention away and he moved quickly, pulling Ben off the sink and shoving him into a stall before they could be interrupted.

"Ben?" He'd never actually heard the voice at a normal, conversational level, but Max knew exactly who it was. "You in here, lover?"

Lover? He mouthed the word at Ben, smirking. Ben just rolled his eyes and leaned his head back against the stall.

"Well, shit," Sugar muttered, and Ben rolled his eyes again. "Ben, I know you're in here." The little cupcake's voice was growing petulant. "I really need to talk to you. It's important."

Ben pushed off the grimy wall of the stall and looked ready to answer. Max couldn't—wouldn't—allow that. He wasn't done with Ben yet. Slamming a hand over Ben's mouth, he sent a smirk at those wide, outraged eyes and leaned in to set his teeth against the sensitive place where Ben's neck met his shoulder. Ben's breath came in a silent shudder and Max bit down harder, marking him as surely as a dog pissing on his territory. *Mine*.

He pressed in, chest to chest, twisting his hips and slouching until Ben's legs opened enough to allow him to grind their cocks together. And yeah, Benny was into it. That long, thick cock told the story.

Ben's tongue swirled over his palm and Max felt the stroke on his own dick, hot and wet and visceral. Ben was pushing back. Fuck, he always pushed back. Teeth set in the mound at the base of Max's thumb, fingers curled in the waistband of Max's jeans, crowding Max across the scant space of the stall, into the flimsy wall.

Max sucked hard—mine—then licked a hot line up Ben's neck and bit down again, this time on the tender spot behind his ear. Ben shuddered, fuck, so sensitive, and twisted his head to suck Max's thumb into his mouth.

"Dammit, Ben, we need to talk," Sugar whined, then the door to the bathroom slammed shut behind him.

Max needed something other than talking, and he thought Ben did too.

With a final lick along the line of Ben's jaw, a final nip at his chin, he pulled back and met Ben's smoldering gaze.

"This is so wrong." So wrong that Ben thought Max didn't want him. So wrong that his head was so fucked-up over a piece of Goth eye candy that he couldn't do his job. So wrong that they were doing this here, now, and not somewhere clean. Somewhere safe.

Ben's eyes sparked again. No doubt he was putting all sorts of incorrect connotations on Max's words. Max decided to distract that busy brain. It might be wrong, but fuck it.

He pushed Ben to his knees.

# **Chapter Five**

Ben looked up at Max, wondering how the hell he'd ended up here, on his knees in a fucking bathroom stall at the club. He ought to punch the asshole in the balls and fucking leave.

The only reason he didn't was because Max looked as pissed off and confused as Ben felt.

Those sable eyes weren't laughing. They were dark and anguished. Max's mouth was a tense, crooked line, his jaw jiggling slightly as he quite obviously ground his teeth.

When had it got so fucked up? When had things shifted from an unrequited crush to Ben on his knees, fumbling with Max's belt, caught in those secretive brown eyes? Something was going on here, something between Max and the club and something between Max and Ben. Ben just wished he could figure out what it was.

Ben's dick was an aching weight pressing against the faux snakeskin of his pants. His mouth fairly watered for the hard, thick length of Max's cock. Moving faster, he ripped open Max's belt, worked the stubborn button free and finally, finally worked the zipper down, careful not to snag anything important since Max's dick was pressing hard against his fly, eager for freedom.

He shifted closer, resting his forehead on the hard plane of Max's abs so he could look down at what he was doing. Max's cock swelled through the deep vee of his fly, swelled against the soft, dark cotton of his briefs. Ben breathed in, taking in the scents of the club, cotton candy and smoke, and the scent of Max, salt and soap and spicy musk. And *fuck* he wanted him.

He didn't want to wait any longer, and from Max's low growl and the way his fingers tangled in the long swoop of hair that fell in Ben's eyes, he didn't want to wait either.

Rough enough to be a warning, careful enough to keep from doing any real damage, he wrestled Max's jeans as far as his upper thighs, taking the briefs along with them. Max's cock swung free, slapping against his belly next to Ben's face, fat, flushed head glistening with a slick of pre-cum. He rolled his face against Max's abdomen, resting his cheek against soft, damp fabric and hard, ripped muscles. Gorgeous. Delicious.

Max growled again, low enough that Ben couldn't actually hear it, only feel it as a vibration in the hard muscles under his cheek. The fingers in his hair tightened and Ben allowed himself a little smile. Max might not be able to decide whether to push Ben away or pull him closer ninety-nine percent of the time, but this one percent, what he wanted was beyond clear.

"Suck my dick, Benny." Secondhand smoke and desperation graveled Max's voice until it was almost unrecognizable. Ben smiled wider and wrapped a hand around the base of Max's cock, a steady, constricting pressure that drew a muffled curse. "Now, you little shit." Ben flicked his tongue out, swiping playfully at the bead of pre-cum glossed over the head, drawing a groan and another strangled curse.

"Suck my dick, Ben. Now."

Oh, that pissed-off command almost had him shooting in his pants.

Rising higher on his knees, Ben angled his head down, swallowing Max's cock straight into his throat, putting every bit of cock-sucking expertise he possessed into the move. He wanted to grin when Max's hips slammed upward, driving deeper into his throat, nearly touching off his almost nonexistent gag reflex, but he couldn't manage it with a mouth full of dick.

Thick, hard, a slick of bitter salt—nothing had ever tasted this good. Ben swallowed a couple of times, letting the muscles of his throat work the head, and Max groaned and

tightened his fingers in his hair. He pinned Max's hips against the flimsy wall of the stall, feeling the metal flex under the weight, and set to work.

He did it like he wanted it, hard and fast, a strong suck at the head, loose and wet on the downstroke. Max's hips wanted to move, shove that fat dick right down his throat, but Ben held firm, forcing him still. He might not be particularly butch but he was no nellie, either.

He swirled his tongue, rubbing velvety shivers down the length of Max's dick, tracing light, quick figure eights on the supersensitive spot just below the head. Max jerked, nearly broke loose of his hold and hissed out a long, vicious curse.

Ben pulled back enough to suck the head. How many licks does it take to get to the delicious, creamy center of a lollipop? Sweeping his eyes the length of Max's body, he drank in pre-cum and the sight of Max's eyes, glittering slits in the funky bathroom lighting, his lower lip caught between white teeth, biting back the stream of sexy filth that so clearly wanted to escape. Ben found he liked making Max swear.

Max forced his eyes back open. The temptation to just sink into the pleasure was almost irresistible but, damn, Benny giving head wasn't a sight to be missed.

Wide green eyes smoldered up at him from their black liner mask, cheeks hollowed dramatically and that fucking pretty mouth stretched wide around his cock. The sight alone was almost as good as that relentless wet heat working the head of his cock until he thought his brain would melt and pool in his balls.

He was pretty sure Ben knew what he was doing to him, because his candy boy pulled off and smiled that cynical smirk, so out of place on his angel face. 'Course, right now the whole cynical thing wasn't bothering Max much, since it meant he was getting spectacularly blown.

Ben kept up an insanity-inducing stroke on Max's dick while maintaining his vertigo-inducing stare. Max's knees went weak and he pressed back against the wall, needing some sort of anchor. Ben's hand was relentless, just this side of enough to get

Max off right the fuck now, and Max couldn't decide whether to be pissed or grateful. 'Cuz his body was voting for right the fuck now but his head wanted to hold out, to drink in the sight of Ben mouthing wet kisses down the side of his shaft and tilting his head to make a slick stroke over his balls.

Pretty, pretty Ben, with his sinful mouth and wicked eyes.

Ben's cock was an indecent bulge in his skintight pants, and Max wanted another taste of it. The image of Ben, spread and vulnerable on Max's bed while Max ate every throbbing inch of him, nearly sent him over.

Almost as if he could read Max's mind, Ben cupped his own dick, jerking his palm along the length in time to his strokes on Max's cock.

"Yeah," Max rasped. "Take it out." Ben darted a teasing lick at the rim of Max's cock head and he temporarily lost his mind. When the sparkles cleared from Max's vision, Ben was still stroking himself off in time to his strokes on Max. "Jack yourself while you suck me," Max gritted from between clenched jaws. Clenched because he was afraid if he let loose, he'd beg like a bitch for Ben's mouth. "C'mon, Benny." He ran a rough hand through the mop of inky hair that fell over Ben's eyes. "Gimme a show."

That wicked smile, the slow unveiling of Ben's cock, the glitter of emerald eyes, vivid in the yellowy light. Max had to clench every fucking muscle to keep the cum back and Ben knew it; his widening smile said so.

Max kept eye contact as long as he could, because looking away felt too much like pussying out, but eventually the lure of Ben's mouth, his dick, was too much. Lips red and swollen from being stretched around his dick curled mockingly. Ben's tongue, pointed and wet, slid over his lower lip, flicked the top one in a taunting parody of what Max's dick was weeping for.

Ben's hand on his own dick was slow, almost meditative. Everything about Ben was hot beyond words, but shit, his dick was a work of art. That pale skin flushed pink with blood, the fat head the same crimson as Ben's lips. The shine there, where his thumb caught the drops of pre-cum and used them to slick the way...

Max liked sucking dick almost as much as he liked getting his sucked, but he had never wanted to taste anyone as badly as he wanted to taste Ben. All over. All the time.

"Suck me, Benny." It was a whisper, almost lost under the music filtering in from the club. He wasn't even sure Ben heard it. It was a plea, because he needed somewhere to channel all the want that was burying him.

Ben took pity on him and did as he asked, dipping his head to take Max deep again, until Max felt the soft press of Ben's throat, the strong contractions as Ben swallowed around him.

"Fuck. Yeah, babe." Brain-mouth filter officially off. Every hard drag of Ben's lips over his cock head dragged out another word. Praise, because fuck if Ben wasn't a fellatory artist. Pleas for the same reason.

His eyes slid closed when he lost control of the lids and his head smacked back against the flimsy metal wall. Ben wasn't jacking himself anymore. No, he'd slipped one hand under Max's balls, playing with the ridge behind them, pinching lightly at the skin and jerking a hiss straight out of Max's lungs.

That pinch and scrape was distracting enough that he almost missed the hand curling around his ass. The taunting stretch when Ben pulled at one cheek. He was balanced on the edge, teetering and ready to topple, but Ben wasn't through with him quite yet.

Ben rolled Max's balls over his knuckles, careful not to hurt. Too careful. Max wanted more, wanted his nails, wanted something more to match the volcano raging at the base of his dick. Then he got more. More in the form of Ben's thumb, thick and rough and dry, prodding against his asshole, and that was it. Max's brain melted completely, pooled in his balls, and when Ben sucked *hard*, it shot clean out Max's dick, and didn't stop shooting until Max's legs were weak; until the only thing keeping him vertical was his back braced on the wall of the fucking toilet stall and his hand on Ben's shoulder.

It might have taken him minutes to come back from that blinding-white, rainbow-sparkled place orgasm took him, or it might have been an hour. Ben was lapping at his dick, gentle, soft strokes that calmed the too-sensitive organ and threatened to coax him past that almost painful aftermath and into *yeah*, *let's go again*.

Ben was still hard, working his cock slow and easy again, and Max knew he needed to reciprocate. He *wanted* to reciprocate. But before he could get enough brain cells working to make the offer, Ben sucked in a harsh breath and was coming, as slow and deliberate as his strokes; heavy, slow-motion ropes of cum dripping down his knuckles and streaking those fucking fairy pants.

Max wondered how he dressed in real life. Ben played the Goth so well that Max thought it must be natural. He knew it was a big part of his own makeup, even if he'd kept clear of the clubs once he'd joined the force, afraid he'd have to bust someone he hung with.

Ben's eyes slid open, dazed and green, and for just a second his smile fit his face, sweet and satisfied. Max combed a hand through Ben's ink-black bangs, frustration and tenderness seething in the gesture.

"Shit."

And the smile was gone like it never existed. Max dropped his hand and let his head fall back against the wall.

"Go home, Benny. Trust me that I got reasons, and just please go home."

Punching Max in the balls was looking pretty attractive again. Ben just didn't get the man. One minute Max was pushing him away with both hands, being a total dick and treating Ben like some brainless little twinkie. The next he had his cock so far down Ben's throat it felt like it was slamming against his heart.

And now they were back to Max treating Ben like a brainless club kid.

"Max." Ben drew a deep breath and climbed to his feet. Somehow, this wasn't a conversation he wanted to have while on his knees. "I keep telling you, I'm not one of your little twinks. I'm not going to chase you down. Hell, you're the one who keeps dragging me off. If you won't give me a good reason to stay away, I'm not going to," he insisted, grabbing gobs of toilet paper to clean up.

"Goddamn it, Ben, don't you get it? Last fucking time you came in here, you got in trouble. Grow the fuck up."

"Grow the fuck..." Ben trailed off, outrage choking off the words.

"You're a fucking cliché. An overgrown club kid who doesn't even see how fucking pathetic he is. Grow up. Get a job. Get a fucking *life.*"

Ben saw red. Talk about clichés. But it was true. A veil of crimson dropped over his eyes and he truly thought if he had a weapon, he might just kill Max.

"You didn't seem to think I was pathetic when you were jamming your dick down my throat." Max's eyes flickered. Ben would swear he flinched a little bit. "And I'm not the one working two days a week as a bouncer at the local Goth club, babe. I'm not the one living in a one-room hovel and sleeping on a rock disguised as a futon. I got a forty-hour-a-week with fucking benefits."

Those brown eyes went hard and cold, and Max slammed a flat palm on Ben's chest, flattening him against the wall of the bathroom stall hard enough to rattle the whole structure and to steal Ben's breath.

"You don't remove yourself, Benjamin, I'll do it for you." Cold, dark eyes, tight mouth and a menacing vibe that had the perverse effect of shooting electricity straight to Ben's dick.

"Try it." He didn't know if it was a threat, a promise or a dare. He just knew he needed to get the fuck away before he dropped back to his knees and begged Max to fuck his mouth, his ass, whatever, as long as he was touching him, marking him with his cum. "Just try it," he muttered, and banged the stall door open, leaving Max standing silent and raging behind him.

Ben slammed out of the bathroom feeling, once again, like a complete fool. Jesus. An overgrown club kid? Get a real fucking job?

At least someone was glad to see him. No sooner had Ben clawed his way through the beaded curtain leading to the main club area than Sugar was hopping out of the DJ cage and swishing in his direction.

"Beeeeeeen!" And speaking of twinkies. The little freakazoid added at least five extra syllables to Ben's one-syllable name. But Max had entered the club; Ben could feel the other man's eyes on his back as clearly as a hand running down his spine.

"Sugar, dude, I'm on my way out."

"No!" Oh jeez. He was pouting. "We hardly got to hang out. I'm taking a break." Sugar sent a nasty look at DJ DarqueMaster, who glared right back. "Lemme buy you a drink. We can talk a little bit. Maybe dance again."

He really didn't want to. Really, really didn't want to. But Mad Max was still staring, and damned if he'd give the bastard the satisfaction of chasing him out.

"What the fuck," he muttered, and let Sugar lead him to the bar.

### **Chapter Six**

"Whatcha drinking, baby?"

"Just cranberry juice and soda tonight." At Sugar's raised brow he muttered, "Apparently alcohol and I don't interact well."

Sugar nodded sagely, a bizarre look with his glitter-crusted eyes and pouty, painted mouth, and ordered their drinks.

"So, he's really not your boyfriend?" Max was glowering in their direction. Ben had never put much stock in clichés like *if looks could kill*, but Max was making him rethink that. He couldn't tell which of them Max was directing that homicidal glare at, but he'd lay equal odds on either.

"He's really not."

"What about Tristan? He's been following you around for weeks, then suddenly you act interested, your caveman drags you off by the hair and Tristan's nowhere to be seen."

Max had mentioned that too.

"I danced with Tristan a couple of times, that's all." That pale brow rose again. Ben didn't feel the need to defend himself but Max was still watching, and he *did* feel the irrational need to put on a show. He leaned in close, putting his lips against the little DJ's ear. "Besides, I think he gave me some bad shit. I don't generally use, but even I know that it takes more than a quarter of a hit of pixie dust to knock you on your ass."

Sugar's eyes popped nearly out of his head at Ben's words. "Really? Maybe that's why he didn't come back. Maybe he's afraid you're gonna narc him out."

"Nah." Ben couldn't keep from sneaking glances in Max's direction. He'd moved over to stand by one of the security staff, and seemed totally oblivious to the fact that Ben even existed. "Tristan wasn't dealing. He'd of tried to hook me in before last weekend. 'Sides," he added, dragging his gaze back to Sugar, who was watching him with wide, hungry eyes. "I don't remember a whole lot after the third drink. How could I narc on him even if he *was* dealing?"

"Well, you looked like you were having a pretty good time." The smaller man scooched closer to Ben. "You're really hot when you let loose, Professor." A flutter of lashes, Christ, and Sugar was pressed up against his side. "You really don't remember anything?"

Max was looking again, he could feel it. A micro-glance from the corner of his eye verified it. He knew he was just proving the asshole right, acting like the adolescent Max accused him of being, but he wanted—needed—a reaction.

Turning to face the little assistant DJ, Ben gave what he hoped was his most winsome, alluring smile. It seemed to work, because Sugar's lips parted and he leaned in, eyes glued to Ben's mouth.

"I remember *you*," he breathed against Sugar's lips. The skinny little guy's breath caught and Ben decided he was as big an asshole as Max. He wasn't interested in Sugar. In fact, he found the little guy annoying most of the time, downright nasty the rest. But Max was watching and Ben couldn't stop himself.

"Ben." The word was a sigh against his mouth as Sugar leaned in toward him.

"Ben." The word was a cold, hard command coming from his other side. Ben pulled slowly away from Sugar, from the too-wet, alcohol-sour taste of him, and turned to face Max. But Max wasn't looking at him. He'd pinned amused eyes on Sugar. Ben was suddenly realizing that a hell of a lot of Max's amusement was a front. "Darque's looking for you, Sugar-pie. If you wanna keep your job, you might wanna shake your ass in that direction."

Sugar huffed out a little sigh from between slightly puffy lips. Then, with a teasing smile, he squirmed from between Ben and the bar, rubbing up against him with every

shimmy. "Later, baby." He fucking winked at Ben then, to Ben's horror, he winked at Max and added, "You just have no idea what you're missing, big guy."

Max looked like he was about to say something, something scathing about Ben's lack of maturity no doubt. But before he could speak, a commotion broke out on the far side of the dance floor.

Eyes narrowed, Max turned without a word and cut through the dancers as if they were no more substantial than smoke. Ben struggled along behind him, pushing and shoving his way to a small knot of people. Max was already at the center of the knot, crouched over a crumpled body.

"Call 9-1-1," he barked, never looking up from the body on the floor. Without another word, clearly assuming someone would follow directions, Max eased the fallen dancer onto her back. Ben glanced around; a big, bald man in a pair of leather pants and a security t-shirt had a cell phone pressed to his ear and a walkie-talkie raised to his mouth. Satisfied that help was on the way, Ben turned back to the drama taking place on the floor at his feet.

Somehow Max had known, even before he turned her gently on her back, that the girl crumpled like a used tissue at his feet was his little kitty-cat from last weekend. It didn't surprise him. She'd been foolish enough to pick up random drinks, who knew what else she'd been foolish enough to take. Still, it twisted nausea in his gut to see her pretty, pale face completely empty of the animation that had lit her up.

She was breathing, which was good. Even as he had the thought, though, her back arched and her body began to shake. Fucking seizure. He caught both shoulders in his hands, pinning her torso down as she began to thrash.

Suddenly there was another pair of hands helping him to hold her steady, another voice crooning soft and soothing. He didn't bother to look up. He knew how Ben felt, could taste him on the air.

"One of your club-kid ODs?" Ben asked. He was all but lying by the girl, a thigh clamped over both of hers, keeping her wildly thrashing legs pressed to the floor and freeing Max to hold her head and upper body.

"This could've been you last week, Benny," he retorted shortly. "It was your little blue fairy friend."

He looked up then and caught Ben's wide, horrified gaze.

"Tristan?"

Shit. He'd said too much. Mercifully, he was saved from having to answer when two EMTs cut through the club, wheeling a stretcher between them.

"Now will you fucking go home?" Because if he didn't, Max might just knock him out cold and cuff him to his fucking bed. A mental picture that sent a hungry throb through his dick, no matter he'd come like a volcano less than an hour ago and was currently holding down a seizing club kid.

"Yeah," Ben said slowly. "But we're gonna have a talk, Max. Real soon." Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ten a.m. Saturday morning found Ben at the U of M Medical Center. He wasn't family, didn't even have a last name for Tristan, but he'd been at U of M for seven fucking years, and he did have friends on the staff.

"Thanks, Nat," he murmured as Natalie Ricci, one of his favorite people, and one who just happened to work in admissions, slipped him a piece of paper. "I owe you one, big time."

Natalie's smile lit up her big, expressive eyes. "A gift card to my favorite online bookstore will do nicely," she grinned. "And a caramel macchiato."

Ben gave her a quick hug and then headed for the elevators. Tristan Michelson. Room D4753. Once he knew where he was going, it was just a matter of minutes before he stood outside Tristan's door, trying to talk his way past the guard stationed there.

"Seriously," he persisted. "We're friends. I just want to see if he's okay."

"Mr. Michelson is not receiving visitors," the cop repeated for what seemed like the twenty-seventh time. Ben shifted, peering over the man's shoulder. Tristan lay on the bed farthest from the door, his hair a bright blue mass on a pillowcase that wasn't any whiter than his face. His still, blank face.

"Will you tell him I was here?" For whatever good that would do. He didn't want to lead Tristan on but, fuck, this was bigger than worrying about that. If he could believe Max, Tristan had ended up here the night Ben had nearly ODed on that fucking pixie stick. Which led Ben to think the drug that had knocked him out for nearly twenty-four hours might just have landed Tristan in the hospital for the last seven days.

It also led Ben to wonder how the hell Max had known where Tristan was.

The guard, an honest-to-God Ann Arbor police officer, rolled his eyes. "Sure, sweetheart. As soon as he wakes up. Whenever that is."

\* \* \* \* \*

He deliberately waited until he knew Max wouldn't be on the door before he showed up at Candyland. Kev-O, the big, bald and brawny bouncer manning the door, took his four dollars and waved him in with a tobacco-stained grin, and Ben headed for the bar.

He'd spent a good three hours sitting in front of Max's apartment, e-reader in hand, waiting for the asshole to show up. He finished his book and started another. Touched up his nail polish. By eight thirty he'd concluded that wherever Max had spent his day, he wasn't coming home before his shift at Candyland. So Ben went home to change then waited for midnight.

He'd gotten his drink and was propping up the corner of the bar when Sugar found him.

"Benny!" Pale pink glitter surrounded wide eyes. "I've been looking for you all night, baby! Where have you been hiding?"

"Just got a late start," Ben answered, searching the dance floor for a sign of Max. "I went to see Tristan today," he added absently.

The look Sugar sent him was startlingly sharp. "You talked to him?"

"I saw him," Ben corrected. "He's in the hospital. Has been all week. In a coma, I guess." The little DJ fixed a speculative look on him. The expression was so out of character it sent a nasty shiver up Ben's spine.

"So, how'd you find him?"

"I have a friend who works at U of M," he answered slowly. Sugar had leaned in and was still studying him with that unnerving gaze. "I never made it past the cop outside his door, though."

"Cop?" Sugar's voice all but squeaked.

"Yeah. Maybe he was dealing after all."

"Huh. But you don't really think so." The odd inflection, clear even over the hypnotic music, captured Ben's attention completely, even distracting him from his search for Max.

"No, not really." Now Ben was studying Sugar, watching for some hint of what was going on in the smaller man's head. "I'd think you'd know about that better than I would," he added. Sugar looked surprised, and not particularly happy with the observation. "After all, he hung with you more than with me."

Sugar looked ready to say something but the words froze on his lips, and in an instant Ben knew why. He felt Max long before the other man spoke, a frisson of electricity along his back. Sugar abandoned whatever he'd been about to say with a nasty twist of his lips. "Ya know, whatever you say, he acts an awful lot like your boyfriend."

"More like the club police," Ben quipped irritably. He knew without turning that Max's model-hot face would be wearing that pissed-off, supercilious look that just

pissed *Ben* the hell off. Sugar's brows rose to hide behind pink bangs but he didn't say anything, just slid off his stool and headed for the DJ cage.

Max wasn't surprised to see Ben. He was just surprised it had taken the kid this long to show up. He looked into those green eyes, intent and glittering under the spinning lights. No, not a kid. And he well and truly knew that by now. Ben was a man, a man with depths that Max was fucking dying to explore. Maybe even *the* man. Not that he could do anything about it.

"Benny." There wasn't any anger in his voice. Just resignation.

"I saw Tristan today," Ben replied.

Yeah, he already knew. The officer on duty had shared that information when Max stopped by the hospital on his way to the club. Ben was no dummy. He wondered what else Ben might have figured out all by himself. He wondered what he *wanted* Ben to have figured out.

"And how was your little blue fairy?" No sense giving anything away.

"Unconscious," Ben replied flatly. "And I'd like to know just how the fuck you knew he was in the hospital."

"I'm security. I know everything."

"Bullshit." Ben didn't look amused. Max didn't blame him. It was taking all his considerable acting skills to keep the amused look on his own face.

"Ben, there's nothing I'm gonna tell you besides what I've already said. This place isn't safe." He sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. He hadn't slept for shit after getting home last night, and he'd been up and at the precinct by eight a.m.

"Yeah, and you won't tell me why. Or how you know it." Ben moved in close, making a real move for the first time while sober. Laying a hand along Max's jaw, burning Max with those lightsaber eyes. "Tell me who you are, Mad Max. Let me in. Let me work with you instead of against you."

So fucking tempting. But he couldn't do it. He'd compromised his investigation too many times for this pretty little piece of ass. He just couldn't do it again. Not if he wanted anything to stand up in court.

"Go play with the other kiddies, Benny," he finally managed, forcing the words past the boulder in his chest. The boulder that got even heavier when Ben's eyes iced over and the hand on his face got stiff.

"Okay. Your choice, Max." Who knew those eyes could go so cold and blank? Who knew that angel face could turn so hard? "I won't get in your way," Ben added, his quiet voice still somehow projecting over the seething music. "Do me a favor and don't get in mine."

Then he was gone. Disappeared into the swaying throng on the dance floor like a mirage.

He'd done the right thing, finally. So why did he feel like that fucking boulder was crushing his lungs?

He wasn't going to drink. He sure as fucking hell wasn't taking any illegal substances. But Ben needed to do something to expel the anger, hurt and frustration, so he was gonna dance.

DarqueMaster seemed to be reading his mind, spinning a series of pounding, racing, hypnotic techno that let Ben lose himself in the beat. The slide of sweat down his back, the burn in muscles worked hard. The dance fugue that let him pretend not to notice Max leaning against the bar, talking idly with someone from AAGoNe and watching the dance floor without ever once looking at Ben.

Fucking bastard.

He'd closed his eyes, determined to sink back into the music, when a wiry body smacked up against him, round ass grinding into his groin. He opened his eyes and verified the unwelcome information that it was, indeed, Sugar rubbing up against him like a cat in heat.

Fuck it. He wanted to dance. If Sugar wanted to use him as a pole to grind against, fine. It wasn't like he had a better offer.

They danced for a long time. Long enough that Ben figured Sugar had once again put his job in jeopardy. When he leaned down and shouted something to that effect in the smaller man's ear, though, Sugar just smiled and told him not to worry.

Ben wasn't worried. Not about that. He had enough real stuff to worry about. Like Tristan. And the cute little girl from last night. And Max. Especially Max. Mad Max, the enforcer. The oracle of doom.

The cop?

It was the only thing that made sense, unless Max was just a fucking paranoid psycho.

Sugar grabbed his hand and tugged him back toward the glass-block wall by the DJ cage.

"Cranberry juice and soda, right?" he yelled over the music.

"Yeah." The little twink had remembered his drink. Man, he needed to make it clear he was not interested. "Sugar," he said, not knowing how to start without being a total ass about it.

"Be right back, baby," the little DJ interrupted before he could speak. With a quick, unexpected dart of his head, Sugar pressed a too-hard kiss on Ben's surprised mouth, before turning to shimmy back to the bar.

Of course, Ben thought, Max *would* take that moment to look over. That cool, amused gaze coasted over Ben, coating him in frost. He was clammy with sweat from dancing hard, with the dread of dealing with Sugar, with the sense he was missing something big, and that something might be Max.

Sugar chose a spot at the bar close enough to Max for their hips to touch. Max's amused expression took on a definite smirk as the smaller guy flipped his pink hair and chattered away. He must have said something Max didn't like though, because Max's

eyes narrowed and his face turned expressionless as the little DJ flounced back in Ben's direction.

Sugar was back at his side with unnatural speed, handing over his drink and taking a swallow of his own acid-green concoction.

"Your cop boyfriend doesn't have much of a sense of humor," Sugar teased, leaning against Ben affectionately. Ben didn't bother to look down. He was too busy watching Max watch them, a grim, speculative look on his face.

"Not my boyfriend," Ben repeated. Again.

"But he *is* a cop, right?"

Ben snapped his gaze back to Sugar. "You'd know better than me," he answered after a long minute.

"But you said he was the club police." All at once, Sugar didn't look like the flaky little twink Ben had always imagined him to be. Those big, dark eyes were direct and assessing.

"Just 'cuz he keeps trying to boss me around and get me out of the club," he answered slowly. He was swamped again by the feeling he was missing something.

"Well, I think you nailed it," Sugar decided. "He's never really seemed like a club bouncer." The DJ winked at him. "Good thing for Tristan that you can't ID him." Sugar took another sip of his drink. "Or whoever his source was."

Ben didn't answer, just took a long hit off his own drink while trying to organize the data in his head.

Max had been working at the club almost as long as Ben had been working on his thesis. Max was seemingly keeping a count of the club kids ODing at Candyland. Max had grabbed him when he ate the bad pixie dust, and then he'd known it put Tristan in a coma...

The facts were getting blurry and his mouth was dry, though he couldn't have said if it was from the exertion of dancing or from the conclusion he was reaching. Because, besides Max, the only other common denominator he could come up with was standing next to him.

He took another pull of his drink, and the lights blurred as the floor tilted under his feet.

"I'm reeeeeaaaaaalllly sooooooorrry, Beeeeeeennnnn." Sugar's words were warped, dragged out into long, round syllables. It almost snapped into place. As his cup hit the floor, plastic cracking and pink liquid puddling at his feet, he almost knew what he'd been missing. But then the floor leapt up, getting up close and personal with his cheek, and he didn't know anything else.

# **Chapter Seven**

"Hey there, Mr. Club Police." Sugar's sly greeting was still ringing in Max's ears when the little pink-haired freak gravitated back to Ben's side. The DJ might have been joking, but he didn't think so. Max didn't know how, but somehow, someway, his cover had been blown.

If his cover was blown, there was no reason not to tell Ben.

And that should *not* have been his first response, dammit. He should be worried about the investigation. Worried about the next club kid to OD on tainted pixie dust. But all he could think was that finally, *finally* he could come clean with Ben, keep Ben safe. Keep Ben, period.

He hadn't begun to wrap his head around the thought when he saw Ben sway. Sugar caught at his arm, talking fast, but Ben was bigger and heavier and by the time Max was halfway across the room, he was kissing the dance floor.

"9-1-1!" He was screaming it, but he didn't care. The louder the better. He flicked his eyes enough to see Kev-O yanking out his walkie-talkie, then glued his eyes back on the crumpled body of the first and only guy he'd ever wanted to make stick.

"Really sorry, Ben," Sugar was murmuring when Max skidded to his knees at their side. The little DJ's face was a mask of concern, but his eyes were cold.

"Sorry for what?" Max snapped as he turned Ben to his back. His eyes were glittering slits, pupils blown wide. His mouth moved, like he wanted to say something. "What is it, babe?" Max leaned down, put his ear to Ben's mouth.

"'Ssss him," Ben slurred. "Shhhhhh-grrr."

Fuck.

"I know, baby." Sugar was crouched on the other side of Ben's body, reaching down to cup his jaw tenderly. "I feel it too. But we can't be together if you keep using, baby." He looked up at Max, who'd been busy yanking off his jacket to wad up and put under Ben's head. "He kept offering me a pixie stick." Long lashes, encrusted with glitter, fluttered. "I'm so lucky I didn't give in."

"Nnnn..." Ben's eyes were wild, dilated so wide barely a hint of green showed. He was shaking now, body shuddering hard, and Max dreaded the convulsions that couldn't be far behind. He pictured Blue, his little purple kitten girl, every pale, dead face of every club kid to be carried out of Candyland over the last several months.

Hands were on his shoulders, pulling him away. He jerked free, no fucking way he was leaving Ben's side. Then the stretcher nudged up next to him, hard hands yanked, and he stepped back to let the EMTs do their work.

"I'm going with him," Sugar was saying, tugging urgently at the paramedic who was strapping the neck brace on Ben. "I'm his boyfriend."

A tide of red washed over Max's vision.

"It's okay, baby," Sugar crooned, petting any part of Ben he could get to while dodging the EMTs as they tried to shove him out of the way. "We'll get you clean and sober, then we can be together."

"He's seizing." The paramedics moved to hold Ben down. "What did he take?" The question was directed at Sugar, who shrugged.

"I'm not sure. He kept offering me pixie dust."

Sugar's words finally penetrated the scarlet fog surrounding Max. And Ben's resonated in his memory.

I'm clean. I do not use. Not even pixie dust.

'Sss him. Sh-grrr.

It's him. Sugar.

As it always seemed to do around Ben, Max's body reacted before his mind. He was after Sugar, on the little bastard, slamming him to the floor before he even realized what he was doing.

The fucking fairy screeched like a girl but he was a surprisingly vicious fighter and packed a lot of strength into that scrawny, wiry frame. He clawed and pinched, and Max ignored the sting and pinned him down with a hand on his neck. It took everything in him not to crush the little fucker's throat.

Hard hands, again, yanking him upright. A dark blue polyester sleeve. Ann Arbor's finest lifting Sugar's sobbing carcass to his feet.

"Badge," Max panted. "Clipped in my inside jacket pocket." The cop who'd lifted Sugar let him go to grab the jacket from where it was wadded on the floor. The little DJ made a run for it, ostensibly chasing the stretcher bearing Ben away to the ambulance. Max knew if they didn't stop him now, they'd never see him again.

"I'm undercover." The words were urgent, rushed. "Grab him!" he yelled. "Don't let him go."

There was a mad scramble, gawkers yelping as they were knocked aside by the suddenly fleeing DJ/drug dealer. Max lunged after him but was caught tight in the cop's grip. He swore, a steady stream of rage and filth, as Sugar disappeared into the crowd, followed by the other police officer.

"Son of a bitch." Max jerked again in the cop's hold but he'd given up on escape. The dude wasn't letting him go until he'd seen his badge, and his badge was currently being trampled underfoot where the other cop had dropped it to light out after Sugar.

He closed his eyes, shook his head hoping to rattle loose some common sense. When he opened them, he almost thought for a minute someone had slipped *him* something. The sight before his eyes was just that fantastical.

DJ DarqueMaster moved through the crowd like a Sherman tank, a mean smile covering his face—and Sugar dangling from his huge fists.

"I think you lost something." He grinned. Max was glad that grin wasn't directed at him. Darque was one scary fucker. He dropped Sugar unceremoniously on the floor at their feet then turned to the cop who'd followed him back through the crowd. "He's got a duffle bag in the cage and he drives a brand-spanking-new Beemer." He turned to Max. "You suck at undercover work, dude. I made you six weeks ago."

Max's self-disgust would have to wait, though. With the urgent matter of Sugar's apprehension resolved, there was only room in Max's head for one thing. He needed to get to Ben.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Beeen-ja-men."

This was getting old. At least this time his head felt slightly less filled with cotton. And the voice was less distorted. Of course, the voice was also a clear soprano instead of the gruff tenor he'd much prefer to hear.

Eyes closed, Ben took stock. Cool sheets. Puffy pillow. Burning sting in his left hand, which sucked since he was a lefty. Nope. Definitely not Max's little hole in the wall.

Finally, with what seemed like an unnatural amount of effort, he forced his eyes open. And immediately slammed them shut against the blinding light.

"Oh! Sorry!" The female voice must belong to the blurry shadow he'd glimpsed before retreating back into his own head. There was a click, and the glare through his eyelids dimmed. "That should be better," the voice soothed.

He wasn't thrilled about it, but he opened his eyes a slit. Yep. Hospital room. Pretty little nurse. No flowers on the windowsill. No pissed-off club security guard cum cop in the uncomfortable recliner.

"What..." He had to stop because his dry tongue was sticking to the roof of his mouth and he was afraid he might choke to death on it.

The pretty nurse hurried to spoon some ice chips into his mouth. Blessed cold. Sweet moisture. "Apparently someone slipped you a mickey," she said with a disapproving frown. "You must hang out with a crappy crowd, hon."

He resisted rolling his eyes only because he was afraid it might hurt.

"Anyway," she paused to spoon up another batch of heaven-sent ice chips, "you've been in a coma since Saturday night, early Sunday morning. Today's Wednesday," she added when he raised his brow in question. "You've got some good friends, though. That little blue-haired boy's been by almost every day. And that blond guy who looks like he should be in rehab. Or prison."

"Tristan?" he managed. He wasn't ready to contemplate the blond felon. "He's awake?"

"He is indeed. He woke up sometime Saturday night. Probably about the same time you were taking your dive." Her disapproval was clear. "He came down Monday to see you for the first time and he's been here a couple times a day since then."

"Do you know what I took?" Because that was easier to face than asking about Max.

"You'll have to ask the doctor that. She'll be around soon. I buzzed the desk once I knew you were really waking up."

"Any lasting damage?" Please God, no.

"You'll have to ask the doctor that too. I know they'll want tests on your liver and kidneys. You're breathing okay, though, and the only thing in your IV now is saline, so I wouldn't worry too much."

Okay. So no panic until he had a reason to.

"Good morning!" A white-coated woman who could only be the doctor surged into the room like a tidal wave. "Nice to see those pretty eyes with some personality behind them."

She whipped out her stethoscope and Ben settled down to be poked and prodded. And to wonder where Max was, and if he'd be coming back soon. \* \* \* \* \*

Max hung up the phone very gently. The rush of relief left him lightheaded. Ben was awake. And talking. And not asking for him.

Of course, Ben had no reason to ask for him. It's not like Max had professed his undying love or anything. Besides, even if he had, bad drugs, four days and a coma later, Ben probably wouldn't remember anyway.

And what the fuck was he thinking, even considering the L word? He didn't *love* Ben. He liked him. Thought he was bright and funny and hot as hell. He'd touched and tasted enough to want the banquet, to crave feasting on that dead-sexy body until he was glutted with the pleasure of it. But that wasn't love.

Why should Ben ask for him? Max was probably all tangled up in Ben's mind with the bad trip—fuck, trips, plural—and the hospital, and the ugly things they'd said to each other before Ben had hit the floor. Max shouldn't want Ben to ask for him. The little bastard had said some nasty shit to him, stuff that was almost true on a lot of levels, and he should be fucking relieved to be rid of him.

So why was he white-knuckling the phone, resisting the urge to fling it across the room? Why was he shaking like a junkie with DTs, jonesing for a glimpse of Benny's glittering green eyes?

He didn't know, but fuck all if it had anything to do with love.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tristan looked good. Still pale, still neon-blue haired, but somehow younger and more vulnerable scrubbed clean of his eyeliner and glitter. Ben wondered if he looked as naked.

"So, do you remember anything?" Even Tristan's voice was younger now that he wasn't yelling to be heard over the music and sucking in secondhand smoke.

"Not from Saturday night. Actually, not from last Saturday night, either." It was frustrating and a little bit terrifying, having what felt like half of the last two weeks completely blank. "Is there anything you remember?"

"Not a lot." Tristan looked down, refusing to meet Ben's eyes. "I'm really sorry, dude. I'd been using pixie dust on the weekends for a couple of months, and it never did any damage." He flicked a glance up, but didn't make eye contact. "Sugar was my source. Apparently he was cutting it with methamphetamine and Novocain." Now Tristan did look up, meeting Ben's eyes earnestly. "I had no idea it was bad shit. I would never have taken it, let alone given it to someone I..." He trailed off, flushing dark red. "Anyway, your cop says he's in lockup, and likely to stay there."

"My cop?" Ben felt dizzy for a second. It was Friday morning and Max hadn't been to see him since he'd woken up.

"Yeah. You know, the blond bouncer from the club. He's an undercover cop! Can you believe it?" Tristan's eyes, almost the same bright blue as his hair, goggled.

"Why do you call him *my* cop?" Why couldn't he just shut up and let it go? Oh, right. Because he wanted Max pretty much more than he wanted his next breath, but the asshole was nowhere to be found.

"Uh, he's only been here every day since I woke up. Sheesh, I couldn't turn around without tripping over him for days."

"I haven't seen him."

"Huh. Weird. Anyway, he says Sugar won't be dealing again any time soon." Another flicker from blue eyes. "I'm guessing he's the reason you never gave me more than a passing glance?"

He could pretend to misunderstand, pretend he thought Tristan was talking about Sugar, but at the most it would buy him about thirty seconds. And Max had been to see him every day until he woke up. He'd checked in on Tristan, but he'd been there for Ben. Ben had no idea what was going on in Max's head. Hell, he hardly knew what was going on in his own head. What he did know was, "Yeah. I guess he is the reason."

Tristan gave a little sigh. "I figured. So, you're getting out today?"

"Yep. After afternoon rounds. What are you still doing here?"

Tristan's eyes flickered in what Ben finally realized was a nervous habit. "There are some problems with my kidney function. Apparently that little bastard fucked me up pretty good."

Ben winced. He'd had a narrow escape. Drugged twice in seven days, he wouldn't have been surprised if his kidneys had turned on him too.

"I'll be okay," Tristan added with false cheer. "My mom's cat had kidney failure, and she lived to a ripe old age. Just needed fluids a couple times a week."

"Hey," Ben put a hand on Blue's where it rested on the bed, "if I can do anything, tell me, okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

But Ben was pretty sure he wouldn't.

# **Chapter Eight**

It felt pretty fucking familiar, sitting on Max's doorstep, e-reader propped against his thighs, reading the same page for the fiftieth time. Ben wondered where Max was, if he was at work, or out with...someone. Then he hated himself for wondering.

The sun was setting, and the concrete stoop outside Max's door was quickly giving up what little heat it had soaked up throughout the day. Ben was appallingly tired. The doctor had told him to expect the fatigue, but that didn't make it any more acceptable. He was rapidly getting chilled, too, a chill that seeped through the skin, past the bones and into the very core of his being. A chill that he was afraid had less to do with the cold concrete than it did with Max's absence at the hospital.

He tipped his head back against the door, giving up on reading, and tugged his leather jacket closer around himself. He wondered what he'd say if Max ever bothered to come home. What Max would say to *him*?

He woke to darkness broken by the watery yellow light of the naked bulb above Max's door. The man himself crouched beside him, balanced on the balls of his feet. Ben blinked his eyes open to the sensation of Max's hand on his cheek, a stunningly tender gesture, and the sensation of Max's eyes on his face, stunningly intense.

"Hey." That voice. That rich tenor, rough with cigarettes. The faint, bitter odor clung to Max, stung Ben's nose and eyes. It had to be the smoke.

"Hey." His own voice was rough from disuse and from the cold. He cleared his throat nervously.

"What'ya doin' here, Ben?" The question should have burned, should have put his back up and sent him on his way, but those eyes, dark and intent, never left his.

"I don't know." He did know. And he didn't. He wanted something, could almost articulate it, but he didn't think he could have it. He was afraid that this visit was just another instance of self-abuse. Abuse via Max.

Max's hand glanced over his briefly, his eyes flickering away for an instant. "Shit, babe, you're freezing." He pushed up to his feet, lithe muscle and dangerous grace, and offered Ben a hand.

Ben grimaced as Max had to practically drag him to his feet. Freezing and stiff and weary, body and soul, was more like it. He huffed out a tired breath. Best to ignore the tingle of heat when Max called him babe. He'd always used the endearment as a way to distance him anyway. He thought. Best to just say thanks for saving my stupid ass again, and take his leave gracefully.

Yeah. That would be best.

"C'mon in." Max made quick work of the lock and urged Ben inside with a ghost of a touch at the small of his back. Ben shivered a little, but Max told himself it was just the cold.

Damn kid must have been out of his damn mind, sitting on the concrete in the dark. Totally ignoring the fact that Max didn't live in the friendliest of neighborhoods, the little asshole was fresh out of the hospital, fresh out of a coma. He had no business sitting out in the cold with nothing but a pair of threadbare jeans and his leather jacket to protect him.

"I got coffee and cocoa." Max just smirked at Ben's raised brows. "I've got a sweet tooth," he admitted. Clearly. With a preference for a certain candy boy.

He filled two mugs with bottled water and shoved them in the microwave without waiting for Ben to make a choice. "So. Didja figure out why you're here yet?"

"I guess to say thanks. Again." Ben was staring at the floor, eyes fixed on his own feet, like he was shy or something. What a joke.

"Unnecessary." The mic beeped and Max juggled the hot cups out, dumping powdered cocoa and petrified marshmallows into the steaming water.

"No, it is necessary." Ben had raised his eyes; now they were fixed on Max's hands. "I could be dead twice over. Probably should be dead. You scraped me up off the floor both times." Those glittering green eyes cut in his direction for just a second. "But you know, you could have told me."

Max didn't have to ask what. And a part of him knew that, yeah, he could have told Ben what was going on. He remembered that rush of relief when he thought Ben knew, that he didn't have to play this stupid fucking game anymore. But in the end... "No, Ben. I really couldn't."

"Yeah. I guess I get that." Ben picked up one of the mugs, cupping his hands around it and pursing his lips to blow across the steaming surface of the cocoa. Max tried to block out the picture of those lips wrapped around his dick, without much success.

"That's it?" He'd sort of meant to make the words brusque, to let Ben know it was time to go. Time to go before Max lost the battle with his dick and tackled the guy to the floor. He bet he could have him half-naked before they hit the linoleum.

"Yeah. I guess." For a bright guy, one about to get a fucking PhD, Ben didn't have much to say for a change. Max told himself to be grateful, but at that moment he would have given just about anything to hear one of Ben's random rants.

All at once Ben seemed ready to oblige him.

"No. It's not." He set the mug back on the counter and moved in on Max, just on the edge of getting in his space. "I want to know what happened."

Shit. "Didn't Blue or someone tell you?"

"That's not what I mean." Now that gaze was on his. Not steady, not by a long shot, and not certain. There was a flinch there, a hesitation in the depths of his eyes that wrenched at Max's guts. "I want to know what happened between *us*. What was real and what was part of the job for you."

Max laughed without any humor and scrubbed a hand over his face. "Babe, nothing about you was part of the job. In fact, if I had a dime for every time I nearly fucked the whole operation because I couldn't stay the fuck away from you, I could almost pay Sugar's bail."

Ben smiled a little. That damn cynical quirk of his lips that hurt to look at. "You say fuck an awful lot when you're pissed."

Max snorted. "You'd be in a position to know, since you keep me in a perpetual state of pissed-off-ness."

Ben moved closer, not touching but caging Max between the counter and his body. He smelled like the outdoors, cold and almost metallic with the city air.

"If I wasn't part of the job, what was I?"

"A distraction. A temptation. A fucking inconvenience."

"Sorry." He looked sorry. He looked tired and hurt and more beautiful than anything Max had ever seen before.

"Shit. Don't be sorry. 'S not your fault you're like crack. One hit and my brain scrambled."

That smile again, but a little warmer. He just didn't get that Ben couldn't see his own appeal. Couldn't understand where the insecurity came from. Didn't the guy realize he was sex on legs? A walking aphrodisiac, that's what Ben was.

"If it helps, you had my brain pretty scrambled too." He'd moved closer, still not touching, but that could change with one deep breath. Max found his lungs had frozen.

"I thought..." Ben trailed off. He was staring at Max's mouth, the pulse in his throat hammering hard enough Max could count the beats. "I wanted..." He trailed off again, a rough sigh fluttering the hair hanging in his eyes.

"What do you want?"

Ben leaned in and opened his lips over the spot where neck and shoulder met, and Max let him. Warm, wet lips and teasing tongue—everything Max ever wanted to feel,

to taste, in life. When Ben would have taken it further, rubbing up against him in a full-body caress, Max drew back.

"What do you want?" he repeated, catching Ben's face between his palms so this time his candy boy couldn't distract him with his sweet, sinful mouth. Because Max needed the words. Ben huffed out an irritated sound, rolled his eyes and looked off to the side.

"World peace," he finally snapped when it became clear Max wasn't letting him any closer until he answered. "The perfect tequila sunrise and a spectacular blowjob."

Max tightened his grip on Ben's face, sliding his thumbs along those high cheekbones. He hadn't shaved, and the stubble glinted almost gold. Max wondered what color his hair was under the black dye. Giving him a little shake, he forced Ben's gaze to his and repeated, for the last time, "Benjamin. What. Do. You. Want?"

"You, dammit!" Ben finally exploded, eyes wide and glittering green and so fucking full of vulnerability it literally stole Max's breath. How, after all they'd been through, could he believe even for a second that Max didn't want him back? "I want you, okay?" His voice dropped to a whisper, as if he were afraid to speak his wish out loud.

"I want to wake up with you. I want to hang out with you." Ben's voice was low and intense. His words gained speed as he gained momentum. "I want to go to the movies, and go dancing, and sit on your fucking rock of a futon and make out while we pretend to watch *The Simpsons*." Those eyes that truly were the windows to his soul closed. "I want to make love with you every night. And I want you to fuck the shit out of me when I need it." He gave a ragged sigh that fluttered over Max's lips, shivering over his skin and shuddering through his heart. "I just want you, Max."

Max drew in a ragged breath of his own. "What if I said you already have me?" All his hopes and dreams, even the ones he hadn't known he had, were in his hands, in the wide emerald eyes that snapped open at his words.

"Don't play with me, Max. I'm fucking serious."

"So am I." He bent and rested his forehead against Ben's. "Benny, I'm yours. I've been yours since the first time you tried to rub that fine ass up against me, and I've known it since the afternoon you woke up in my bed." He shook his head. "Everything you said, it's yours for the taking."

"Then I'll take it." Ben's smile was tentative, a ray of sunlight dancing with color after a storm. Then his eyes twinkled and his smile turned sly. "And I'll take it now, if you don't mind."

### **Chapter Nine**

Ben was stretched out on his belly, a pillow wadded under his hips, arms stretched above his head and wrists cuffed to the wooden frame of the fucking futon. He couldn't think of anywhere he'd rather be.

Max was worshipping him. No other word for it. Slow, wet kisses to the back of his neck. A long, lazy suck at the tender spot where neck and shoulder joined. A curl of sensation unrolled through him like a hot wire, neck to nipples to dick; a searing line of pleasure.

It was like nothing that had passed between them before. No edge of desperation, the knowledge of denial tempered and refined into a slow, dreamy possession that was more intimate than anything he'd ever experienced.

The threat of control, the promise of ownership had always been there in Max's touch. Ben had known, deep inside where he was afraid to look, afraid of what he might find, he'd known that, given the chance, Max could own him. He'd known Max could be violent.

Who knew Max had it in him to be tender?

Ben was naked. Body and soul, in a way he'd never been with any other lover. Max stretched over him, pressed against him, open jeans scraping along Ben's skin, his zipper a sharp abrasion.

"Mine, Ben." The words were breathed against the skin between his shoulder blades, a promise that wrapped around Ben's heart in a stranglehold of emotion.

"Yeah," he mumbled into the sheet. His.

"What do you need, babe?" Max's tongue down his spine; hard, silken skin of his chest against Ben's ass as he knelt between Ben's spread legs, folded over to keep as much contact as humanly possible. "Need me to love you?" Max was tracing circles at

the base of his spine with that talented tongue, shooting sparks along Ben's nerves, threatening to short-circuit his entire nervous system. "Or do you need me to fuck you?" A low huff of laughter against his spine and, damn, that hands-free orgasm really wasn't an invention of the porn industry. He clamped down hard, hands, hips, ass. Holding back. "Fuck the shit out of you, babe." The amusement in that cigarette-rough voice would have pissed him off if Max hadn't started dabbing his tongue in the little divot at the top of Ben's crack.

"Yeah," he panted again. Either. Both. As long as it was fucking now.

"Dealer's choice, huh?" Hard hands dug into Ben's ass cheeks, opening him, a vulnerable, maddening stretch that just ratcheted up the tension trembling in his arms.

"Need you, Max," he groaned into the sheet, into the unyielding surface of the futon. "Just need you."

Max's groan echoed his, hot breath on the sensitive skin between his cheeks, hot and wet on his puckered hole.

"You've got me." Max repeated his earlier vow and sealed the deal with a slow, hot lick from balls to asshole.

Tongue teasing, probing, Max set about preparing him. Ben felt himself softening, straining for more. When a thick, slick finger joined the dance, the moan was ripped from his gut.

"That's right, babe." The words vibrated against him, sent a shudder through him. "Fuck my hand." He hadn't even realized he was rocking back into Max's thrusts.

Max flicked his tongue around the ring of his sphincter before working a second finger in. Deep. Deeper. Deepest. A third finger nearly sent him into orbit, especially when those fingers crooked, an almost too-rough scrape over his gland that made him see stars.

"Ready?" How the fuck could Max still talk? Ben felt like the ability to form words had been permanently burned out of him, collateral damage to the scalding pleasure

flooding him. He grunted, a low, garbled sound with no literal translation but which clearly meant *Hell, yeah. More than ready. Desperate.* 

The crinkle of the condom wrapper, the rustle of denim and the shake of the mattress as jeans were kicked away, then the thick, blunt press of Max's dick finally, finally lined up against his hole. The burning press, pain and fire and pleasure wrapped up in one blast of sensation.

Ben wasn't a virgin. He'd fucked and been fucked enough to know what to expect. Nothing had prepared him for Mad Max.

"So tight, Ben." Max rose behind him, pulling Ben's hips higher, stretching his body out into an arch of pure pleasure. He imagined what Max was seeing, the curve of his spine leading into the swell of his ass. Max's cock digging in, inch by slow inch, shifting from side to side and forcing its way in, making room.

He wanted to reach back, grab Max's thigh and pull him harder, deeper, but the cuffs held him firmly to the frame of the futon, and the helplessness tripped some trigger he hadn't even known he had.

He couldn't stay still. He rocked harder on his knees, pushing back, trying to ram himself down on Max's dick, to get deeper. "More." The word was a gust of air, a grunt dragged from his gut.

"Yeah, babe. More." And Max gave him more, slamming in deep with a hard surge that shoved Ben up the futon so he had to brace his hands on the frame or risk concussion.

Maybe he wasn't without words after all, because with every thrust, every slap of Max's thighs against the back of his, every hard slam against the gland that pumped pleasure through him like a fucking waterfall, he heard himself. "Yeah, yeah, yeah." A refrain of pleasure and need.

"Don't come." The words were panted hard, almost as hard as the fingers digging into his hips, an impossible demand. It was already building, drawing his balls up into

his body, ready to spew. "Wanna suck you off." And fuck, he'd hold back if it killed him for the promise of Max's mouth.

"Oh fuck, then hurry." More words. Who knew?

Max laughed again and it jarred through him, jangling already scalded nerves. "Demanding," he observed, but the word was grunted out between thrusts.

"Gonna..." Ben arched harder, undulated in Max's grip. "Unh." As much as he wanted Max's mouth, he couldn't hold it much longer.

"Wait." Breathless demand. "I'm close." He was. Ben could tell from the swelling of his dick, the way his hips had started snapping, driving him deeper into Ben's ass. A low, growling groan rose and fell with every thrust, and Ben's raw grunts fell in carnal harmony.

He wanted it, wanted Max's cum, wanted to feel that whipcord-lean body jerking against him. He tensed, tightening his muscles and using his ass to squeeze Max's cock, clenching the length stretching him to agonizing bliss, and Max's growl dropped deeper, turned to a low shout as his hips lost their rhythm, slammed into him with no coordination, until Ben felt nothing but the hot rush swelling the condom.

"Jesus." Max's voice was raw, as fucked out as if he'd already swallowed Ben's dick. And if he wanted to do that he needed to do it fucking now, because Ben was a breath away from coming, and the idea of shooting down Max's throat was dancing in his brain, the image alone almost enough to get him off.

Max seemed to know it. He pulled out quick enough that, had Ben been any less turned-on, it would have hurt, then yanked the pillow from under Ben's hips and manhandled him onto his back. The new position strained his arms, crossing them over his head and pulling at his shoulders, but Max's breath was on his dick and nothing else mattered.

"Don't play," he begged. And yeah, it was begging. "Need to come."

"I got you, babe." And he did. That hot, wet mouth sealed over the head, tongue fucking into the slit, and reality exploded in a shower of rainbow sparks. His eyes had slid closed but he forced them open. He wanted to watch.

Those sable eyes, as warm and soft as the fur they reminded him of, locked on his. Lips red and swollen, wrapped around his dick in a picture so perfectly obscene Ben thought he'd lose it then and there.

Max didn't get the chance to take him deep. Didn't get the chance to do much more than suck the head, jerking hard along the length, dragging sweet friction in the slick of Ben's pre-cum, because Ben was coming. Coming like he never had, a scalding, acid rush. More mind-bending than the moment before the pixie dust had kicked his ass. More intense than anything Ben had dreamed existed.

Max just sucked harder, swallowing fast but not fast enough. Cum coated his lips, snuck out the corners of his mouth, and he kept sucking, kept swallowing until it was too much, the pleasure turning truly painful so that Ben drew his knees up, turning away from the stimulation. And the sound of his dick popping free sent another jolt through him.

When his brain turned back on enough for his eyelids to work, Max had disposed of his condom and was kneeling between Ben's legs once more, swiping the spunk off his mouth with the back of his hand.

Ben's spent, raw cock twitched and he groaned because he wasn't going to be ready to go again for a week at least. "Is there anything you do that isn't ridiculously hot?"

Max smiled, a slow curve of his lips that reached his eyes, made them warm and so fucking beautiful that it hurt to look at, but Ben couldn't tear his gaze away. After a moment of just looking, that smile twisting something tender and vulnerable in Ben's chest, Max leaned over him. The press of his ridged abs on Ben's spent cock was somehow as intimate as the slam of his dick in Ben's ass. The slide of hard, calloused hands up the length of Ben's arms shackled him every bit as much as the cuffs tethering him to the futon.

Max's mouth took his, and Ben realized it was their first real kiss. The first kiss without chemical interference or anger or doubt. The cuffs clicked free, and Max planted Ben's forearms on the mattress on either side of his head, balancing over him as he ate at Ben's mouth with tender urgency.

Ben dragged weak, shaking arms up, wrapped one hand around the back of Max's neck, speared the fingers of the other through the spiky points of bleached-blond hair to cup the back of his skull.

When Max finally raised his head, Ben was thinking that maybe going again wasn't as out of the question as he'd thought.

"This is gonna be good," Max murmured against his mouth, dropping his body enough to rub his slick cock against Ben's own twitching length. He smiled against Ben's mouth and shifted his hips in a slow, painfully intense grind.

Oh yeah. Going again wasn't going to be a problem.

"More than good." That smile again, against Ben's mouth, and this time Ben returned it. "The best."

The End

#### **About the Author**

VJ Summers is the quiet—and short—half of best-selling author team Violet Summers, and is multi-published in a variety of genres, from contemporary to paranormal, from BDSM to fantasy. The two things you can count on in all of VJ's books are their deeply emotional stories and scorching erotic love scenes.

She doesn't remember quite when she started writing, though she has a vague memory of a story written in the seventies about a girl name Carmel (that's Car-MELL) who wore designer Sassoon "shapes", or jeans. It was not, she says, her finest work. Now, years in public education have sparked a variety of stories that she's eager to tell.

VJ lives in Southeast Michigan, and the spice of the Metro-Detroit area often flavors their work. "Why look for a more glamorous setting," she asks, "when we've got the beautiful, re-vitalized Downtown area to draw from?"

VJ welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her <u>author bio page</u> at <u>www.ellorascave.com</u>.

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