

Loose Id



TREVA HARTE
MAXXED OUT

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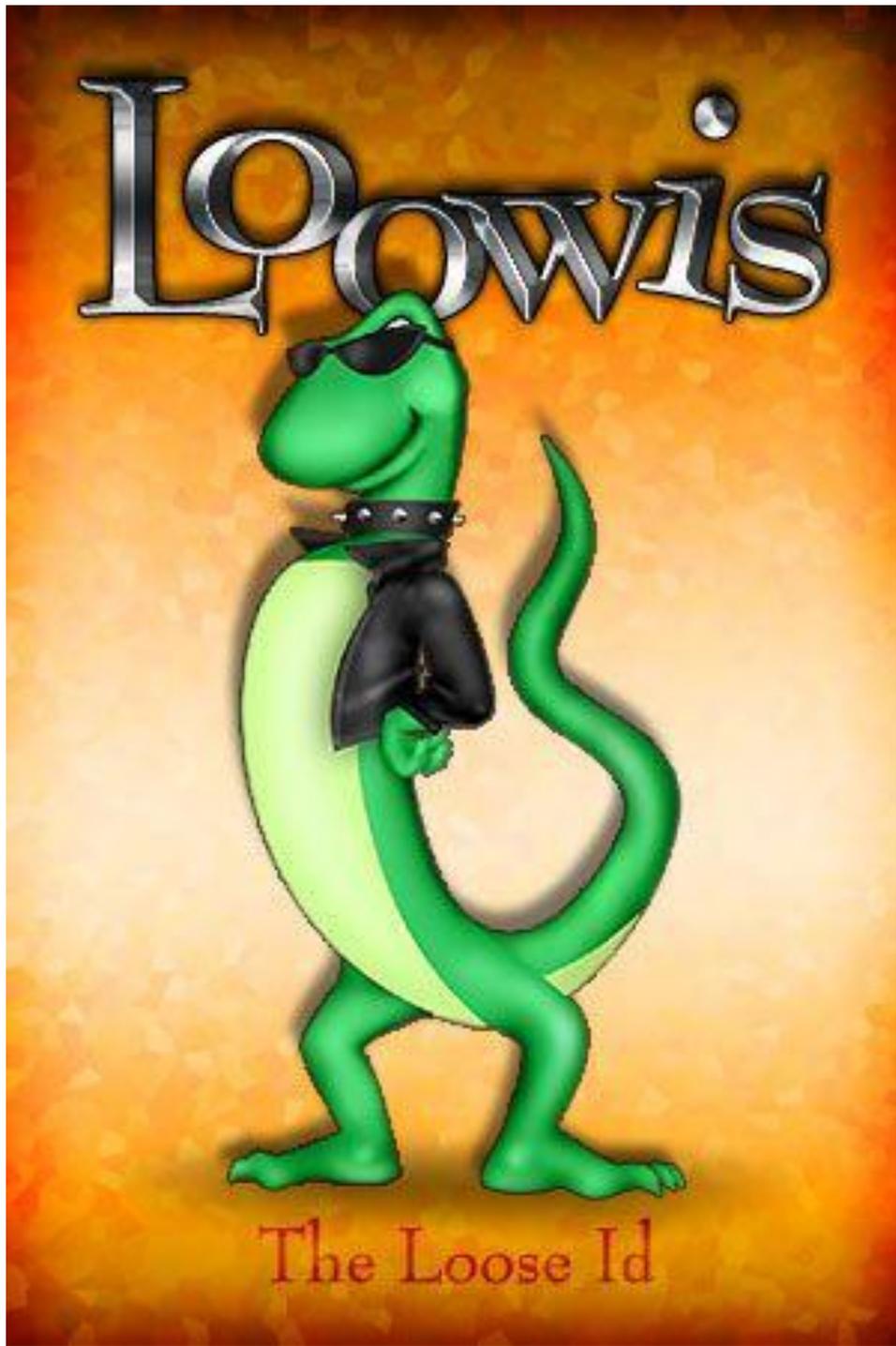
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Chapter One

Go, Max! Go, go, go!

Instead of obeying the voice screaming in my head, I ran my hand through my hair. The still-damp tips of it clung to my fingers. The shower had helped. The coffee had helped. I still felt like shit, but I was hoping—God, I was hoping really hard—that this visit would help the most.

I went through names on the apartment mailboxes—*Andrews, Wilson, Sullivan...Rocco*. Funny that I didn't know exactly where Daniel lived nowadays. I suppose it was funny that I thought I should.

It wasn't like we hung out all the time. I hadn't seen him for years, except sometimes at the tail end of Christmas, when he'd show up to see Mom and Dad. After all, he wasn't my friend. Well, not exactly. I hesitated before I pressed on the buzzer. Should I forget it?

Naw.

Go, Max. Go on.

All that didn't matter. Daniel would help if I needed it. And fuck. I needed him to help. I pressed down hard on the button, telling myself I was ready to take the first step. Anything had to be better than what I'd been doing—not doing—for years.

“Yeah?”

“Daniel? It's Max. Max Richards.”

“Yeah?” There was a slight pause. He had to remember me, right? I shuffled my feet, trying to think of how to identify myself to my brother's best friend. It had

never occurred to me that he might not know who I was. Damn it, there was a good reason why I never planned ahead. Things never worked according to plan.

“Well, hell. Come on up.”

My breath whooshed out. If Daniel really hadn’t remembered me, I’d—I don’t know what I’d have done or felt, because it hadn’t happened, thank God—but it wouldn’t have been good.

My legs were shaking as I headed up the stairs to 2C. There he was—one arm curled over the door, one on the door frame—big, wide, with a scowl on his face. He looked even larger than I remembered, which was weird. Didn’t you usually discover people and places were smaller in real life than in your memory?

Just my luck that Daniel was even more imposing now than he’d been when I was twelve and first really noticed him. I would have laughed but kept it in since it would have come out as more of a terrified giggle. In a way, this visit was all Daniel’s fault for being larger-than-life.

Then I realized something strange had happened. The adrenaline that usually buzzed in my body slowed down at the sight of him. I think I stopped breathing when reality finally met up with my plan.

Here I go. This is it. The moment stretched out, stilled, froze. All I could see was Daniel looming over me. For once in my life everything was settled and calm. Perfect.

Then I took a deep breath, and time hummed back to normal speed.

Go, go, go.

“Can I come in?”

* * *

Jesus. So this was Max.

Before the time I’d gotten my hand off the door, he was inside. He was here, all right, but I still hadn’t gotten used to the idea.

The kid was...well, not really a kid anymore. He sat on my sagging old sofa, sprawling out his long legs to brace himself. He needed a shave. Wasn't that a kick? Little Max needing to shave.

I could remember back to when he was born. Matt and I had already met at grade school, and Matt had decided we were friends. I stayed over for the first time to keep Matt company while his parents were at the hospital.

That was a long time ago. I tried to see Matt's baby brother with new eyes. After all, this Max wasn't a baby. He was tall, a little awkward and geeky, but growing into his frame. He was still pretty. We'd teased him about that when he was at the age when it was hard to tell boys from girls—they were all high voices and long legs. But he was definitely masculine now.

And he looked hungover. No surprise there. Drinking was what college kids did, right? Kids not in college too, for that matter. His brother and I used to sneak booze when we were younger than he was.

He tapped the arm of the sofa, stopped himself, and then tapped again.

Yeah. He also looked wired. Scared wired. I wondered if he was abusing more than booze, but decided that wasn't it.

Max had something eating at him.

And he'd come to me, of all people. Well, that almost made sense. I knew all about things eating at you.

But what the hell was he doing here?

I tried to focus on how I should act with this new Max until he told me, but couldn't think of a thing. God, I was tired, even though it was afternoon. The day after the first night shift had thrown me off. I guess I was getting old. I had to be if Max was now an adult.

"Orange juice?" I poured him some before he nodded, and then slugged the rest down from the bottle. I'd only had one clean glass left. Tidying up on the weekends

wasn't a priority for me. Max stared at me while I swallowed, but when I finished and looked directly at him, he glanced away.

"Th-thanks. I—" He swallowed the juice and frowned at what was left in the glass. Well, fuck that. The glass was clean. Maybe it wasn't up to the Richards family standards of cleanliness, but it was clean. Old defensiveness trickled in under the anger. I used to feel awkward, different—stupid—around them. They hadn't tried to do that to me. I managed that all on my own. The better they were to me, the more I knew they were everything I wasn't.

But when Max finished his sentence, I felt even more stupid than I had as a kid. He muttered, "Damn it, I haven't stuttered in years."

The frown had been over his problem, not mine. I'd almost forgotten about the stammer. Sometimes when Matt teased him, the kid would get so wound up he couldn't talk. Matt always eased up on him then. He'd been a good big brother.

He'd been a good friend. The best.

All right. Enough waiting. While I'd been wondering when Max would talk, I'd already remembered too many things I'd forgotten. He'd reminded me about some of the good stuff in the past, but it was a matter of seconds before we both started thinking about the bad.

"All right, spit it out before you get back into the stuttering habit. Your parents spent a hell of a lot of money getting you to stop."

God, Max had hated going to those lessons.

"Spit what out?" He glanced up at me and then down again.

I almost sighed. Were we going to have to do things the hard way? I set the orange juice bottle down on the counter with a *thud*. The kid almost jumped out of his skin at the sound. I'd been about that bad when I first got back from Iraq, but I'd been trained to watch out for enemy fire. What was he afraid of? Me?

“What do you need, Max?” I leaned against the counter, trying to look nonthreatening. I’m not sure how good I was at that since I’d spent most of my life trying to look like a badass. By this point I didn’t even have to try.

“Uh...” He swallowed more juice and began to cough. I waited. When he got over it, he said, “It’s more difficult than I thought to—um—spit it out.”

Oh hell. I wasn’t good at guessing what people meant at the best of times, and this wasn’t me at my best. Why did I have to give up an hour of sleep for this?

He gave me a sudden smile, and my breath caught. He didn’t look much like his more coordinated athlete brother. Now that his hair was drying, he was closer to blond than his brother’s darker shade. He was too skinny, and his face was too serious. But the smile...the smile was the same. I’d always known the world was going to be fine when I saw it come out.

I held on to my patience for the sake of that smile. “You know I owe your family big-time. Anything I can do for your parents or you, you’ve got. What do you need, Max?”

He stared at the floor, smile gone. He looked miserable. Goddamn moody kid. It made me want to smack him. Made me want to give him a hug and tell him everything was fine.

He straightened his shoulders and looked me in the eyes at last. “I hope you mean that. You see, I need you to help me tell my mom and dad I’m gay.”

I watched him swallow and brace himself. He kept staring at me. For a moment he looked like he had when he was a kid in trouble and expected me to help him out.

I only wished I could.

His almost hopeful look drained away when I didn’t say anything. I didn’t like the sudden wariness in his body. That wasn’t Max.

I knew I had to fix things.

Daniel just stared at me, his dark eyes intent, his face completely blank. My stomach, still queasy, knotted up, just like it had last night after the drinking marathon. I'd done a lot of drinking before I was willing to admit I had to be honest. I did a little more before I knew I needed help to be honest. It wasn't until I was fairly sober that I realized it was Daniel whom I needed for all this. If Daniel wouldn't help me, then no one would.

But Daniel wasn't saying anything.

It was scary being on your own. I'd hoped—Maybe I'd made the wrong assumptions all these years. Heard things wrong. Shit. I really was on my own.

"Sorry. I'll leave." I stood up so fast my head spun for a minute. I staggered back.

"Steady." He gripped my shoulder, a firm hold, but there wasn't anything personal about it. He probably didn't want me to break the rest of the sofa by falling on it. "Maybe you need to sit down again, and we should talk some more."

He sounded calm. So I should be too.

"Uh. Sure." I sat. My palms were sweating. Apparently *should be calm* wasn't working for me.

"I'm not going to insult you by asking if you're sure. You look pretty sure to me." Daniel kept his hands on my shoulders, and I could almost feel the tension going out of my body with his touch. "Let's talk about whatever your problem is about this. Your family? Your parents are great people. But I'm figuring this would be a surprise to them."

"Thanks." *Thanks for taking me seriously.* "Yeah. I've never—I don't think—I didn't even want to believe it myself for a long time. They don't know at all. And I don't want to hurt them more than they've been hurt."

He took his hands off my shoulders. "So telling them you're gay would hurt them more than Matt dying in a car wreck?"

“No!” Jesus God. “But they’re fragile. They’ve patched their lives up pretty well, but the cracks still show, you know? I don’t want to add any more pain.”

“All right. That’s fair. What do you think I can do that you can’t?”

This was going to work out after all. Daniel was handling it just the way I’d figured he would.

“I don’t know. But they took it pretty well when you told them you were, and you’re the closest thing to Matt they have left.”

As the words floated into space, I took a look at his face. It wasn’t a blank any more. Too late, I realized maybe that was the wrong thing to say.

“They took it pretty well when you told them you were.”

When the kid finally opened his mouth, he told things just the way he saw them. I had to admire that.

Well, I’d admire that after I got over the shock.

“They told you *I* was gay?”

Max looked young and vulnerable again. “Not...not exactly. I overheard them say...” He stopped, and I didn’t know if he was struggling because of his refound stammer or to find the right words.

But whatever they’d said, it was all right. I knew them. It had to be Max taking what I said the wrong way. Speaking wasn’t my strong point. I relaxed and tried the nonthreatening look again. “Okay. I didn’t think they’d have mentioned it to anyone. But if they did, that would still be all right. I’m not hiding anything.”

Not since I said good-bye to the army two years ago. I’d pretty much been done with keeping that secret by then. If I had any family left at that point, it was Matt’s mother and father. So while I hadn’t made an official announcement, I’d let them know some of the places I hung out in my spare time. They hadn’t ever said anything directly back to me either, but they’d...accepted it. That was all Matt’s parents and I needed.

Of course Max would want to do more. He always liked to create a storm.

But he surprised me by avoiding the drama for now. Instead Max took a deep breath and said, slowly and carefully, “I once overheard them saying it was a pity you’d never get married or have kids. That you were lonely. That’s when it finally clicked for me.”

My face heated. Great. The Richards family felt sorry for me. I didn’t need to know that. I’d spent years getting over my accent, my poverty, and learning to be comfortable around them. I couldn’t start over again. And I sure as hell couldn’t stop being gay to prove I was as good as they were.

Hell. Now that I’d gotten Max going, how did I stop him?

“So the problem is that you think they’ll figure you’ll be lonely if you’re gay?” I was pretty sure the issue wasn’t that simple.

“I dunno.” Max cracked his knuckles. “It doesn’t make any difference if I tell everyone or not, I suppose. I’m lonely already.”

Christ. Matt, what the hell am I supposed to do with your baby brother? He’s not like you. I can’t joke things away. I can’t throw him off with questions. He’s not going to let me off easy.

“So maybe you’d be less lonely if people knew.” I sat down next to him, keeping a careful distance.

“Are you?”

Ouch.

“We can talk about my problems when I come to you for help. At least I’m not lying to myself or anyone else. That works for me.”

“All right, then.” Max nodded and let it go, thank God. “So I tell them. Just...say it?”

He moved his legs, and I watched one frayed inseam strain and threaten to unravel at his right inner thigh. Nice. Fucking nice. The quick zing that shot to my

balls wasn't unfamiliar, but with this guy, it was as unsettling as it was unexpected.

I needed to get him out, because it appeared I'd reached my limit on meaningful conversation for the week. My brain wasn't interested, and my little head was taking over. Except I wasn't sure Max had finished, so my brain needed to keep going a while longer.

I was the closest thing he had to a big brother, and that was a damn shame for both of us.

"You seem good enough at talking, kid. Should work." *Damn, I could use a drink.* But that wasn't in the cards right now. I tried to settle down. Max needed someone who could take whatever he needed to throw and take it calmly. And I was the only other someone in the room.

Shit. Just the two of us. I looked at the stubble on his face, wondering how it would feel—

"It's not what my parents wanted. I know that."

Parents. George and Jeanie. Better to me than my biological ones. *His* parents. Right. What the fuck was *wrong* with me, thinking about Max that way?

"Listen. You're the only kid they have left. They're not going to lose you too. Not for this."

"It won't ever be the same between us."

It hadn't been the same ever since the cops announced Matt was dead on arrival at the hospital. It never would be. But I could understand Max not wanting to threaten what was left.

He shifted, and that damn inseam threatened to break open again. I huffed out a breath.

It was weird. Part of my brain was still acting like Max was...well, Max. The other half was telling me Max was fucking delicious to look at and would be even better to touch.

“You planning to be an adult someday?” My words came out more harshly than I wanted them to.

He looked up at me, lips thinned, and nodded. Once. I’d forgotten the kid could keep his mouth shut but stew for weeks if he was mad enough. Of course he had to be really mad before that happened. If I’d gotten him going that much, it was too bad, but I needed him out of here soon. I wasn’t up—if that was the right word—to arguing much more.

“Then things will change between you and your parents, one way or another. Do it on your terms.” I braced myself to stand. Talk over.

He didn’t want to, but he’d heard me through anyhow. I owed Daniel for that. I owed my brother too. Daniel was doing this because he was around to talk to and Matt wasn’t. Now was the right time to thank him and step away before I made a fool of myself.

Then Daniel stood, and I got a look at how his jeans slipped a little down on his hips. I could see a faint shadow of pubic hair and, maybe, his cock. Oh dear God. Watching the tiny bit of revealed skin was like...like *snap*. Instant lust. This was a man, and I really fucking wanted him.

I’d relaxed slowly during our talk. That sight was all it took for the choked-up terror to come back. But it was mingled with more, just as powerful, emotions. All the momentum that had slowed down until I heard how he responded sped back up again.

I was the original ADHD kid most of the time—talk or act first and think later. And I wanted to act. Just pounce and think much, much later.

But I was going to talk some more. I’d actually thought about what I was going to say next. Thought about it for years, actually. Daniel had no obligation to listen to my planned-out speech, because I was about to push way beyond family friendship. But I had to try. I couldn’t leave it alone anymore. It didn’t matter if I made a fool of myself.

“Daniel.”

“Yeah?” He wasn’t looking at me. God. He was tired of hearing me whine. I could feel something frantic jumping around inside. I had to move forward. I had to. I’d finally realized that last night, right before I passed out. Trying to pretend was ripping me apart.

“I was hoping—”

He turned toward me then, but he didn’t help me out this time. He just looked wary. That didn’t matter. I’d have to do this sometime with someone. Why not start with the guy who’d starred in my favorite fantasies for years? At least he wouldn’t laugh at me.

I took a deep breath and let it fly. Of course it didn’t come out the way I’d rehearsed it in my head.

“Do you th-th-th—Would you be interested in seeing me again?”

Chapter Two

“What?” I hadn’t seen that coming.

Max beat out yet another nervous tattoo on the arm of my sofa. Although he was almost vibrating with excitement or tension, it looked like he was going to plant himself there until I answered.

When it took me a minute to catch my breath, he kept going as if my question meant I hadn’t gotten it the first time. “Hanging out. A date. A hook-up. Something.”

“Is this a multiple-choice test?”

“Yeah. And those are the only three answers. ‘None of the above’ is not acceptable.” He had transformed from nerves to intensity before I could catch up.

That’s what happened when you hung out with brainy little bastards. You never knew what they were going to spring on you next, and then they started to talk fast before you could recover. I knew there was a reason I’d avoided them.

Until now. Max was hard to avoid.

“I’m flattered,” I began cautiously. I was. It wasn’t that I was uninterested. He could take a look at my jeans and see that. My cock had gotten hard the minute he asked. All his suggestions had sounded good to it.

“Flattered enough to—” He sliced his hand at the air rather than finish the sentence.

“I’m not sure you should proposition the first person you come out to, Max.” I cleared my throat. “Especially if it’s me.”

“Why not? Are you too much man for a newbie?” Max gave me the wickedest grin I’d ever seen. I could do things to a guy who looked at me like that.

But not Max. He wasn’t a guy—not an available guy. Besides, he’d said he was a newbie. I shouldn’t like that at all.

“I’m almost your brother. I’m too old for you. I’m not...I’m not a college kid.” I began listing out loud the most acceptable reasons I shouldn’t be doing anything about what I shouldn’t be thinking about. There were other reasons I didn’t want to discuss—like what a man who’d fought and been wounded didn’t have in common with a naive freshman home for the first time since he started school.

“You’re not. You’re not. And so what?” He shot answers right back at me. Damn it, it was starting to feel like an exam. I never knew if I would pass exams. On the other hand, Max probably aced his college tests. Another good reason we should not be hanging out or hooking up.

“And because I have to take you to your parents, and you have to talk to them.” This was like handling a toddler who wanted to stick his finger in a light socket. It was hell getting his mind off something he wanted but shouldn’t have.

He gazed up at me, looking nervous and innocent and goddamn fuckable. No. He wasn’t a toddler.

“Oh yeah.” Max stood at last. I barely avoided a sigh of relief. “You mean now?”

He stretched and raked his hair back from his face again. And I wanted to push him back down on the couch and muss him up some more. My cock sent wicked signals to my brain, telling me to do just that. My brain told my cock no.

I hadn’t been awake for more than an hour, and already this had been a long day.

I thought about dealing with Jeanie and George on too little sleep. And dealing with Max after the fallout, whatever it would be. God. Of course, maybe it would be better to go ahead immediately than to wait until I was thinking clearly.

“I’m ready. Are you all right with doing it now?” I asked.

He was probably feeling pretty good at the moment, thinking he'd managed something big by telling me his secret. But I didn't mean that much to him, despite his proposition or whatever it was he'd just done. Coming out to parents—that was different.

"Th-th..." He stopped and took another breath. "They aren't home right now."

He'd probably timed his arrival here to take place during their absence so they wouldn't know anything. As he prowled around the room, I was remembering more about Max. The little bastard had been smart, hyper, moody, always doing something or saying something to stir his family up.

And now he'd stirred me up. Damn it.

"You want to go out for lunch or something until they get back?" Once I shepherded him through the talk with the family, my duty—not that I had a duty exactly—was done. The Max I remembered might be nervous now, but in ten minutes he'd be something else. The kid changed moods faster than movie stars changed outfits. He'd be fine soon. He'd go back to college and hang out with some gay-college-student group or something until he found himself. That was what colleges were for. He'd do just fine without me around to guide him.

Yeah. Find himself somewhere else than my living room. Or in my bed. Or on the floor. Getting fucked by someone else who wouldn't do nearly the job I could do.

"Yeah." Max blinked at me.

I realized I was close to him. Too close. I'd been inching toward him while I thought about how it could be.

"Not a date. Lunch." I said the words firmly to him and to me.

Max didn't look convinced. My cock didn't seem convinced either. Fuck. No. Not fuck. Get him the fuck outside and away from here.

"Where?" he asked.

"Burgers maybe?" I hadn't thought that far ahead. The kid was still too young to take to a bar...even if I could drink before heading back to the ER tonight.

“I’m a vegetarian.”

Jesus.

“There’s an Italian place about two blocks up. Pasta, eggplant Parmesan...” That was about all I could think of for vegetarian food there. I waited for him to tell me why that wouldn’t work. Probably they sneaked meat into the eggplant or something. Or he didn’t eat cheese. Instead he blinked at me before nodding.

Daniel had asked me out. He probably didn’t even realize he’d done it, and I felt like a girl for thinking that way, but...well, shit, he had. I trudged down the street with him, hands in my pockets to keep from grabbing or gesturing or looking anything like the excited maniac I was inside. I matched my steps to his, even though I usually went much faster.

I glanced at his leg and looked away. I knew he’d been hurt and been in rehab after the army. I wasn’t sure how badly he’d been wounded, but he certainly wasn’t eating up the road with his stride the way he used to. Of course my legs had been shorter than his the last time we really walked together. In fact, I was actually taller than he was.

God, I must not act like a dorky twelve-year-old around him. It had been bad enough doing that when I was twelve. My fists clenched inside the pockets. It had been six years since I’d really hung out with Daniel like this. I’d taken it for granted before Matt. Of course I was going to be with my big brother and his best bud when Matt had to watch me. Until there was no Matt, and then barely a Daniel.

Even so, it still felt right. For once I didn’t need to say a damn thing while I walked with a guy. We knew each other well enough to be quiet and easy together, even after all those years.

“Here you go. It’s not much on the outside. But it’s damn good food. The owners used to have a place in Baltimore’s Little Italy until they moved.”

“Great! I haven’t been to Little Italy in way too long.” Like I cared about the food.

“How is Richmond? D’you like it?” Daniel pushed the door open and held it as I went through.

We were going to chitchat about Richmond now? All right.

“It’s wilder than you’d think, considering the city is still hard-core Old South.” We took a booth without waiting to be seated. “You might like it.”

You might like visiting me. I practiced the words in my head, wondering if I could make it sound like a casual offer. Like most freshmen, I lived in the dorms, but there were hotels. A lot of hotels, just waiting to be shared. Or even a quick grope in my room at VCU, trying not to moan, because someone might be outside... God, like I’d care if anyone did hear. I’d be fucking proud if people knew I had Daniel there. If I could make him shout from getting him off, that would be better than spring break. If he put his hands on me, it wouldn’t matter to me if the door was open and the world could see. Or God, if he fucked me until I screamed—

No, I probably couldn’t make the offer sound casual.

“Your brother and I went down a few times to catch some bands.” Daniel grabbed the menu. “It was fun back then.”

Of course he and Matt would have done stuff there before I could catch up. That was the story of my life.

“You and Matt never... You didn’t—” Oh God. There went my mouth again. “He liked you, but he wasn’t gay. Right?” That was the most tactful way I could think of to end that sentence. I ducked my head down into the menu and prayed I would just shut the hell up for once.

I didn’t want to know. I already knew I could never compete with my big brother. I sure as hell didn’t want to try to compete that way.

“Matt and I loved each other,” Daniel said calmly. My stomach lurched. “But he’d be the first to tell you he wasn’t gay.”

I shut my eyes behind the menu and silently thanked God right there above the faded tablecloth.

“Bread?” The waitress plunked it down before we answered, not knowing she’d spoiled our moment. At least, she’d spoiled my moment. Shit, maybe even Daniel didn’t know she’d spoiled something I wanted to be his and mine. “What would you like?”

“Pizza with pepperoni.” Daniel didn’t look at the menu. “And coffee. A lot of coffee.”

So I didn’t look either. “Pasta and sauce.”

“Meat sauce?”

“No, ma’am. And a salad on the side. Oil and vinegar—” As she walked off, I lowered my voice and said, “That’ll harden your arteries, you know.”

“I live for danger, kid.” Daniel grinned at me and then sobered again like he wasn’t sure what to say next.

Well, I knew what to do next, and it wasn’t talk. My impulses were telling me what to do, and sometimes, you know, you just couldn’t resist an impulse. At least, I sure as hell couldn’t. Especially not this one, dangerous though it might be. I was going to create a new *our* moment together, an even better one than the ones I had already. My fingers were shaking when I dropped my knife.

“Whoops.” I bent down.

Oh God. There I was, on my knees in front of him. I rubbed my hands on my pants and then reached forward to his fly. Finally, my shot at Daniel.

I unzipped him carefully, terrified he’d tell me no or that I’d fuck it up somehow. Wouldn’t it be my luck to catch something sensitive in the metal? I slid my hand under the zipper of his fly and forgot about anything but him. I almost whimpered when I touched his length. He’d gone commando, thank God, so I could touch the hair on his thighs, grasp his cock between my fisted hands. His erection moved under my palms, standing taller for me, the head already tempting me with a drop of precum at the tip.

Oh Jesus. Daniel. Then I realized he wasn't protesting. He might be frozen with shock but I could work with that. I unzipped his jeans and leaned forward to bury my face in his now exposed balls. I could smell him. His scent always made me hard. I turned my head. I could taste him. Salty, bitter, and *Daniel*.

I knew what I wanted to do was more than a tease. I had to have him. I'd waited so long for even this. It didn't matter we were in public and it had to be fast. I didn't care. I just wanted him.

Right *now*.

I had just bitten into some bread when Max went under the table. I damn near choked on the crumbs when he slid his hand under my jeans as he unzipped my fly. Before I'd recovered, he'd fastened his mouth on my cock with quick, sure moves. Jesus! He'd thrown me again. One second I was thinking about how quickly I could finish lunch and get him back to his family, the next he was under the restaurant table, nuzzling my cock with his mouth. I wasn't going to actually bend down and look, but the image in my brain of him down there, kneeling at my feet with his hands and lips working on me, was enough to make me slam my knees against the bottom of the table.

He ran his teeth just lightly over my cock, a promise and a threat at the same time. My God! Where the hell had Matt's baby brother learned that?

Then my brain shorted out, and I forgot about thinking. I knew I was supposed to tell him to stop, but I couldn't talk. And when I got my wind back, I didn't want to talk. I kept the bread in my mouth, hoping to hell I wasn't going to make any sounds that other customers might wonder about.

Because I wanted to scream.

His tongue flicked a few times over the head of my cock, as if testing. The air was cold against my skin when the heat of his mouth left. I managed to get in a breath to keep from passing out, right before he swallowed me with one quick, clean

movement. Warmth and tightness and suction—I gripped the edge of the table and hung on.

“Stop.” I managed to say it between gulps of air and a swallow of bread that almost strangled me.

He gripped one of my knees. I could hear him gulp as he held my leg.

“Mmmm-mmmm.” He made a little negative humming noise against my cock, and I whimpered, as softly as I could manage.

Max traced my slit with his tongue to emphasize the point, and my balls tightened. I couldn’t help it. I hadn’t even had time to jack off before I answered the door earlier, and I needed to come more than I’d needed anything for weeks. I jerked my hips hard, ramming my cock into his mouth, once, as a warning. He didn’t let go as I pushed myself even deeper down his throat. All that heat around me. I thought of his cheeks hollowing out, of Max sucking hard, working his mouth and throat to make me feel that good. Oh God. Oh God. My body tensed as I gritted my teeth. And then I came, shaking with the rush of heat that hit me.

The little fucker licked up every drop and got back into his seat, his hair more mussed and his skin flushed, but otherwise looking perfectly calm, just as the waitress reappeared with our order.

I twirled my spaghetti with a twist of my fork, waiting for Daniel’s explosion. Next explosion. I tried not to keep grinning like an idiot, but that had been...that had been—

“Stupid.” Daniel broke in on my private celebration. “That was damn stupid.”

“You didn’t say so at the time.” I risked a quick glance up and saw him frowning at a slice of pizza.

He looked more troubled than angry, though, so I figured I’d better not try to tease. Maybe it had been too much to hope he’d be as happy as I was. But who the hell was unhappy about a blowjob?

“Why was it stupid? No one caught us. You liked it. I liked it.” I made my voice serious and stared at him directly.

“You can’t be naive enough not to know about protection.”

“Oh. That.” I blinked. “If there was anything I needed to worry about, I knew you’d call a stop to things.”

I hadn’t actually thought about it at all at the time, but I knew I was right. Daniel wouldn’t put me at risk. He wouldn’t do that to anyone, really. But definitely not me.

Daniel sighed. “You make me feel incredibly old. You fucking well need a keeper.”

At least he hadn’t said babysitter. Progress!

“You up for the job?”

“Finish your lunch. I’ll show you what I’m up for.”

With a promise—or threat—like that, I took about two bites more and jumped up, ready to go.

“Wait for the check, Max.” Daniel was starting to sound amused again.

Christ. I’d been five when I’d last run out of the restaurant before the bill was paid. So much for trying to look adult.

But I wanted to leave now and go do some very adult things with Daniel. I wasn’t sure he was on the same page with that. Not yet. But the cock sucking had to have him thinking about it.

Shit. I was stupid, although not for the reason Daniel had said. I shouldn’t have gotten him off. If he still had an edge on, he’d be the one yelling for the check and running me out the door. I didn’t have any practice at seducing someone like him, so I’d fucked it up.

If he let me stay, I could work on it until I got it right. I caught him watching at me, and my chest tightened. I wanted to get it right. I wanted to get *us* right.

Of course, first I had to convince Daniel there was an *us*.

“Max?” Daniel took the bill, and although I reached for my wallet, he ignored the gesture when he slapped money down on the table.

“Yeah?”

“I’m not as quick as you are, but don’t ever think I’m stupid. What kind of game are you playing with me?”

“No game.” I followed him meekly out the door. “I don’t know what you mean.”

I had kind of an idea about what he meant, though.

He gripped my shoulders, but not like last time. This grab seemed more like he wanted to do a choke hold but was making an effort to maintain control before he got arrested. I forced myself not to react. This was the scary Daniel I rarely saw. I knew enough not to provoke him.

He glared at me and asked, “Why are you playing virgin?”

Chapter Three

Somehow we ended up back at my place, exactly where I hadn't wanted Max an hour ago. He was squirming a little bit under my hand, but I wasn't letting him free. I didn't trust either of us now.

I looked over at him, to find him blinking at me, and decided of the two of us, I trusted him least. Why the hell hadn't I remembered his innocent-when-guilty-as-sin look before this?

"So?" I resisted shaking him.

"I didn't lie. I'm not lying. Exactly." He got away from me and dropped back down on my couch.

I crossed my arms to keep from scooping him up and waited. He never could handle silence. I could almost see his self-confidence crack when I refused to speak and the moments stretched out.

"I'm not playing virgin. I never said I hadn't done some mutual jacking-off sessions with other guys or...or some sucking. It didn't mean anything except getting off, y'know? That's all the guys and I have ever said it was, when we talked about it at all." Max turned red. "They say it's just something to do when you're horny and drunk. Most of them have girls to bang, but...you know, th-th-things happen."

"What do *you* say?" I asked, suddenly feeling the knot in my chest loosen, but not wanting to name the emotion starting to flood in while I watched Max, frowning, groping for words. I trusted him when he wasn't sure what to say.

"I say some of those guys are lying to themselves, but I know what all of us did doesn't mean anything to me except a blowjob. I also know I don't want a guy to

play around with just because th-ther isn't a woman handy at the moment. And I know I've been spending a lot of time drunk, because that's how these things usually happen, and well...I *like* blowjobs. Sometimes things got really kinky. I liked that too. But doing stuff that way only when we're drunk? It's too fucked-up for me now." He cleared his throat. "I want something honest. I want someone around when I sober up. Who'd like to be around me when I am sober. When it's just me."

"Max—" The wave of protectiveness almost hurt as it squeezed my chest. I tried to be careful. "Who wouldn't like to be around you?"

He was the one who didn't say anything this time. He just watched me, studying me as if I had the answer. The need I saw in his eyes made me loosen my grip on him to something less fierce, something much more tender.

"Max, you have it wrong. You shouldn't want to be around *me*." I tried to let him go.

"Too late, Daniel." Max stood long enough to throw his arms around my shoulders and cling, whispering close to my mouth. "It's way too late for that. Please."

He looked determined as he said the words. And young. God, he looked so young. Had I ever been that hopeful? Then he kissed me, his tongue coaxing mine, and when I slowed down my reaction, he finally bit into my bottom lip for more of a response. He growled with frustration. I wanted to laugh and bite back. By now he was nothing but sex and temptation.

I wasn't sure how much he'd done, what he knew, what he hadn't experienced yet. It didn't matter. I was going to teach him a lot more than he knew before.

He pulled at my shirt, unbuttoned the top button of my jeans, clinging to me, rubbing against me, suddenly frantic. His cock was hot against my stomach, but he didn't try to move it lower, as if he was waiting for my permission for something else.

"Please." He whispered the word again. "You have to let me—"

I should have told him, warned him, but need swamped me too, and in that moment I knew I'd care for him, protect him, and give him what we both wanted right now. Just for now. I pulled his head back to kiss him even more ferociously than he did me. It would be all right. I'd make it all right just this time.

I slid my hands under his sweatshirt, just to feel the thudding of his heart. His heartbeat went wild when I touched his nipples, pinched them into points. He squirmed but seemed to have lost his coordination as he tried to unfasten my jeans with shaking hands. He couldn't pull the zipper all the way down.

The rush of power was almost as huge as the rush of need that had hit before. I chuckled against his throat, feeling his pulse hammering against my tongue.

"I don't have to let you do anything, boy. You're going to let me do you." His head fell back when I bit the sinew of his shoulder, and he moaned.

"Yes."

I took my time, refusing to let my hands shake the way his were. I stripped him of his shirt and sweatpants and ran my hands down his sides, savoring the smooth skin, sliding past his ribs, and letting my palms rest on his hips. Then I gripped those hips and ground him against my cock. I pushed him, grinding harder and harder yet. He didn't have the strength to hold against me but kept backing until he hit the arm of my couch. He raised his body with his hands, his fingers splayed on the couch to hold his weight, his back bent as he arched up, trying to give me more pressure right back. His legs gripped around my hips, unexpectedly strong and tight. He didn't intend to let me go. That was fine. I wasn't going to allow it either.

I leaned over and shoved my cock against his, a long, rough stroke, the two of us locked together. I saw the liquid pooling on the fly of his boxers, his erection stiff and proud under the cloth.

"I could get you off like this, couldn't I?" I asked, and he opened his eyes to stare at me, his gaze a little unfocused. "Couldn't I, boy?"

“Yes. Anything you want. But please—” He sucked in his breath. I rubbed my cock against his again, and he let the air out in a rush. “Oh please, for God’s sake, Daniel, fuck me. I want it so bad.”

“Yes.” I stroked his hair. Then I squeezed his balls, tight enough to make him squirm. “That’s what I’ll do. Eventually.”

“*Now!*” He stopped. “I mean, whenever you want. Just as long as you do it.”

He licked his lips, and I almost lost it right then in a spatter of hot cum all over his chest and face. I shut my eyes and willed myself to hold steady. Because as good as marking him would be, it would be better to come inside that tight little ass.

Eventually.

“I’ll be gentle,” I promised him, almost crooning the words, and weirdly, it wasn’t a joke.

“You won’t let me screw this up.” Max was tense. “I’d hate screwing this up. I’ve waited too long.”

“No one is screwing up.” *I hoped.* “Just screwing. We’ll start off slow.”

He made a protesting noise and then laughed. “I mean, sure. Whatever you say, boss.”

God help me, I liked the sound of that. It had been a long time since I was in control of anything or anyone, much less anything or anyone as delicious as Max. I pushed him farther down on the couch so that his legs were draped over the arm, and then I pulled his underwear down and spread his legs. Pretty. I cupped his balls, just for the sheer pleasure of watching his cock twitch and his hands clutch at the fabric of the cushion below him. His balls tightened. I needed to be careful, or he’d spew. A nineteen-year-old had even less control than I did. His chest heaved when I spread his thighs farther apart to take a long, leisurely stare at his asshole. It looked tight. I laid my palm over it and traced a shallow path between his ass cheeks with one finger. His ass clenched under my touch. Yeah. Oh God, I was going to be so careful, and it was going to be so fucking good.

“You can handle me. No matter what. Right, Daniel?” Max’s voice cracked.

That’s when I knew for sure. Whatever kinky thing Max had done before, this was going to be a first for him.

“Sounds like I need to handle a lot. What else have you done, virgin?” I rubbed between his ass and his balls a little—not too close to his hole, but close enough to make him take another quick breath. “What would be a surprise and what wouldn’t, hmm?”

“Aw, shit, Daniel. I can’t list—I can’t *think*.” He wiggled under my hands like a puppy eager for more petting.

I stopped touching him.

“I’m going to get lube out of the bathroom. Keep yourself ready for me.” I wondered just what he’d do as I walked to the medicine cabinet. I was tempted to hurry back to see, but instead I fumbled in the cabinet to get what I needed, until I finally splashed water on my face and reminded myself to keep it slow. My hands kept shaking even when I returned with the lube and condoms.

It had been worth the wait. When I got back, Max had ripped his boxers off and was holding his cock tight at the base with one hand, obviously afraid he was going to blow. But with the other hand, he was fingering his ass, his face flushed as he circled his hole.

“Now isn’t that a sight?” I tried to joke, but my voice came out huskier than usual. Because it sure as hell was.

He looked up and licked the top of his lip. “You asked what else I did. I’ve done *this* a lot.” His voice lowered with the last few words, and his face reddened a darker shade at my stare.

“Can you get off like that?” I began to stroke my cock, still watching.

“It works better with something else to stretch me. Something bigger,” he said fast, as if he didn’t want to confess what he did on his own. Or maybe as if he did.

“That will happen, kid. Patience.” I threw the tube at him. “Here.”

I was afraid to touch him right then. Besides, I really liked watching how he caught his lower lip between his teeth when he began to smooth the Astroglide between his ass cheeks and then inside. It was my own private porn show, and Max was definitely the star.

He knew how much I wanted to watch, because he took his time slicking himself down, squeezing his balls in the process, flexing his ass cheeks as he thrust in deeper and deeper.

When his ass began to thump on the couch, rocking it in an uneven rhythm, I figured I needed to stop the show before he forgot his moves for the final act. I laid my hand over his. He opened his eyes and smiled, almost sweetly. “Can I stop now? Are we gonna fuck?”

“Damn right.” The condom was on. Did I want to see his pretty ass or watch his face as he got taken? Oh hell. I wanted both. All of it. Every way I could take him.

“Legs over my shoulders.” Watching him as I entered him would be better.

His eyes widened, just a little, and then he followed instructions. I pumped his cock once, just to watch his face tighten up as if in pain.

“If it’s gotta be slow, at least don’t tease, Daniel.” He sounded like he was in pain too.

“I’m going to slide in. Push out against me. Let me know if I need to wait a bit before you’re ready to do more.”

“I’m ready. Been ready for years now.”

He was tight, and he hissed soundlessly when I pushed against the ring that was keeping me—momentarily—from his unfucked ass. Then he shifted under my weight and nodded.

“Don’t stop.” He whispered the words, and I didn’t wait. I pushed harder, hissing myself at the resistance.

His heels slapped against my back—urging me on? Did he want me to wait? I chose what I wanted it to mean, and kept going. Sliding into Max was hot and good and better than any other fuck I could remember. God, I loved that first slide on home.

Max's mouth fell open when I finally got to his prostate. Small wicked flames ripped at my forearms as he scratched me. His eyes closed when I pulled away, and he braced himself.

“Hard...er.” He moaned it in my ear, and that was it for me.

It was going to be fucking harder.

Harder. I'd wanted it harder, hard enough to shake everything out of me and turn me inside out. But I hadn't expected—

Daniel's neck corded as he pulled my ass up tight against him, angling me over the couch so he could use his strength to ram me. The pain and the pleasure as he ran across my prostate and in and out of my ass mingled into one huge ball of excitement and lust and want.

I looked up and saw his teeth bared like an animal over its prey, with his strength ripping into me. I wanted to scream. I just didn't have the air I needed to do it. Everything closed in, centering on my balls and the burn in my ass. Spots danced in my eyes as I stared at his face, focused on him and the climax that was so fucking close. I didn't want to come too soon, to spoil things, to—My vision blurred as need twisted, hard and sharp, inside me.

Then it all rushed out—my cum spurted, pulsing hard enough to hurt, and I let out a long wail. He didn't stop moving. My legs trembled from trying to hold my position, and soon my whole body began to shake. Daniel kept pounding me through the endless rush of my semen spilling on me, the couch, and Daniel, until finally, with a deep grunt, he came too.

When he finished, he slid out, pulling the condom from his cock as he did. I fell to the ground, my legs unable to hold up a second more. A few drops spilled onto my

stomach from his cock, and I shivered at the slippery, wet heat. Then, with a sigh, he slid down to his knees, and his head fell onto one of my thighs.

He circled one of my ankles with his fingers, as if he couldn't raise his hand any higher.

"You all right?"

I was a lot of things. All right didn't seem like one of them. I managed to move my hand, curiously heavy, to his head and stroked his sweaty hair.

"Mmmm," I managed.

"Should I—Do I need to apologize?" He sounded less wiped out now. If I weren't careful, he might move. I wanted to stay stuck to him, clamped together by my body fluids, forever.

"God no. Just do it again." *Just maybe not right now.* My ass was on fire. But definitely soon.

It had been worth it. Better than my fantasies, and my fantasies had been plenty damn good. But this was really Daniel. And that had been sex with him. If it got scarier than this, being this close to someone, I might never have sex again.

If it got better than this, I might never do anything but keep having sex.

I could feel him smile against my leg.

"Need to sleep first." He yawned as he turned his head in my general direction. "Come to bed with me? I gotta go work in about four or five hours. I should shower, but I'm so..."

I wasn't sure, but I think he started snoring lightly, still on his knees. Even so, he was a tougher man than I was. I didn't think four or five hours would be long enough to make me twitch, much less go work.

I tapped him lightly on the head and his eyes opened again.

"In the morning—" I yawned too but got the words out. "D'you mind if I run the washing machine? Need my clothes."

He looked at the pants on the floor. “They are a little stained. There’s no washing machine here, kid. You can borrow my sweats or something to do your wash. The laundry is on the second floor. I’ll give you a key.”

He pulled me to my feet, and we staggered, holding on to each other, to the bed in the next room. I landed there, face-first. When Daniel hit the bed, his heavier body indented the mattress so I rolled against him again.

“kay.” I fell asleep, smiling.

I’d scored big once more. He’d let me stay until tomorrow.

Chapter Four

The alarm rang, splitting through my warm sleep with a noisy, vicious *clang* like an audible smack to the head. I opened my eyes to its hated but familiar noise. I sat up, adrenaline pumping before my brain kicked in. Almost time for work. I slapped the alarm off.

A muffled, sleepy sound protested my movements. I glanced down at the body next to me. That wasn't so familiar. When I moved, I felt some twinges and remembered I'd had sex.

With Max. Who was still here with me.

He was also still naked, still marked with streaks of cum. There were bruises forming on his hips where I'd grabbed him. Before I could feel too bad about that, I saw my wrists and arms. There were long, jagged scratches from his nails. I was pretty sure he hadn't been trying to get away.

Not that I could remember everything before my brain had shorted out. That was how intense it had been. I was only positive there had been hot, overwhelming pleasure before I finished with him. Except now I wasn't sure I was finished with him yet.

Yes, I was. *Work*. I had less than a half hour to get out the door. I stumbled for the bathroom, hoping I could somehow make myself feel more normal before I got to the ER.

I didn't feel normal, but that wasn't a bad thing.

It wasn't my usual off-kilter feeling, the kind I got before a fucking attack. This was a sort of confused, actually good strangeness. The world seemed almost too in focus, but not gloomy. Maybe my unusual perspective was from too little sleep. I

stepped into the shower, favoring my bad leg, which had chosen that moment to start cramping.

I let the water run over my hair and face, shutting my eyes against the water pressure. I took inventory. No headache. No shakes. I realized I had a stupid smile stretching my face. That was all good. Weird, but good.

A loud *crash* almost shot me through the ceiling. I saw who was pushing open the shower curtain just in time. Max. Of course it was Max. My fight stance eased.

Jesus. What if I'd hurt him first?

Max didn't seem aware he'd been in danger. He looked sleepy and was obviously uncoordinated, because he stumbled and reached for me as he slipped. I grabbed for him before he fell, my heart still thudding from the adrenaline charge. And the new, even better adrenaline from feeling his naked body against mine.

"Why the hell d'you have to go to work now?" He mumbled the words against my chest.

"Because." I took my washcloth and ran it over his ass. He grunted.

It was nice smoothing the cloth over his body. I wasn't going to really touch him, because there wasn't time, but this came close to what I wanted to do. So damn close. He arched under my hand begging for more.

I couldn't help it. I ran my tongue over his nipples, just to watch them tighten. Damn it. What a responsive, only-fucked-once body. All wet and slippery and wanting me.

Work.

"I have to work." I sounded much more determined than I felt.

"All right." Max looked disappointed but wasn't arguing. "I guess emergencies don't take a night off. What do you do in the ER?"

"I'm an ER tech. Mostly that means I make sure all the equipment runs right."

“But you did a shitload more than that in the army!” Max’s eyes opened wider. “You fucking single-handedly saved people who were wounded, and kept them going until they got to a hospital.”

“I did what I needed to do then.” I tried not to blush, but I could feel a little heat in my face. Maybe it would look like it was from the hot water. But trust Max to have read that stupid article in the local paper when I got the damned medal. “I do what I need to do now.”

“Why aren’t you a paramedic or a doctor’s assistant or something?”

I gestured to my beat-up leg. The one Max seemed to have conveniently avoided looking at. “I can’t stand up to the job. Literally.”

Max scowled at me. “That’s such bullshit.”

“Naw. I’m lucky I can use this leg at all. I can only work part-time at the hospital. Too much time on my feet and I crumple.” *I’m not a fucking hero, Max.* Just to make sure he knew that, I told him what I’d never tell anyone else. “Besides, I’d never pass any of the tests. I’m not good at tests.”

I’m not smart either, Max. Not the way you are. Always were.

“Idiot.” Max echoed my thoughts. “If you could just stick around longer, I’d tell you why you’re an idiot. And it’s not the leg or the testing.”

“Why would I want to stick around to be chewed out by a teenager?” I asked. “Besides, you have other things to do today.”

He needed to leave soon. It would get much more complicated if he hung out here, getting attached. If I got too attached. If my cock, which was grinding against his leg, found its way back into that tight asshole of his and we got really attached.

“I don’t having anything that important to do.” He licked his lips. Deliberately, the little fucker.

My cell phone rang. No one called at this hour unless that no one was drunk or was at the hospital. I limped out of the bathroom and grabbed the phone on the final ring before it switched to voice mail.

“Rocco here.”

I heard Max bounding out of the shower and almost smiled. All that noisy energy should have been exhausting, but it had a certain charm when Max was naked and pressing up next to me, like now. He nipped my shoulder, and I held him away from me, like I might an overly playful puppy, while I listened.

Sometimes you had a lucky day. Or night.

“Sure. I could do that. No, it’s fine. No problem at all. Glad you got me before I left. I’ll be there then instead.” And I’d think about how I’d manage a double shift later. I had better things to think about now—hot images were filling my brain of holding down Max’s body, hearing him whimper and beg and cry for more.

I clicked off the phone and smacked Max on his butt. “Come back to bed, pest.”

His eyes widened. “You’re blowing off work?”

“They asked me to work a double tomorrow instead of coming in tonight.” Ordinarily I’d have groaned at the late notice and extra hours. But tonight wasn’t ordinary. “So maybe I’ll blow you instead. If you can behave.”

“I’ll behave up a storm, boss.” Max grinned at me, his whole face lighting up.

Instead of heading for bed, though, he grabbed my cell phone and flipped it open.

“What? I need that on in case of emergencies.”

“I’m not turning it off. I’m putting my phone number in. For all the times when there isn’t an emergency and you tell me you’re available. All right. Done. Now you can blow me.”

His cock was up just from the words. You had to like that about a guy. He began to pump my cock and all but bounced on his toes with enthusiasm as he did.

Damn it, what was I doing with this kid?

He reached up and bit my ear.

I was about to fuck the hell out of him; that’s what. Obviously the universe or fate or whatever wanted me to have another shot at him. I’d become a big believer

in fate in the past few years. If some power wanted to toss me a few good times along with the bad, who was I to argue?

“How much do you hurt?” I tried to hold on to some consideration, even while he held on to my cock.

“A little. Um, not at all, I mean. Really.” His eyelids were already drooping, giving him that half-dazed, just-sexed look I’d gotten from him the last time we started to play.

I spit on my finger and pushed gently at his asshole. He winced at the probe.

“Don’t lie. You’re hurting plenty.” I scowled.

He looked like I was taking his Christmas presents away right after he’d unwrapped them. I had to smile. “There are plenty of other things we can do.”

“Sure.” He slid his hands down my thighs and squeezed. Then he nuzzled at my chest, working his tongue through the hair to the nipples hidden beneath. “I love your cock any way I can get it, Daniel. I love your body.”

Max always knew how to keep his tongue busy, one way or another. What he said was almost as arousing as the sucking, followed by his sharp nip. I stiffened under the unexpected pain of his teeth. He burrowed against my skin, rubbing his face against me.

Oh hell. I liked this. Not just his touch, which was damned good, but everything that came with it.

I used to have an athlete’s body. It hadn’t been a lean, tall body like Matt’s, the kind that had gotten him photos in newspapers and groupies in high school, but I’d had my own kind of athlete’s body—a strong, muscular one. Tough and broad. Able to do exactly what I wanted it to do. People may have loved Matt’s body, but they feared mine.

That had been one land mine and a lot of rehab ago. My body wasn’t worth praising anymore.

“Mmmm-hmmm. Tasty.” Max was already licking his way down my stomach, and I sucked in my breath.

I hadn’t even realized I’d missed those admiring glances that went my way. Or even more, I’d missed the kind of lingering touch Max was giving me now—the kind that showed the toucher liked what they were feeling up.

Weird. More weird than before. My brain was telling me Max was lying. But my body was revved, eager for more of what Max was serving me. Praise, flattery—whatever it was, really, his actions were sending shocks through my nerves and right to my cock.

“Get on the floor.” My voice rasped. “On your hands and knees.”

Max shot me one half-terrified, half-delighted look before he obeyed. There were still drops of water on his skin. I wanted to lick them off, slowly. His arms were trembling.

Oh God. He looked so right, crouching there, waiting for me.

Oh God. This felt so right, crouching down, waiting for whatever Daniel wanted. The jumpiness skittering under my skin disappeared. I didn’t have to figure out what next. Daniel was going to handle it. Handle me.

It had worked out. I hadn’t screwed up. Just been screwed, the way Daniel had promised. And we had a chance to do it all over again. I might pass out from anticipation now I knew what it was like to have Daniel screw me.

He ran one calloused palm up my leg, then cupped my balls. I shivered and panted, trying not to cry out, trying not to embarrass myself in front of Mr. Tough Guy—even though I could never be half as macho as Daniel.

“It’s all right if you make noise,” Daniel told me. “My closest neighbor is old and half-deaf. And I like to hear you.”

He squeezed my balls, not hard enough to hurt. Just enough to make me hiss, but I wasn't going to do what he wanted. No screaming. At least, not just yet. He'd have to work for it. Daniel chuckled.

"Not good enough. Let's see what I can do to make that noise louder." He placed his palms, one on each ass cheek, and he spread me open with his thumbs. I braced myself. I was sore. But it would be worth it, even if I didn't sit down for a week.

Especially if I didn't sit down for a week.

The stubble on Daniel's chin scraped me first; then his tongue tested, tasted my displayed hole. I gasped. His fingers tightened on my ass as if he thought I was going to try to run. He hit a bruise from last night, and I winced.

Then his tongue reached down, deep, and my nerve endings began to crackle. There was the slightest pain, and then there was nothing but wanting more.

"*Motherfucker!*" I jerked forward and howled, dignity gone. But yelling for what I wanted was a lot better than fucking dignity.

I fisted my cock and began to pump while I did my best to stuff my ass down Daniel's throat.

"No." Daniel stopped my hand. I did groan then and squirm. "You're so fucking impatient. I like that."

"I love this, but"—I paused to try to form a few more words—"if I'm not bottoming, why are you rimming me?"

"You're bottoming, all right, no matter how we do it. And why am I rimming? Because I like to."

Then he slipped me on my back, as easily as if I were a child again, and straddled me. I arched and tried to hump his thigh. He laughed and nudged my legs wider with his knees.

"Try this," he said, leaning forward and grinding his cock against mine.

The man was a genius! I shut my eyes and focused on getting off with that hard-on to encourage me. He bit my lower lip, growling as he did, showing he wanted to cut me. That was all right. I whimpered back. I wanted the mark as much as he did. And pain or not, I really wanted that cock.

But whenever I got close, he let up on the friction, easing back just enough to keep me from coming. That was so fucking wrong.

“Daniel—” I didn’t even know I what I was going to say until I did. I hadn’t expected my voice to catch. “I need to come. Please.”

“Not yet.”

What the hell did Daniel *want* from me? I didn’t know what I was supposed to be doing to him. To me. It was like I was expected to ace Sex 401 before I’d gone through all of Sex 101.

God knew I wanted to live up to Daniel’s expectations. I’d try whatever he wanted, even if I didn’t understand. Not only was it fucking mind-blowing, but I wanted Daniel to be half as hot for me as I was for him all the time, even when his hand wasn’t on my cock or his fingers tickling my balls.

Anything he wanted to do, I wanted. Anything he needed, I’d be.

Oh hell.

“Daniel.” I managed that one word.

“Wait. My turn,” he snarled. Then his voice gentled. “Bet that cock of yours tastes sweet.”

I looked at his face, his face set with as much lust as I had boiling around inside me, and knew—and what a stupid, cliché time to know—that I was falling in love with him, maybe had always loved him—just seconds before he put his lips around my cock, the cock he fucking *owned* right now, because nothing had ever felt that good. Then he sucked.

Yes.

I jerked my hips up, trying to get more, and he gave me more. The heat from his mouth poured through my body, pulsing through me.

I heard the blood pounding in my ears. But he was still holding my balls, and I still couldn't come. I slapped at the floor, trying to hold on, knowing it was going to be good, whatever happened next. But God! I needed...I needed so bad—

Without looking up, his mouth pulling hard on my cock, Daniel set me free. I gasped as the pressure began to rush out of my balls and zip up my cock. He flicked his finger, just hard enough, first on one ball, then the other. The pain and pleasure from his taps whooshed through me.

Lights flickered on and off in front of my eyes as my breath caught in my throat.

And I screamed like a girl when I came.

Chapter Five

When I woke up again, it was late afternoon. My body was sticking to the sheets with sweat from the summer heat and a hell of a lot of semen. Oh Lord. I wanted to bury my head back in the pillow, but the silence in the apartment got to me.

Daniel was gone.

And that was when I had to face what I'd done. I took a shower fast, getting the smell and sight of our sex off me. It hurt to stretch. To sit. To walk. I hadn't minded when it happened. I wouldn't even mind now, if Daniel was around to look at me with that closed half grin that hinted he was more amused and turned on than he wanted to show. He would have been too, watching me wince. Then he would have taken care of me, any way I wanted...

Maybe.

I looked around. No note for me. No text on my phone. Nothing.

That told me everything I needed to know.

Time was up. *Our* time was up. He was going to be working until I had to get back to school. Convenient for him.

I pulled my pants back on as the silence in the place got more oppressive. My shirt full of sloppy seconds was a lost cause, so I put on a T-shirt of Daniel's. I sure as hell wasn't going to stick around to wash clothes.

But when I got outside to my car, I found myself staring at my keys. I didn't know where to go.

Not back home. I'd lied to Daniel—I'd known my parents were gone for the weekend before I went to see him. And even though I had a key, I didn't want to go back to my old bedroom, where I'd spent years fantasizing about sex but afraid to risk my skinny geek self by trying to get any. Years fantasizing about men. About Daniel.

I wasn't going back to that.

I was going forward. I was going to—Well, what? Do a lot more guys? Have them do me? Probably. Definitely.

Unless Daniel wanted me first. For as long as he wanted me.

“Shit.” *He didn't.* He wasn't going to. That was what I didn't want to think about. He'd wanted sex, and then he wanted to be gone.

I opened my car door. God, I wished Matt was still here. He might not have enjoyed hearing about his little brother's sex life with men, but he would have told me what to do anyhow.

He knew me. He knew Daniel. He would have helped. Why wasn't he here?

I sat down heavily in the car seat, letting loss wash over me for about the millionth time, but this time with a new, hurtful twist. Matt was gone. I'd almost accepted that at last. But I was losing Daniel too. I could feel it. He wasn't going to call. He wasn't going to want me back. Once again, I hadn't been good enough. I hadn't been...enough of whatever it was he wanted.

My eyes burned from the tears I wasn't going to cry. Waking up alone in Daniel's bed reminded me of all the mornings I'd woken up with a hangover and nothing but a wet spot on the bed next to me.

“Well, sometimes you go into the game knowing you're probably going to lose. Doesn't mean you will. Doesn't mean you aren't going to try. Doesn't mean you're not going to kick a hell of a lot of ass first.”

I swear I could hear Matt's rolling laugh, the one that burst out of him when he was amused, the one that went rocketing through all the empty spaces in my life.

I didn't know why that memory had to come to me just then. My brother as Knute Rockne. I put the keys in the ignition. Well, hell. What kind of message from beyond the grave was that supposed to be?

I winced as I moved. Shit. Daniel really had fucked me into next week. That had to be good. Maybe all wasn't lost.

I wasn't going to fall into my old geek, "I'm a loser" mode. He'd wanted it. We hadn't been playing silly college games when we screwed. Not once, not twice, but... Damn, I'd lost count how many times. He *had* to be interested in a repeat performance. And I was willing to repeat it until we got it absolutely goddamned right.

I could smell Daniel on his borrowed T-shirt, and my cock, my much used and abused cock, stirred again at the scent of him. I couldn't give up. Give him up.

All right. Game on. I was going to try.

* * *

"You look like hell, Daniel." My favorite bartender pushed a beer over the counter toward me.

"Thanks. I feel like hell too." I eased myself onto the bar stool. "I knew that double shift would kick my ass."

"Maybe you should just go home and sleep." Tanya leaned against the bar. "Take some painkillers that aren't in liquid form."

"I will. Soon. I don't want to go back just yet." I gulped down the beer. "It's too quiet there."

"Mr. Hermit is complaining about quiet?"

"You know, here's a tip. Most bartenders sweet-talk their customers. They tend to buy more booze that way."

"I save my sweet-talk for guys I haven't known forever." She gave me a considering glance. "Besides, you're going to suck down booze no matter what I say."

Can't say as I blame you. I don't know how you manage to do what you do. You just keep on dealing with all that pain. And death."

"Sometimes I can help."

"Right." Tanya's lips shut tight. "Sometimes. Was it bad today?"

"No, or at least not bad that way. Just tiring." I'd iced my foot before I left the hospital, but I could still feel the pain jarring through me. I looked over at Tanya, trying to think about something besides how much I hurt. "God, now that you mention it, I guess it has been forever since we first met. When was it? Third grade?"

"Yeah. And how long have we each thought the other one was a pain in the ass?"

"Third grade." I smiled.

"You really hated it when Matt and I hooked up seriously." Tanya shook her head at me. "Oh, don't even try to deny it. Asshole."

"I love you now, baby." I didn't even know I was going to say that. I would've blushed, except that looking at her stunned face as she absorbed the words was so worth it.

"Back at you. Desperately. For the past six years, right?" Tanya wiped a nonexistent smudge off the bar.

Ever since Matt's car accident.

"Yeah."

"I'm not sure which one of us Matt loved more."

"You, Tanya. Trust me. There was never any doubt. He'd never talked about anyone like he did about you."

Tanya leaned her forehead, just for a second, against mine. "He loved you a lot, Daniel. And don't try to lie to me. I know about your after-the-game victory celebrations. He told me."

I froze, unable to think or say anything to cover. We'd never told anyone. It had been just Matt's and my secret. And once Matt died, it was supposed to be just mine.

But Tanya looked calmly at me, awareness in her eyes, as if it didn't matter. There were other people in this place who could overhear. Didn't she get that?

And Matt was dead. Why would it matter?

But it did. It had mattered to Matt.

"A few mutual jack-off sessions don't mean anything. It's something guys do—straight or gay—sometimes." *And sometimes they blow each other. And once or twice, when they're really drunk, they kiss and say I love you.* "Matt always was really clear he wasn't interested in any more from a guy."

"Then why haven't you moved on, Daniel? You still have a lonely apartment to go back to. You should have someone in it, waiting."

"So should you. You're still here too."

"Yeah." Tanya shrugged. "But you're the one hurting right now."

"Yeah. So many guys are into someone who can have flashbacks and try to kill them if a car door slams hard outside." I *liked* quiet. Having other people around too long wasn't safe for either of us.

"I bet the right person could help you with that. He sure as hell wouldn't mind that you brought back a few problems from the war."

"Well, he should mind. Especially someone who doesn't have any idea what it was like. Who I wouldn't want to have know."

Like Max. How fucked-up would it be to have Max around for more than one night? I liked Max because he was innocent and because he was Matt's brother and because he was a hell of a lay and because...just because. If we kept going, Max was going to think it meant more.

I knew what it was like to build up hopes from something that was just sex. And just sex was all I was ever going to give anyone now. There wasn't anything else I had worth giving.

"Maybe you should give this someone a call once you get some sleep and get over your moping." Tanya smiled at me. "It's the first time I've ever heard you sound like you could use anybody around, Daniel. He must be special."

What would she say if I told her it was Matt's baby brother? But I didn't open my mouth.

Tanya moved toward some other guy, some idiot who grinned all over when she said something to him and laughed when she fixed him a drink.

"Yeah. But he's too special for me," I whispered the words to my empty beer bottle instead.

Time to go home and medicate myself to sleep. Before nightmares or, worse, nonexistent hopes drowned me. This game was over.

* * *

I dropped my gym bag on the floor when I hit Daniel's buzzer. While I waited, I rubbed my palms on the back of my jeans. He'd be there. And he'd let me in. Right?

I huffed out a little breath and fought to keep from bouncing on the balls of my feet when I had to wait. We could keep all this simple. I'd had a hell of a good weekend last week. The best. He must've had at least a good time. So this wasn't too pushy, was it?

I looked down at my gym bag, remembered our touching farewell, the one we'd had right before I fell asleep like I'd been drugged.

"Thanks. I'm not sure that's the right thing to say after sex like that, but—Well, damn. Thanks."

"The pleasure was all mine, Max."

“Can I... I mean, I forgot why I showed up this weekend. You know. My mom and dad. They don’t even know I was in town. I still have unfinished business with them, and I could still use the help.”

“Let me know when you need me. It’s fine.”

He hadn’t promised to fuck my brains out as soon as possible, and he hadn’t called me all week, but damn it, I needed him. And if he wanted to kick me out, I might as well know now. Get it over with before I built up any more expectations.

I looked down at the bag.

Get real. This wasn’t just trying to persuade Daniel to do something he probably wanted. This was too pushy. There were no expectations for me to build up. I was an asshole. A pushy asshole.

Goddamn it, I hated this indecision. But I was not going to show up at his door looking ready to move in.

I glanced around, trying to think of a place to stow the bag outside the apartment, anywhere but keeping it in my hands, when I heard Daniel’s voice. “Rocco.”

“Richards.”

There was the same long silence as before. Christ, he didn’t even know about my stupid plan yet and he didn’t want me around.

“Come on up, Max.”

My heart started to race. I wanted to come on up so bad, and I was terrified. Daniel hadn’t sounded angry, but he hadn’t sounded happy either. Maybe I could throw the bag down in front of the door before I entered and pretend I hadn’t planned on another weekend with him.

He had opened the door, just like the last time, and loomed in the doorway, his arms crossed while he watched me walk up.

So much for ditching the bag. I scowled, because everything was going to be fucked-up. I didn't see him rushing for me the way I'd wanted, even though I'd known better than to expect it.

Shit. Daniel was going to say, *Forget it*, and it wasn't fair. Hey, it wasn't his ass that'd hurt for three days. It wasn't his neck that had had bite marks all over it when he went to class. It seemed like half the campus had had a remark to make about me. It hadn't mattered at the time, because I'd been so buzzed from Daniel, so convinced I was going to make the two of us work.

Why the hell couldn't it work? I'd reminded myself he fucking well had been into the sex. So fucking into it that we'd hardly kept off each other until he had to go to his job.

Even when I wasn't convincing myself we had a shot, I'd thought about him all week. I conveniently forgot about the empty room without him. Instead I thought about what he could do when he was in that room. I wanted his hands on me, his cock in me. I'd done things with him that I hadn't even read about before, and I'd read plenty. But most of all, I wanted him to just be with me. Jesus, how embarrassing.

My mood had been all over the place for the past few days, worse than my usual craziness.

But this was now, and it wasn't a fantasy. I had to settle down.

"Hi." Daniel's gaze flicked over to the bag in my hands and then back to my face. I swallowed. He wasn't smiling.

My mood shot from vaguely hopeful to clearly depressed.

"Hi." I didn't know what else to say. I'd shown up at the man's door and suddenly had no clue what to talk to him about. Well, especially if he didn't want to talk. "This isn't what it looks like."

“No?” I’d thought about Max, of course. Even with the sweating nightmares that had come after too little sleep and a lot of worry, I’d thought about him. I’d hit the painkillers hard this week. And the Valium. That should have made my week bad, because I hated having to take that crap. But nothing had spoiled my fantasies. My stomach still knotted up at the sweaty, sexy images of him that played in my head. Those were the best things my brain had conjured up in a long time. Jesus, Max had been perfect.

And here he was, in real life, looking young and innocent and holding an overnight bag like he planned to stay. Reality wasn’t so perfect, even though it would be good to have him stay. To go out and laugh. To let him smile and joke, help me bury my worries down my gut while I buried my cock in his ass.

But it wouldn’t be fair. He was already expecting... I didn’t know what he expected, but more than I could hand over to him. Max might be perfect, but I sure as hell wasn’t. I’d fucked up when I fucked him last weekend. That didn’t mean I had to keep making the mistake worse.

Why the hell did he have to come back?

“I’m going to my mom and dad’s this weekend. Like I’d planned to last week.” Splotches of red burned on his skin when he looked at me. We both knew that wasn’t why he’d brought a change of clothes to my place. “But I thought I’d see you first.”

“Well, I’m here.” The kid really needed to think out things—especially his lies—before he opened his mouth. I wasn’t going to help him over his embarrassment. Even if it would be nice to kiss him under his flushed cheekbones and then take a bite. “And by the way, it’s Thursday. Not the weekend.”

“I know.” His blush died down. “But you work on the weekends, so I managed to get here earlier. And then I lied about why I came. But we both knew that already, so maybe we should start this conversation over.”

I wasn’t going to start talking. Silence tended to throw him. Besides, I was afraid of what I might say if I opened my mouth.

He kept looking at me, as if he was puzzled or annoyed. If I were him, I'd be both. But that's what he'd always get from being around me too long.

He'd go now. That would be the best thing for him. Me too. I didn't have the time or...or the energy to deal with someone like Max. Not for the long term, the way someone like Max deserved. But God, he was pretty. A sudden flare of lust and need shot up, despite everything.

His eyes narrowed, as if he found what he'd been looking for.

"Ah fuck it, Daniel." He dropped the bag on my good foot about half a second before he wrapped his arms around me and pressed, full body, into me. "Don't play games."

Then he pulled my head down and kissed me—not sweetly. With some teeth in it, wanting it to hurt.

"Fucking kiss me back, you coward," he growled into my mouth.

My fingers were in his hair, and I was pulling his face up to mine before I had a second thought. He leaned against me, trying to force me back against the wall. I would have laughed, except he felt so damned good. I let him shove me back while we kissed.

The screaming in my head smoothed out as if it had never let out a peep all week. All that was left were the smell and the feel of young, almost innocent male. And the taste. God, the taste of him. I'm not sure I'd ever wanted to lick anyone else's flesh the way I wanted his.

I buried my head against his neck while the two of us pressed against each other, cock to cock. I could smell the sweat and the arousal on him, and I had to have more.

"Shit. You're easy, Daniel." Max snorted, even though his nails were still digging into my ribs.

If only I was easy. No complications. That was the whole fucking problem. But I didn't move away from him. I let him bump his cock against me and felt my cock stiffen with interest when he did.

"That's no way to lure me into bed, newbie."

"Bed? I'll be lucky if I get to shut the front door first—" He kissed me again, long and deep this time.

Trouble. This was definitely trouble. I kissed him back, though, feeling hot and helpless all at once. Where was my badass self when I needed it?

"Daniel. Baby. Let me get this belt off and the door shut—" I heard my door slam while he fumbled with the buckle.

Just once more. How wrong could that be? Then we'd see his parents, and—He slid his hand under my pants and chuckled.

"Commando again. That saves time." He got a nice handful of cock and wrapped his hand around it.

Damn that kid. I liked him when he was shy. I really liked him when he was bold. Just the way he was now. But I gripped him by his forearms anyhow and kept him from jerking me off.

"What do you think you're going to get out of doing this, Max?" I asked.

"Some cum?" He grinned at me, but his smile wasn't as wide as usual. Good. He was nervous.

"No, Max."

There. I'd told him no. I was a hero. Soon to be blue balled, but a hero.

He looked me over again, very seriously.

"Yes, Daniel." His smile was suddenly back, full force. "Don't try to tell me you don't want it."

I had ground my cock against his—hell, he was pressing against me, all but begging for it, and I was human—so there wasn't much use in saying no. At least *I* knew when people would believe my lies.

I tried again anyhow, with enough of the truth to try to make my lie work.

“I want to fuck you, sure. But I think you’re the kind of guy who wants me to respect you in the morning.” I hoped I wasn’t sweating. “And I’m not going to if we do this now.”

“I might be new at this, but I don’t think I’m that bad. You’ll respect me just fine.” Max cocked his head to one side. “In fact, I think I have enough skills to make you worship me by the morning. As long...as long as you let me try.”

I think I could have held out, probably—maybe—up until I heard that little hesitation in his voice. God. I couldn’t hurt Max. Not now. Not this way, anyhow.

Having a cock that was rock hard for him probably had something to do with that decision too. But mostly it was the flash of pain I saw on his face right before he issued his challenge.

He wasn’t meant for pain. Just pleasure. Pure, sinful pleasure. I pulled him tighter against me and pushed his ass higher so he could really work his cock against mine.

“Knock yourself out, kid.”

He didn’t ask me if he could stay. Maybe he didn’t want me to answer. Instead he clung to me, grunting a little, and concentrated on getting off. And, of course, it was getting me off too.

I shut my eyes and managed to talk. One more try. For Max’s sake. “It doesn’t mean anything, you know. It won’t work out.”

“What am I, a girl?” Max’s voice was thick but amused. “It’s sex. I understand that.”

Then he bit my lower lip, the way I had with him once. Fuck! The kid really thought he could seduce me. He fumbled with his pants, wiggling even more against me, and then his naked cock rested against mine, hot and hard and wet with precum. Or was that mine?

“I’m going to do what we both want, so save your breath for something better than words.” His voice deepened, and for a minute I remembered someone else who had told me almost the same thing back in high school, and I gasped.

“*Shut up, Daniel. We both know how much we want this.*” Matt’s and Max’s words jumbled in my brain, the two of them suddenly tangled up with my wanting to be nailed right to the ground.

And I knew.

The kid could seduce me. Fuck. There was no *could* about it. He was going to do it right now. I blinked, and the memory of Matt and our last night drifted away. It was Max’s face I was looking at, Max’s cock against mine. It was going to be a new first time for Max. With Max. I wanted that.

I let my last shredding of sense go and fell right into Max’s hands.

It was Max who was going to fuck me.

Chapter Six

I looked at Daniel, and I realized I had him. It might be just for now, but this time his cock was mine. I knew when I had seen there was just a hint of need—or at least something more powerful than want—in his face when he'd tried to brush me off. I saw him swallow hard before he did it, like it was killing him to try.

And that made my inner crazy go off like a rocket.

“Ah, fuck it, Daniel. Don't play games.” I heard the *thump* of my luggage a second before I closed in for the kill.

He kept trying. But I'd learned to read *him*, not listen to his words. And his body wasn't lying to me. Not once I got my hands and my cock on it. The secret to Daniel—I'd finally found it. I was finally graduating from Sex 401.

I could feel his pulse speed up under my hands when I held him. I heard his breath catch when I slid one of my hands down his thighs.

And, of course, there was his cock, standing up for me. So freaking hard to ignore that.

I tuned out his words as I licked the sweat off his upper lip. His body told me he was lying. Damn near screamed I could have him. So I focused on what we both wanted, and when I did, he shivered underneath my touch, the way I had for him last weekend.

I was right. Everything I knew and did was right for him. He kissed me back, the way I'd asked, his teeth scraping my lips and tongue. He strained against me, the way I demanded when I pushed myself against him, shoved him back so that I could fuck him.

“Max,” I heard him say, his voice turning my name into a long moan.

I ran my fingers down his cock, and he bucked.

“Say my name again. Tell me you know who you’re with and who’s gonna do you right now.”

I was in control this time. More in control than I’d ever been in my life. For now, and now was all that mattered to both of us; Daniel was mine.

“Max.” He sounded like he was fighting to breathe. Me too.

I wasn’t going to the bathroom to fumble around to find lube and condoms. I’d brought my own, but first I used his precum and mine to slick him down. Cock, balls...ass. I looked at him, with all those glistening parts, and knelt to bite his thigh. Just because I could.

He bucked again, and his fingers dug into my shoulders.

“Hurry up.” There was a little threat in his voice. But mostly he was begging. Just the right combination to make me want to hold off and see what else I could get out of him.

I licked the mix of cum near his hole. The rush of tasting him and me together was like being drunk, but better. Much, much better.

“Gonna fuck you so deep and so good.” I would. If it’d been some other time or some other person, I’d have been terrified I didn’t know what the hell I was doing, but this time I knew I would.

He lay facedown on the floor, cradling his head in the crook of one arm. I looked at him, almost but not quite out of his jeans, the denim tangling around his ankles like a restraint. For me. This was all for me.

I pulled myself out of my clothes, my cock tight and full and more than ready.

When I entered him, he gave a soft sigh. He was hot enough to scorch. And he felt good. So good.

I shut my eyes, holding on, fighting myself until I could keep going the way I wanted. I could do that. I was strong enough to slide forward and kept moving steady and slow, just the way he’d done to me.

He groaned and twitched, the way I had. Yeah. I wondered how often he bottomed. There was something lost in the way he buried his head away from me. Something frantic in the way that tight ass of his took my cock and tightened around it.

Wouldn't him being a virgin at this be a kick?

I took one deep breath at just the thought of it. Another. I really wanted to move. But I really liked waiting, just like this, knowing what would happen next.

"D'you think you could get on with it?" Daniel's voice was as tight as his ass was. "Please? I'm dying here."

I waited just long enough to be sure I wasn't going to sound as desperate as I felt. "Since you said please."

I slammed forward, and Jesus, Jesus, I was home, my balls tight against his ass, my cock completely gripped inside him. I heard the two of us panting, almost like a chorus.

"Daniel." There wasn't anything else to say. I began to push, and he moved his ass with me, trying for more.

"Go on." He growled it. "Go *on*."

And I did. I slammed in hard, pulled back slow, and then thrust in harder. We grunted together, writhed and cursed and pushed, joined together and then pulled apart so we could do it again. God, dear God, I wanted to pound into him forever. I wanted to come right then. I tried to suck in air, but there wasn't enough air in the world. I could feel my climax coming, like a fireball, building up, flaming over me, burning with me with heat.

I tried to hang on, tried to keep this incredible high going, but Daniel groaned like he was dying, like he felt the same way I did. I exploded at the sound.

God. Inside Daniel. A Daniel who was screaming into the hard wood boards of his floor, arched against me. I grabbed blindly for him, ready to fall on top of him as I emptied, and felt the spatter of his cum against my hand and arm.

That was for me too. *Mine.*

I draped myself over him, trying to get back to my old self, even though I didn't know why. This self felt so good, close and sated and with Daniel.

As we lay there, some sanity came back. Daniel was still sprawled under me while I tried to figure out how to play what happened next. I knew I had to think fast. Saying too much about how much this meant to me would make him run. Well, maybe not run, since I didn't think either of us had the strength, but he'd withdraw. Too little and—When the hell had I ever said too little?

I could feel Daniel's chest rise and fall as if he was sighing. He shifted under me. *Time's up. Say something, Max.*

"So." I cleared my throat. "Is it too much to hope your downstairs neighbor is deaf too?"

"Sorry, no. But fortunately that neighbor works days." Daniel sounded shaky.

I wanted to kiss him. Stroke him. I risked gripping his shoulder and giving it squeeze. "Lucky us."

Daniel gently pushed at me and I rolled to his side. Then he sat up and scrubbed at his face. "Yeah."

Great. Once again I was going to have to do all the talking.

"Let me buy you a drink."

He looked at me. I didn't need him to remind me I was too young. Besides, he was wrong. I felt old enough to take him on right now.

"It's after noontime, I have a perfectly good fake ID, and I just topped my first guy. Pretty damn well too, if you can't say more than a few words after all this." I pulled my knees up under my chin and shot him my best tough look back. "That deserves at least a beer."

He smiled then and stood up. "You're right. I'll buy."

Hell. Daniel was agreeing with me and buying me a drink. *Today, I am a man. Hell, I am the man.* I pulled on my pants and wondered if there was even the possibility I could be Daniel's man.

Not now. That would be moving too fast. But things were looking good. Really good. I just had to work things right and it could happen.

"So did you ever bottom before?" I asked. "Or am I the only one to have the honor?"

Daniel laughed, but then his smile disappeared.

"Once. Just once. I thought I'd never want to again."

* * *

For the first time ever, Max didn't chatter away when I wished he would. That smile of his had turned into something more somber as we headed outside. Regret dragged at me. I'd fucked it up. Things had been good. Then I had to say the wrong thing, and it wasn't.

Fine. Let him figure out what I was like for himself. I was always going to do that. The kid probably thought I hated bottoming, when I'd meant something else entirely. I couldn't explain there were only two people in the world I'd ever been willing to do that for.

Of course they had to be brothers.

"Here." I stopped at Joe's. It wasn't my usual spot, but I couldn't go to where Tanya worked. Even if she didn't have this shift, someone would tell her. At least everyone kept their mouth shut at Joe's. They didn't think of me as a friend.

It was easier to deal with people who weren't friends. They didn't slump down on the bar stool next to you. They didn't look at you with worry. They didn't expect things. Things you couldn't do.

I stared down at the beer I was gripping. Nothing more than beer and not more than two. I'd put that limit on myself a few months ago, when I realized my drinking was getting out of control too.

I needed rules. I needed—

“Daniel?”

And there was Max next to me, once again all but vibrating on his chair. He didn't do rules well. That worked just fine for him.

“I told you things weren't going to work out for us.”

“Yeah. But you didn't tell me why.” Max straightened his shoulders. “I thought it was maybe me. I'm not...I'm not right for you.” I opened my mouth, but he rushed on. “I don't think that's it, though. I'm not perfect; I know that. But I think it's not really me at all you're unhappy with. It's some crap you have stored up and won't let go.”

“Could be.”

“Is it Matt?” He whispered it. I could barely hear the words above the hum of the bar crowd. He looked defeated—not like the usual Max.

My heart began to thump faster. It was all right. He didn't know. He was making a hell of a good guess, but he didn't know.

I wasn't going to tell him everything. I owed that to Matt. But I wasn't going to completely lie. I owed that to Max.

“In a way. I should've been with Matt.” *I should have been there instead of him.* “He offered to take me along that night. I said no. And then he died, and somehow I was staying in his room instead of him. I was with his family. And he was gone.”

“That's crazy, Daniel. You would have been with us even if Matt had been alive. Your last grandparent had just died, for God's sake, and it was stay with us until you graduated or stay on the streets. We would never have let that happen.”

Maybe. But would I have been there if you knew we'd fucked each other, and that was why Matt went tearing off that night? He wasn't thinking. He was just running, trying to deal with what we'd done. And I refused to go with him.

“I told him he needed to work out his problems on his own that night, because I didn’t have any and I knew what I wanted. So he left without me. He got drunk somewhere, crashed into a tree, and he didn’t have any more problems ever again.”

And all of a sudden everything I wanted was gone or cracked in two.

“That doesn’t make you to blame.”

“He was still dead, no matter who was to blame.”

Like my grandmother. Like the soldiers I couldn’t save.

“Daniel—”

“It’s easier not to care, Max. It’s just...easier.”

“That’s bullshit. You do care, and you aren’t making it easier for yourself.”
Max faltered again. “Or for me.”

“So I believe a lot of bullshit. Why hang around, then? Go find someone who’s willing to change for you. Better yet, someone who doesn’t have to. Someone who is good for you just the way he is.”

“Go to hell, Daniel. You’re not giving us a chance because of something that happened years ago. Guess what? I can’t fight what happened when I was twelve. I miss Matt. I miss the hell out of him, but I can only live with what I have now. I can’t change something I had no control over. A car accident is exactly that. An accident. You can pretend all this was your fault, but that’s just so you can think you have control over people. Over life. That’s bullshit too. You’re a hell of a man, and I’ve...I’ve worshipped you for years. But I know you’re not really God. Do you?”
Max pushed out of his chair and headed for the door.

I didn’t try to follow him.

He was almost gone. I breathed hard through my nose, trying to ignore the weird swirl of relief and pain in my gut. I’d live through this. And Max would be safe.

What the hell was I thinking?

Of course Max could never let anything alone. He turned at the door and marched back. I knew people were staring—just like I was. I gaped when he gripped my hair and pulled me closer to him.

“You *fucking* idiot.” Then he kissed me. Kissed me until I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. Rocked his body against mine until I couldn’t see straight.

Until I couldn’t move. Until I was ready to forget whatever it was that kept me from his mouth, his hands, from *him*.

I waited for him to tell me to kiss him back the way he had before. I was close, so damn close, to doing it without his order.

“Good-bye, Daniel.”

Good-bye? He had to be shitting me.

But he turned again and headed for the door.

The hoots started before he got halfway there. Shit. I snapped out of my daze in a hurry. This wasn’t a gay bar, and this wasn’t DC, where people might not have looked twice. It was a local bar—one in my not-so-refined locality—and it wasn’t exactly the best place to twist tongues with a guy.

Get the fuck out, Max. I stood up.

“Hey, pretty boy!” The man’s back blocked my view of Max.

I hissed out something I couldn’t hear because of the pulse beating in my head. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d lost my English but I knew the words were something my grandmother would have slapped me for using.

I moved toward them both, when my foot gave way, and I cursed again. Goddamn weakness—I heard a body hitting a table.

Max’s.

I heard him cry out.

Adrenaline, hyped-up fear and anger, and my military training all hit at once.

I don’t remember exactly what happened right after that.

Chapter Seven

“Daniel. Jesus, Daniel, stop!” Max’s voice sounded thready, but at least he had a voice.

“How are you?” Max was on the floor. I was panting, and my hands were bleeding. I wasn’t sure how we’d gotten here, but I wasn’t too freaked. Blackouts had happened before. And Max was with me. Things couldn’t be that bad.

“I’m kind of...floating.”

“Concussion?” I was already crouching over him on that dirty bar floor, looking into his eyes, feeling for his pulse.

He sounded stronger when he answered, and his pulse beat steadily against my fingers. “I’m not the medic around here. Maybe. Feel sort of sick and goofy at the same time.”

“I called the cops and the ambulance.” The bartender was on the other side of me.

“Daniel was...totally defending me.” Max shut his eyes.

I blinked. What the hell would the cops be hassling me—I looked down at my bloody hands again and realized I was getting off my adrenaline rush. I was starting to shake as bad as Max was.

“Stick with me, Max. Not too much longer. What happened?”

I could remember a little. Screams. Max yelling something. Thank God he didn’t seem surprised I couldn’t remember everything.

“You beat the crap out of three guys. It was like the movies.” Max’s lips twitched like he was amused. “My hero.”

I didn't remember.

"They aren't—" I hesitated.

"They got out of here on their own." The bartender shrugged. "I just don't want trouble for the bar down the road, you know? They weren't drunk; you weren't drunk. The kid hadn't even ordered anything. They were just assholes."

I heard the sirens outside and braced myself. Max seemed all right. Once I knew that for sure, I could deal with the rest of it, whatever it was. Max was what mattered.

The bartender gave a sour smile before he straightened to let the authorities inside. "I'm betting they're real sorry assholes right now."

* * *

"Daniel, what's happened?" Jeanie Richards touched my shoulder, both to reassure and for reassurance. I'm not sure it worked for either of us.

"I don't know. They won't tell me." Even though I'd be working for them in the ER tomorrow, they wouldn't tell me anything directly. Even though it was Max in there. I was afraid to read anything, good or bad, by how they carefully didn't deliver news. "I think—I hope—it's all right. He's stable. He was talking to me before they wheeled him in."

Max wasn't Matt. I knew that in all kinds of ways now.

"He was in a fight?" Max's father asked. "Max doesn't fight."

"It wasn't a fight. Three men jumped him."

"I don't understand—" George stopped. We knew sometimes things happened that didn't make sense.

"Go see what the doctor will tell you, George." Jeanie sat next to me and lifted my hands. I winced. "Looks like Max wasn't on his own against those men. You need to have that taken care of, Daniel."

"Sure. Soon. Once we hear...something. It doesn't hurt that much."

She put my hand next to her cheek and smiled. Her eyes were teary, but she smiled at me anyhow. The emotions I was holding off almost ripped through me then. I swallowed and sucked them down. I wasn't sure what would happen if I let go.

"We can go see him!" George called to us.

Jeanie stood up. I hesitated. I'd rather not try than be told I couldn't see him. I couldn't handle it this time.

At least one thing was clear now that Max wasn't with me and I didn't know when or if I would see him. Nothing else was important except Max. As long as he was all right, I could shitcan everything else that had kept me away. What I felt for him—down to even the gut-churning fear—was too big to play games with.

I was going to do things differently if he was okay. I might not be the perfect one for him, the way he'd said to me once, but I wanted to be. I'd die trying to be. That had to count, didn't it? Max couldn't just leave. That would be too unfair.

I shut my eyes and wondered if I could pray and if that would count for anything. I hadn't tried doing that in years. But for Max—Yeah, I could do that too.

Max's mother pulled at my sleeve. "You're family, Daniel. Come on."

"Thank you," I managed.

It better not be too late to realize how much Max meant to me. How bad it would be to have a world without him in it.

* * *

The lights were way too bright and the room was way too cold. I tried to pull up the blanket, but my hands were shaking.

"Hey." I relaxed. I knew that voice, even though it was a little gruffer than usual. His hands were the ones that tucked the blanket under my chin. "You have visitors, kid."

Daniel. Thank God.

"Sweetheart?" That was my mom.

That was good too.

I opened my eyes and winced. In a second, Daniel's body was shading me from the light, and I could see without hurting. My parents were there, looking as terrified as when we'd been in the hospital for Matt.

Daniel was there, holding one hand while my mom held the other.

"Have a headache, but otherwise good." I shut my eyes again. For once I didn't want to talk.

"The doctor said almost the same thing. They're still going to have you here overnight to make sure. You always did have a hard head." My dad's voice was too husky, but he was holding together pretty well.

"Why the hell did those thugs attack you? Were you mugged?" My mother's voice was shooting up with indignation as she got over her panic.

This wasn't exactly how I'd figured I would tell them, but I took a deep breath, ready to give it a try.

Daniel squeezed my hand, which left me even more stunned than I already was. Stunned enough to shut up.

"He was with me at a bar," Daniel said. "The men made a few assumptions about Max's orientation based on that."

"They hurt him because the two of you were at a bar together?" My mom sounded shocked as well as angry now.

Daniel was leaving me a way out if I wanted it. I wouldn't have to tell them anything.

Screw that. I wasn't ashamed. Maybe a little woozy, but I was clear about that.

"Well, they made the right assumptions since I was doing my best to hit on Daniel while we were there."

"Max?" My father sounded strange, but I didn't know if that was surprise or something more ominous. It didn't matter. I was going to tell my parents, because there was no way in hell I would be ashamed of doing anything with Daniel.

“I’m gay, Dad. I’m gay, and I was making a move on Daniel in public. That was why they tried to smash my head in.” My head really hurt now, but I sneaked a peek at my parents’ faces.

They still looked like Mom and Dad. Like my mom and dad looked when I’d just finished doing something that shocked and puzzled them, but that was pretty normal. The stuff I did to flip them out covered a wide range. I first remember getting that look when I tried to crawl into the dryer while it was on. I was four at the time. They got over the dryer thing pretty fast. Where did being gay rate on their “what the hell is Max doing” scale?

Since I couldn’t tell, I turned to the person I really wanted to see. Daniel’s expression was one I hadn’t seen on him before. I imagined he would look like that when he was going to march into battle. He was still holding my hand. That counted for something, right?

“Jeanie...George—” It still sounded weird to have Daniel call my parents by their first names. He’d started that after Matt died, when he was younger than I was now. Hell. I guess that made us all grown-ups at last.

“Daniel?” My mother sounded lost. She’d dropped my hand somewhere along the way.

“I should have taken care of him better. I’m sorry.” Daniel, being Daniel, went past all the coming-out stuff and zeroed in on what he thought he’d failed at. Damn him.

“I’m not fucking twelve still, Daniel!” I almost regretted the profanity in front of the parents, but I meant it too. “I’m in charge of me and what I do. I was being an asshole when I kissed you, but you know, I *wanted* to kiss you. I’d do anything to be important to you, Daniel.”

“Jesus, Max.” His grip tightened again, painfully this time. But he kept looking toward my parents. “I’m not sure how you feel about...about me and Max. But I want you to know he’s important to me. This...um... What’s happened just recently between us is new, but I’ve always cared about Max. I still care about him,

just differently. I'm not sure how he feels, because he's a lot younger than me"—he held up a hand to keep me from squawking—"but I know I, ah, I love him."

He muttered the last three words like he was admitting he had an interest in screwing sheep.

Crying would send Daniel screaming out the door. I could feel tears welling anyhow. If I did cry, maybe I could just tell everyone it was the pain. Or maybe I could just man up.

"I love you too. I don't kiss just random anybodies in bars."

"And as much as I love you, I have an incredible urge to spank you for doing that. It's probably lucky you're in the hospital and you scared the piss out of me a few hours ago, or I would." Daniel scowled at me, but I could tell by the way he was looking at me and still grabbing my hand that he didn't mean it. "The public displays have got to stop. Besides, you already are important. Probably the most important thing in the world."

Oh fuck. I *was* going to cry, no matter what, if he kept spilling his guts.

"I have to say that kinky spanking urge of yours doesn't surprise me, and you know I don't mind public displays. I think they're hot." I blew him a kiss, just because, and then winced at my sudden worsening headache—and from remembering we were in front of my completely silent parents.

"Well." My dad cleared his throat. "Well. I have to say I didn't expect this."

My heart sank. I knew who I'd choose if I had to, but I didn't want to have to. This time I hung on to Daniel's hand when he began to pull away.

"I-I know we're going to be fine about your announcement soon." My mom still sounded bewildered. "It's not—Is it all right if I say it's not what we had in mind for you, Max?"

No. No, it wasn't. Don't do this, Mom.

"But since this is how it's going to be, I just want to say I'm very proud of the man you picked for a partner." Mom smiled at me and blinked as if she was going to

cry as well. I probably got my tear ducts from her. “I can’t imagine a better person than Daniel, or one who would care more. You were a good boy, Daniel, and you’ve turned into a good man.”

Daniel blinked for a minute too.

“I’m not really sure Daniel knows what he’s in for.” My dad didn’t smile or fight tears, but he relaxed the longer he spoke, and so did I. “And, Daniel, I have to admit, Jeanie and I often had an urge to spank Max. We don’t find the urge kinky at all. It’s perfectly normal.”

“Hey!” I said.

Daniel picked up my hand this time and *kissed* it. That seemed like a pretty public display. “Thank you very much. For...for—I’ll try to live up to everyone’s expectations.”

Typical. This time he tuned out the praise and centered on the obligations.

“Y’know, you never believe it, but you always do, Daniel.” I let the palm of my hand rest against his mouth, wanting to feel him still. “And I have lots and lots of expectations for you to meet. Just wait till I get out of here.”

“*Please* wait until then,” Dad said with a little more emphasis than needed. “As soon as you’re able, Max, I want you to come home and visit. Bring Daniel. We’ll talk. We need to sort things out, but—Oh hell. It’s *you*, Daniel. And Max.”

Mom kissed me. Dad kissed me. Then it was just Daniel and me, alone at last.

“I want to go home, Daniel.”

He looked confused and glanced toward the door, where my parents had left.

“No. With you. I want to be with you.” I could already see his apartment as home as long as he was there.

“Sure, Max. I might need to...um, fix up some stuff before you show up.”

I didn’t want him to start thinking about what the apartment didn’t have or whatever fucked-up crap was going on in his head.

“No. Just be there and we’re good. Really. You don’t have to fix up anything.”

He smiled again, still looking confused but happy.

“I should thank Matt. Once again.” I spoke without thinking.

“Why?” Daniel sobered at just the mention of my brother’s name.

“Without him, my family wouldn’t have accepted us the second you spoke up. Shit. Without him, I’d never have met you. He must still be looking out for me. For us.”

Daniel leaned over to kiss me, so I couldn’t see his face. “Maybe he is.”

“That makes me a shit. I used to be jealous of the two of you.”

Daniel froze. Damn. Oh damn. I was almost asleep, and all of a sudden I was getting a really bad feeling, like this was going to be a more important conversation than I’d planned. I just wasn’t sure why.

“Why would you be jealous, Max?”

“Because my parents used to—still do—trust you just as much as they did Matt in a way they never will me. Because...because you two were so good together. You knew everything, could do everything, and the two of you were so close. I wanted that.”

“You didn’t need to be jealous of me, for God’s sake. He was your brother. He loved you from the minute you were born.”

“I don’t just mean jealous of you with Matt. I was jealous of Matt with you.”

“What the hell?” No, Daniel didn’t know. He had no clue.

“I always wanted to be close to you. Closer than you were to Matt.” There. I’d told him possibly the most embarrassing thing about my childhood, teen years, and the present.

“You are.”

Now.

Maybe I won by default since Matt was long gone. Maybe Daniel was trying to soothe the invalid. But I’d take it. “I do love you, Daniel. You know that, right?”

“I know I love you.” He leaned over and gave me one small kiss on the cheek. At least he didn’t look like he had to be pushed into making the confession, but I wanted more.

I wouldn’t push. After all, he worked here, and I might get wound up. All right, not *too* much pushing. I mean, I was going to have to do some. I was still breathing.

“I’m going to make you believe I love you. I’m really, really good at making people do things.”

“I know. But so am I.” Daniel stroked my cheek. It was sweet, but I knew damn well he was checking for fever.

Like I was delirious for saying I loved him. He obviously continued to underestimate me.

“You’re a pushover, Daniel. A marshmallow.” I couldn’t ignore the exhaustion anymore. But I tried to grab for him before I conked out. “Love you so much.”

“Don’t talk. We have time later. Although it’s kind of amazing the way you can keep talking even with a concussion.”

I needed to get a few things out now, though, before I crashed. “There’s something—I dunno—maybe more than one something you aren’t talking to me about. I know that, Daniel. But I’m grown-up enough to wait for you to tell me...and you will, once you figure out I love you enough to work out anything with you. There’s nothing you can say that will make me not want to be with you. I’m sticking with you for as long as you’ll have me. Maybe even longer. I tend to be a pest.”

“You trying to scare me into a confession, Max?” Daniel smiled again and left it there.

Thank God, I probably couldn’t scare him. After all, he knew me.

“I don’t have to. We love each other, and it’ll happen.” I tried to keep my grip strong on his arm even while I yawned.

“You know, kid, you could make me believe that’d happen.”

One of his hands covered mine, helping me hold on.

Yeah. I could hold on with his help. He might not want to believe what I was saying, but he'd hold on too.

"You want me to prove it? I stole your T-shirt and kept it to sleep in while I fantasized about you. Isn't that lame?"

"I still have the boxers you left. I jacked off with them while I fantasized about you."

That was *not* lame.

"I wanna go back with you and watch while you do that."

"Sure. As soon as the doctor lets you."

I'd love to see the doctor write out those orders.

"All right. I can wait. If we get back soon. I'm staying with you as long as you let me, you know."

"That could be a long time, kid."

Yeah. Hell yeah. I'd stay.

☪ THE END ☪

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Treva Harte

Treva Harte lives near a city with many, many attorneys. Thanks to Loose Id and her writing, she is now able to be a recovering attorney and spends her time writing, editing, raising adolescents, taking care of an elderly mother, and dealing with a hyperactive husband (he says he's just very energetic.) She is also co-owner and Editor-in-Chief of the e-publishing company [Loose Id](#).

She and her husband both like writing in whatever time they have left, so they often fight over—sorry, since he is still a practicing attorney they NEGOTIATE—keyboard time. No wonder Treva's particular brand of sensual romance is a bit offbeat and usually mixed with fantasy.