

THE *Christmas*
THROWAWAY

RJ SCOTT

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DEDICATION

For my family: for the love and support they have given me since Christmas 2009 when I decided to try and get my writing published. What a year.

The best gift I received this year was to have my first book published with Silver. *The Christmas Throwaway* is for Reese Dante, whose amazing cover art matches my thoughts so closely. It is for Leiland and Silver, who took a chance on *Oracle*, and it is for Devin, who spots all of my three-handed aliens and makes me look good.

TRADEMARKS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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

Ben 10: Alien Force: Cartoon Network

iPod: Apple Inc.

Lucky Charms: General Mills Food Company

Mouse Trap: Hasbro, Inc

PSP (PlayStation Portable): Sony Corporation

Trivial Pursuit: Hasbro, Inc

University of Virginia

The Dallas Cowboys

Die Hard (1988): 20th Century Fox Film Corporation,
Gordon Company

Stepford Wives (1972 novel): by Ira Levin

CHAPTER 1: THE FIRST CHRISTMAS

"Hey! You can't sleep here."

Zachary Weston had closed his eyes and let sleep pull him under. The simple fact was that sheer exhaustion meant he couldn't physically stay awake any longer. Sleep came quickly, the sleep of the desperate man, despite the furious aching pain in his lower back. He had pushed on through the pain for the last week. Ironically the ice and frigid temperatures, whilst freezing his extremities, helped ease the aching.

Behind his eyes he saw a crackling fire in an iron grate, the red and gold flames casting a beautiful light throughout a room decorated for Christmas. A tree stood tall in the far corner, its sparkling fairy lights, colored tinsel, and baubles catching and glinting random colors.

"You can't sleep here."

Presents were scattered and piled, haphazard and thoughtless in their arrangement, for there were so many. Books and songs and warm clothes sat in wrapped paper, festooned with silver and gold bows, his name scrawled in gold on a fair share of them.

"Hey, you can't sleep here."

Outside the window it was snowing, not a blizzard,

but soft fat flakes, which fell in a mesmerizing dance to join the soft shapes already hiding the mature garden from view. The cold meant the outside of the windows were frosted with creeping white tendrils that drew random patterns on the icy glass and reflected the colored lights from the tree.

"Hey..."

Zach bent down, picking up the first present, looking back at his mom. She was smiling and happy to see her son so excited, sharing nods of understanding with his dad. They both had so much love in their eyes.

"Hey!"

Someone was speaking to him from outside the room, but he couldn't see who. That didn't matter, because if he concentrated hard, he could focus on the gifts. He shivered, cold seeping into him, and unconsciously he moved himself closer to the fire, frowning when, if anything, the heat near him diminished. Stupid fire. He took his next gift, pulled at red and silver paper and uncovered the softest of sweatshirts, thick and warm and smooth, in a startling blue that his momma said matched his eyes. Despite the fire, he was still so damn cold, and quickly he pulled it over his head, the heat of the soft material on his frost-chilled skin comforting and warm. He

smiled as he was as wrapped with affection and love and the sparks of a family Christmas as he was with the sweater.

"You can't sleep here."

Zach started. The voice from outside the room was suddenly right in his ear and the last vestiges of his dream nothing more than suggestions in his head. Abruptly, his eyes snapped wide open and, after a second, focused on the source of the words. Zach actually saw very little beyond the sudden blur of a silver badge and the navy blue uniform, and then focused on the speaker's eyes. They were flinty hard in the streetlight, and there were small puffs of white hanging in the air, created by the man's breath. *Shit!* Somehow someone had seen him and reported him, or the cop had spotted him. He was being moved on again. He pulled at the thin jacket that covered him, a memory of soft blue material flashing into his head and disorientating him momentarily.

Zach had so hoped to avoid the law, cautiously optimistic that the churchyard might be a place of sanctuary on Christmas Eve.

"Sorry," he said quickly, scrambling to his feet as fast as he could manage, which wasn't entirely that fast considering the aching cold that seemed to split his very

bones in two. He cursed as his blanket fell from his numb hands and landed in the snow at his feet. That was the only warmth he had, a threadbare piece of material he had stolen from Goodwill when the woman in charge turned her back. And now the damn thing was going to be wet.

Still, there was no time to worry about that; the cop wanted him moved on. He leaned down to pick it up, only to see the ground spinning up to his face at an alarming speed. Strong arms stopped him from face-planting in the snow, but he twisted out of them quickly. The man might be a cop, might wear a badge, but no one touched him. Zach knew what men could want from the child he still was. He wasn't stupid, and he had dodged enough of it in the city.

"How old are you?" the cop asked, looking concerned and very much in authority.

"Eighteen," Zach lied quickly. He took a step back until his thighs hit the back of the bench he had been resting on. The cop stepped with him, looming large despite being a few inches shorter than Zach, his face creased in a frown.

"How old are you really?" the cop persisted, his expression calm, his voice low and curious.

Zach bit his lower lip, feeling the hot blood against

his tongue, the shivering inside him starting to manifest in shakes he knew even the cop would see. Carefully Zach lifted the blanket, damp and ice cold, trying to create a barrier between himself and the police officer with the intense gaze.

"Seventeen," Zach finally said, willing his teeth to stop chattering, "but I'll be eighteen in a few days." He added the last bit, giving the cop an out. He wanted to add *just leave me alone, I won't hurt anyone.*

"Ben Hamilton," the cop said softly, holding his hand out as if he wanted to shake Zach's. Zach was confused, waiting for the glint of cuffs, uncertain, and he dug his hands deeper in the wet blanket he was holding. The cop, this Hamilton, didn't move his hand, just held it firm and steady. Finally Zach thrust his cold hand out, the texture of the officer's leather gloves soft and strange beneath his touch.

"Zach," he introduced himself softly, remembering not to mention his surname. The cop didn't push him on it, just nodded and pulled his hand away.

"So, Zach, what's happened to you? Why are you lying on the bench at the Church of St. Margaret on Christmas Eve?"

The officer wasn't shouting; he was asking quietly,

but Zach immediately started to go on the defensive. There was a concerned twist to the cop's mouth, and he had narrowed his eyes as he asked.

"I..." Zach stopped, assessing the lies he could spin, thinking of the stories he had used to persuade people to leave him alone. Nothing crystallized as right for this moment in time. There was something *to* this cop, a man who seemed not much older than he was, an officer who wasn't a city cop, but a small town cop. He wouldn't be part of the system the same way as the cops in the city who said he should go home. *I don't have a home*. Maybe... maybe he should tell him the truth?

"I can't be at home right now," he said finally, wincing as the cop's gloved hand traced the bruises over his left eye and down his jaw line.

"Who did this to you, Zach? Did this happen here in this town?" The officer's words spun a safe haven for sharing secrets, soft, insistent and not very cop-like. Zach shied away instantly from the gentle touch, an icy blade of uncertainty pinching his skin as he contemplated being in the dark church grounds on his own with this man. He seemed friendly enough, but what if it was just another act? Cautiously, and trying not reveal his intentions, he looked to his left and then to his right. If he was going to run, he

needed a head start and being held or cornered would take that head start away. To the right, dense foliage blocked an exit, to the left was the gate to the churchyard and the shadowy grave stones. That was his best bet. He shifted his weight to his right foot, ready in a moment to push himself away and to vault the gate. His leg shook with the added pressure, and he knew he would probably fall at the first hurdle. Still, any plan offered more hope than no plan.

"I fell," he said firmly, the same line he had used for most of his life, the same line that earned him looks that ranged from pity to doubt. When he had said those words to people from organizers at the soup kitchen, to cops on the corner, to the owner of the homeless hostel, he had been sworn at, propositioned, cried at, or pushed away in disgust. He wasn't expecting much from another man in authority.

"Uh huh." The officer didn't push for any more information, just nodded at the simple statement and took a step back and away. He spoke directly into his radio. "I'm heading home now. It was nothing to worry about at the church." Static broke the calm of the snow-deadened air, and a tinny voice acknowledged the radio message with a series of codes and a single name, *Ben*. The cop looked back at Zach, and Zach gauged that now the cop was two

steps away from him, heading for the gate would be easier. "You can't sleep here. I'll find you a room for tonight, and we'll deal with the rest in the morning."

Zach's eyes widened. He wasn't going anywhere with any stranger, not unless he was under arrest. This cop was going to *find* him a room? Probably some out of the way no-tell motel. Shit. No way this side of never was that happening. He had barely got away with his life two nights before from a proposal far more wrapped in the suggestion of hope than what the cop was giving him. Zach was so past being gullible.

Pulling himself to his full height, he thinned his lips in determination. He was not swapping one hell for another, not a chance.

"No. Thank you, but, no, I have to... go to the station for the train." He tried not to let hopelessness into his voice, attempted to sound self-assured around the chattering of his teeth. He sounded out the words in his head, and he knew *exactly* what he was saying. He clearly had some sort of purpose for being on the bench in the snow on Christmas Eve and the cop should respect that. It was a free country.

"Okay, Zach," the cop sighed, "we can do this one of two ways. It's late, and it is the night before Christmas. I

really want to go home to be with my family and you are kind of making this all very difficult. Now you can come with me, get a decent meal, a shower and maybe some warmer clothes and then you can sleep for the night in a warm bed. This can be all your own choice, or I can make it official and arrest you, then force you to go."

Zach heard every word, looked around desperately, at the small church, the graveyard, the bench, at the snow, and back at the really young-looking cop in front of him. He was so screwed. The ice beneath his feet had climbed his long limbs, bringing with it insistent pain. The strength in his legs was failing. He had run for so many days, managed to keep ahead of everything and everyone, and he only had two more days until he could stop running. Why was it that his body was choosing now to give up?

"So," the cop continued, "I haven't got all night. I really don't want to spend my Christmas Eve standing over your frozen body and explaining your death to the medical examiner. So your choice is?"

He didn't have a choice. This was a no-choice situation. He knew it, and the cop knew it. He straightened as best he could, the pain in his lower back burning back to its usual level, despite the cold of the bench that had started to numb the tenderness slightly.

"Okay," Zach said quietly. After all this was a cop. How could it be wrong to want to be warm for just one night? "Not a cell?" he asked cautiously.

Officer Hamilton turned on his heel to start walking away from the bench.

"Nope, not a cell."

"You promise?" Damnit! Could he sound more like a kid? Way to come off as a responsible adult who had control of his life. Not.

The cop stopped and looked back at him, pushing his hands into the pockets of his thick jacket. Zach found himself looking at it enviously.

"I promise." He turned, clearly expecting Zach to follow, which he did. He stumbled on the icy path, in the same thin sneakers he had been thrown out with only one week ago. He cursed under his breath that the cop's boots afforded him a grip on the snow and that he had to scabble to keep up. It was humiliating to stumble-trip his way like a pathetic lost puppy behind the cop. At the same time, Zach admitted to himself that he couldn't outrun the cop if he decided to act on the impulse to just get the hell away from the man in uniform. So he followed as best he could.

They walked in silence for little more than ten minutes on the cold empty streets, past a town square and a

clock built into the wall of a small library. It told him the time was eleven-thirty. The cop stopped at the small convenience store with the *Closed* sign in the door, checking the door and peering into the emptiness inside. Zach just watched, scuffing his sneaker against a ridge of ice on the sidewalk. Then the cop led Zach towards a house at the end of a row of similar houses. The drapes had been left open and Zach could see the tree standing in the window, its Christmas lights welcoming them as they tramped up the cleared pathway. Officer Hamilton let himself in, stamping snow off his boots by the front door and gestured for Zach to follow.

Zach hesitated. He could feel the warmth inside, see the soft lights, the homeliness of a Christmas-trimmed home. Still, this cop was asking him to enter a house. No one would know Zach had gone into the house. With the cop. With a stranger.

"Ben?" The voice was soft, and a woman appeared from somewhere inside the brightly lit hall, stopping at the cop's side. She was small and neat and wore a concerned look on her face. She reminded him of his own mom, without the whipped, exhausted look she always seemed to carry. "What's wrong?" The cop stripped off his jacket and hung it on a peg, taking off gloves and pulling off heavy

boots.

"We have a guest for Christmas, Mom," he replied softly, beckoning Zach through the front door and, as if in a dream, lulled in part by the woman's voice, Zach stepped over the threshold. The warmth against his frozen skin was prickle-hot and painful, and he blinked at the sudden change in his body as the door shut behind them. A momentary twist of fear made his stomach ache. He hadn't been shut inside by doors for a week and being there felt like a prison as quick as you could say *cozy interior*.

The cop, *Ben*, guided him into a side room where a fire hissed in the grate, the tree stood near the window, and presents lay in casual disarray at the foot of it. Zach got his first real look at the man who had pulled him in from the churchyard. He was a slight bit shorter than Zach, solid and muscled with dark hair and hazel eyes. His uniform looked good on him, fitted him close and neat. Zach hated uniforms. The cop didn't look official like the security in the city parks or the shadowed doorways he had been sleeping in. He didn't look harried or suspicious or hard. It unnerved Zach to be faced with this contradiction in his mind.

"This is Zach. He needs some clothes and somewhere to sleep tonight." Ben's voice was deep and

certain. He didn't make excuses for bringing a stranger to his momma's house, and in return, she didn't seem all that angry. What kind of Stepford soap-opera house was this?

"Hello, Zach." He winced at the soft words from the cop's mom. "Go and clean up and I'll warm up some soup." She didn't wait for his yes or no, but at that point, the thought of a clean bathroom, an actual toilet, and maybe a shower was enough to make Zach weep. "Ben, show Zach to the bathroom, get him a razor and some towels, and maybe dig out some of your sweatpants, dear." She smiled at him then, but Zach was disorientated, exhausted, and in pain. It was all he could do just to stay on his feet, let alone form words or even return the smile.

The next hour was a daze of heat and water in the shower, the door locked against anyone who might attempt to push their way in. The razor scraped away the thin straggly stubble on his face. He hadn't used a toothbrush in a week, and the new toothpaste and brush cleaned up his teeth as he stared into the small fogged mirror over the sink. Zach finally felt sanitary for the first time in at least seven days.

The last time he had managed to clean himself up was two days ago in the bus station waiting room, and the water in the basin had been suspiciously brown. He'd had a

ticket out of the city in his pocket, as far as his eighteen dollars and twenty cents would take him. For his own safety, he had needed to get out of Harrisonburg. God knows where the road would take him, but as he had traced a finger along the I81 on the large map on the wall, he had hoped that he could maybe get as far as Winchester. That is where his second cousins lived, and maybe they would take him in until after New Year's.

The assistant behind the glass hadn't actually laughed at him, but she made it clear he would be lucky to get halfway in that casual way only adults selling tickets could manage. He had taken what he could get. Ended up here in God-knows-where, Virginia, halfway to safety.

He stared at himself dispassionately in the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. His body always verged on too skinny, as he grew tall so quickly, but now his frame was just gaunt. His tired eyes and gray-tinged skin made the thinness even more noticeable. At least his hair was clean, the blond dark with water and combed back away from his face. His blue eyes seemed to be popping out of his face. They were bloodshot and smudged underneath with gray, and the purpling bruises along the edge of the sockets didn't help matters. He looked pathetic. He felt pathetic.

The cop had left him sweats that were a little short for his long thin frame, but they were warm, dry, and felt wash-worn and soft on his clean skin. He pulled on a t-shirt, then a sweatshirt over his towel-dried hair and finally looked back again at the mirror in the bathroom, tears unbidden in his eyes. For the first time in days, Zach was really seeing himself in something other than a shop window. He knew he had lost a lot of weight, could feel it in jeans that refused to sit right, but in the mirror he saw a shadow of himself, beaten, exhausted, and so damn skinny.

He looked like a stereotypical street kid, and it scared him that in such a short time he had gone from normal teenager struggling with studying to this broken image in front of him.

He knew he had to go and face the cop and the cop's mom because he sure as hell couldn't stay in the bathroom forever. Cautiously he opened the bathroom door, some small part of him expecting the cop to be standing outside waiting with cuffs. He wasn't there, but it didn't make Zach feel any less nervous. He picked his way down the hall, following the voices in the kitchen. Apparently they had been talking about him, because when he walked into the room, the silence was immediate and somewhat uncomfortable. The cop was sitting at the table, a mug in

his hands, looking impossibly young for a cop in the bright light of the kitchen. His —*Ben's*— mom stood at the stove stirring something in a pan. Her clear hazel eyes warmed as she looked over at him, her lips curving in a smile. He would have to be careful here, measure his words, not give too much of himself away.

"Chicken soup okay with you, honey?" she asked him gently, carefully.

"God yes," Zach said quickly, wincing at his loss of control and then realizing what he'd said. He may have turned away from God for leaving him to be beaten and rejected by his father, but it didn't mean that others didn't have belief. He should watch his mouth. "M sorry, ma'am," he blurted quickly, "I mean, yes, I would like some soup."

The cop snorted his amusement, and his mom smacked at her son's shoulder with her hand, admonishing him for his inappropriate sniggering. She poured what smelled like heaven into a bowl, telling Zach to sit and then proceeding to watch him like a hawk as he ate. He couldn't bring himself to care that she watched him or that the cop hadn't moved from his seat and still looked at him. In fact they were probably both sitting and judging him for how he looked and where the cop had found him.

"Ben, dear, are you off shift now?"

"Until tomorrow."

"Go change out of your uniform. There are still some of your clothes upstairs from last weekend. Maybe you can give me and young Zach here time to talk." Zach lifted his head at this, bread halfway to his mouth. *The talk. Shit.* He was so screwed.

"Back in ten," Ben said clear and firm, and Zach looked at him, at the warning in the cop's face — *Don't mess with my momma.* He nodded slightly to let Ben know he got the message, watching as the broad-shouldered man left the kitchen.

"So, Zach, I'm guessing you aren't here by choice?" She started innocently enough, pouring another helping of soup in his bowl and passing him more bread. She watched him intently. He wondered what she saw when she looked at him and he was ashamed. The old and new bruises on his face, half covered by still damp blond hair he had pulled down to hide them. He knew he looked younger than his near eighteen and could be easily mistaken for much younger. Zach was aware of every little sensation in his body, the warmth, the peace, the quiet, the acceptance, but it was all so wrong at the moment. He didn't deserve this, and he didn't know quite how to handle it.

"No, ma'am," he finally said, biting into bread so

crusty that crumbs sprinkled his soup as he ate. If he had a mouthful of food, maybe he could get away with not saying anything at all. He had listened to enough lectures in his life to be able to tune them out.

"Ben tells me you're nearly eighteen, but that he knows nothing except your first name."

Damn. His surname, she wanted to know his surname. He guessed it didn't matter much now, as there was no way he was going home. There were only two more days until he turned eighteen. It was too late for the cop's mom to track down his family. He swallowed the mouthful of bread and soup and wiped at his face with the back of his hand, caught up in the reassurance in the woman's eyes.

"Zachary Weston, ma'am," he finally offered. "I'm eighteen on the twenty-seventh of December." She nodded thoughtfully, and he quickly scooped up another spoonful of soup, the heat of it sliding down his throat velvety warm. She didn't speak straight away, just looked at the mug between her hands before asking the next question.

"Can you tell me why you're not at home with your family?" She hesitated, tilting her head to one side. "I guess I shouldn't be assuming you have a family."

"No, ma'am, I have a family. A mom, dad, and a sister. They —my dad— didn't want me in the house any

more."

"What did you do to deserve that? Was it the wrong crowd? Drugs? Drink?"

Pain shot through him at the options she was giving him. The reasons why young people were generally homeless. She thought he was an addict? He had never even touched a cigarette, let alone drugs, and as for drink... He closed his eyes briefly. Why wouldn't she think he was at fault? He knew he looked ill enough for people to suppose he was on something that was harming him. He averted his gaze, as if fascinated by his soup, his hair falling again to hide from her far too perceptive gaze. Should he tell her the whole story? Would she want to hear all the real details? Other people had asked but they didn't really want to hear.

Should he give her the details of the strict ex-army father who felt lessons were learnt through corporal punishment? Or of the home schooling and the fact he had no friends? Maybe he should just go for the easy option, the truth at the base of what had happened to him. He didn't want to lie to her. It wasn't in him to lie. He looked up and directly at her, the soup unsteady on his stomach.

"It happened because I'm gay," he said simply and so softly she had to lean forward to hear, then she frowned

as he pushed the chair back from the table.

"And you ran away?" she asked simply.

"No!" Zach's reaction was instant. "They tried to fix me, but it didn't work. I didn't want it to work. They told me to go."

"I see," was all she said. He didn't hear disgust in her voice, but it wasn't like she immediately jumped up and gathered the gay throwaway in a hug.

"Thank you for the soup, ma'am. I appreciate your help, and your son's." He stumbled to stand, pins and needles in his legs, and moved into the hall, only stopping because the officer was blocking his way. The man was fresh from the shower with his dark hair spiky and his hazel eyes focused intently, looking less like a cop and more like a normal guy.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked, his head tilted in question. Zach saw the puzzled look in the guy's eyes then looked deeper, to a compassion such as he hadn't seen in a long time.

"I'm leaving, Mr... Officer. Look, thanks for your help. I'm sorry." Zach's words were shaky, but he made sure his intent was obvious. He was determined to leave. They wouldn't want him under their roof either now. At least he'd gotten a hot meal in his belly, and he was damned

if he was going to give back the warm clothes. He only had to find his shoes, and he would be gone. He could probably outrun the cop if he had a good enough head start since the other man was standing in the hallway with bare feet. Zach lowered his gaze and shuffled to move past, but he was stopped by a strong grip on his arm.

"Momma? Did he do something? Are you okay?" Ben ignored Zach, who was nearly hopping from foot to foot trying to loosen Ben's grasp, anxiety and panic building inside him. He hadn't done anything to the cop's momma; he wouldn't. Weakly he pulled his arm, but the damn cop had a grip of freaking steel.

"It seems Zach's parents threw him out because he's gay," she offered simply. Zach yanked away to gain maneuvering room. Ben's face suddenly twisted in anger. *Shit*, Zach thought immediately, *here it comes*, and as the cop brought up a hand, Zach found himself cowering from the imminent hit. Instead, the cop laid his hand gently on Zach's shoulder and appeared to choose to ignore the fact that Zach had slunk back in fear.

"That happens a lot," the cop said simply, his face clear of any kind of telling expression, "but in this house, it isn't a problem. Momma has a straight son, married with two kids, and a daughter with two boyfriends at any one

time." He paused, clearly letting the first part sink in. "Then she has me, her gay cop son."

"Oh," was all Zach could say, rubbing the arm Ben had grabbed to relieve the pain.

"You being gay isn't going to be one of the things that might affect your stay with us. Okay?"

Zach twisted to look at Ben's momma, still sitting at the table. She was nodding in agreement. It felt odd. It was some kind of surreal afternoon chick flick with exceptionally pretty people being nice to extremely lonely young throwaways. He blinked, eyes then widening as it all sank in, too good to be true, but somehow very real.

"I'm going to go to bed, Ben. Why not sit a while with Zach, and then maybe show him to Jamie's old room. There's fresh linen in the closet." She rose gracefully, placing bowls in the sink and crossing to pull her son into a hug, "Ellie will be in by two. She promised. So keep an eye out for her for me."

CHAPTER 2

Ben knew his mom wouldn't sleep until Ellie was home. He also realized that she was giving him time to settle Zach, who seemed as highly strung as a racehorse, quivering with nervous tension. Their guest constantly checked the front door, and he could imagine the kid's brain calculating distance, speed, and direction for escape.

During his police training, Ben had attended a training seminar in Richmond. It was designed to give new recruits a feel for various career paths and specializations. He had spent a few hours listening to the juvenile liaison officer who touched briefly on stories of throwaways, his particular area of expertise. It intrigued Ben enough for him to search out the officer after his speech. He wanted to know more.

"What are the main reasons that they runaway?" Ben asked of the more experienced officer, who shook his head.

"Not run, throw. These kids are literally thrown out of the house. They didn't choose to leave by running away; they were just kicked out."

Ben remembered the horror stories of kids turning to prostitution, turning tricks to survive, often dying young,

the victims of disease or drugs or starvation.

"I asked one boy," the liaison officer had started the conversation straight in with the stark realities, "*why* he made his way to the city and he told me, 'Every gay kid around knows about the right streets and alleys in Richmond.' When they get thrown out of home, that's where they head." Ben had gone back on his own time to ask for more information. The lives of throwaways horrified him, but some chord in him had been struck by the entire problem.

"So why don't we have infrastructure in place to help these kids?" His question had shown his own ignorance, something he realized when the senior officer sighed resignedly

"There is support here in the city for the kids. Like hostels and other subsidized rooms, and there are charities that try to help. But the economics of life on the street are just as precarious here as they are across the country. Financial aid is cut, and volunteers are thin on the ground. The reality of it is that for kids on the street they find themselves in very desperate and often dangerous situations. "

"You mean drugs, prostitution, that kind of thing."

"Kids come here, and to the other big cities, for a lot

of reasons. Some think they're old enough to make adult decisions. They have this fantasy, this idea that they can survive on their own. And then there are the throwaways. No matter what they say, most of them run because they're desperate or have nowhere else to go. A lot of them don't know anything further than the next meal. Some of them make it. Too many of them don't."

The officer's words rang in Ben's mind now as he looked at the picture of innocence that stared back at him, Zach's eyes as wide as those of a deer caught in the headlights. He had scrubbed up well, this throwaway from the city, his face pink from shaving and the shower. A good-looking kid, he was whip lean, with soft blond hair drying into curling waves around a gaunt face. His eyes were a fascinating shade of blue, small flecks of gold near the pupil, but he looked out at the world with the fear of the hunted. He was tall, at least two inches taller than Ben. Ben himself was no slouch at nearly six feet, but the youngster stooped, slumped like he was exhausted, hiding if Ben was to hazard a guess.

What the heck could he do to convince the kid to calm down and relax? Wait. Hot chocolate. With marshmallows. Ben considered it one of the best comfort foods ever devised. If it worked for him, it might work for

Zach. Inspired, he scrabbled through the cupboards, locating all the makings of hot chocolate and making busy until the smell of chocolate filled the kitchen. He said nothing and still Zach remained nervous and rabbit-scared. *Well, this is going well, Hamilton. Convince him to sit down before he falls over.*

Finally, he guided Zach with a casual wave of his hand to sit on the sofa opposite the tree in the living room. After a few seconds of careful consideration, Ben sat down next to Zach. Not touching him. Not the chattiest of people most of the time, Ben wasn't quite sure what to say. An awful lot of what had happened in the past few hours was way out of his job spec. He should have reported finding the boy asleep on the bench, taken him to the station, and gotten him some help. At his first look at the sleeping vagrant, his skin as icy gray as the wooden bench he lay on, Ben imagined he would have to call an ambulance.

However, when Zach spoke, he had spoken clearly, if not without one hell of a lot of fright in his voice.

Thing is, when Ben saw that fear in the boy's eyes, something inside him, maybe his own soft heart, or Good Lord, maybe it was Christmas spirit, just wanted to make him safe. It was, after all, one reason why he joined the force, to make the people in his hometown safe, no matter

who they were.

Dirt and stubble and greasy lank hair had served to disguise the boy's features, and he had smelled rank. He had needed a shower, clothes, and somewhere warm to sleep.

And then, when Zach had emerged from that bathroom, dressed in a pair of Ben's sweats, his hair clean and the scraggly stubble shaved off of his face, Ben struggled not to say something inappropriate. The younger man was gorgeous, all doe-eyed and innocent, anxiety bracketing his mouth, fear in his eyes. He was also so far from Ben's type. He was tall and Ben liked guys shorter than him. He had blue eyes: Ben usually went for brown. As for his hair? Blond was so not his first choice; he much preferred brunets. With those and other generally useless thoughts floating through his head, Ben had pushed his impulses to one side. Gorgeous the boy may be, but he was an underage runaway first, and gay Ben may be, but he was a cop first.

"So, you're a senior, I guess?" Ben started as safely as he could, quirking an eyebrow when Zach shook his head.

"Home schooled," Zach offered. "Dad blamed the school I was at for making me gay." The last he added with

a quick shrug. "So he pulled me out. I haven't been to school in like four years."

"Making you gay?" Ben had heard these words before. It wasn't new, and it wasn't strange to know these things happened. It still shocked him to hear these things coming from the mouth of a boy so damn young.

"Yeah, who would have thought public school could turn you off girls, eh?" Zach deadpanned, offering up a small smile, before bowing his head with a flush of embarrassment on his high cheekbones.

"So why didn't you get thrown out at fourteen?" Ben knew that was kind of a personal question, but he really did want to know as much as he could.

"Interventions. Camps I attended to quite literally straighten me out. Army buddies of my dad's that would take me on weeks away, running, walking, guns, all kind of shit to counteract the gay."

"Shit."

"I took it all, the interventions, the orders, the lack of a life. I was part of my dad's future plans for me without having a choice."

"He wanted you in the army?"

"Special Forces, like he was until he was invalided out. He had high ambitions for me."

"So, clearly you are not in the army. What happened?"

Zach sighed, shook his head and hesitated, as if he couldn't find the right words.

"I was told in no uncertain terms that on my eighteenth birthday I would be enlisting. There was no way that was happening. I don't want that. I want to learn and to write. Write books." Zach peered shyly through his bangs, and Ben didn't see one sign of temper in them.

"You told him?" Ben really wasn't sure if he wanted to know what happened next.

"First time I ever stood up to him. I told him, I'm choosing my own life, didn't matter if I was gay or not. It was my life."

"That was incredibly brave."

"It was stupid. He's six four, muscles on muscles. He beat me, and I was out of the house in under an hour, at the business end of a hand gun."

They sat in silence for a while longer, Ben trying to get his head 'round how, as an officer of the law in this small sleepy town, he could help an underage street kid. Zach clearly wanted to change the subject.

"So, a cop then?" Zach mirrored the style of the question Ben had asked him, a shy, almost nervous look on

his face as he again ducked his head. Ben felt his heart twist, just wanting to reach out and pull Zach into his arms and hug him and tell him it was okay to ask questions.

"Yep, year one in this town, lowest rung on the ladder. I'm on duty from eight a.m. tomorrow, and I get to cover Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, Thanksgiving, and the Fourth, but yeah, it's a good job."

"Ben, can I ask you a question?" Ben nodded, and Zach sucked in a deep breath and blurted the question out. "How old are you?"

"Twenty four. Though I don't feel like it. Twenty-four, my own place, and I still come over and steal hot chocolate and marshmallows from my mom," he added, then winced, falling over himself to apologize as Zach immediately retreated into himself, pulling his knees up and wrapping an arm around them in full-on self-protection mode. "Zach, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"Hey, no, she's your mom, and she is a cool mom. My mom just stood by and let my dad get on with it. She cooked, cleaned, had me and my sister; it was her role in life. Not sure she ever made me hot chocolate or gave me anything anywhere near protection from dad."

"I'm so sorry, Zach."

"Honestly, I am so over what they did. They don't know what they've lost, 'cause one day I am gonna be rich and famous and married to the most gorgeous guy on the planet. We'll adopt three kids, and live on a ranch with horses and dogs, and then they will come running back, and I will just tell them all to fuck off." Zach's voice rose in volume with each sentence, until the last profanity was near shouted, before he realized what he had said and buried his head into his knees, his face bright red.

Ben just chuckled.

"Tell you what, Zach, you give me their address and I'll tell them to fuck off for you." Zach raised suspiciously bright eyes to Ben and gave a watery smile, his heart on his sleeve again.

"Thank you."

They both heard the door rattle, and the rush of cold air was a nasty reminder of what was waiting for Zach tomorrow night. Ben looked at Zach, saw that he'd gone pale, and wondered what was wandering through his head. He seemed lost in thought.

"Benny?" Ben saw Zach tense as Ellie came stumbling into the front room, gloves and scarves thrown everywhere, and her bright green coat dumped at her feet. Ben checked his watch.

"Two-fifteen, Ells Bells, and don't call me Benny," Ben said, looking back, very pointedly, at his watch. Ellie had the grace to blush and picked up her coat, probably realizing antagonizing big brother or Mom was not going to counteract a break in curfew.

"Who's your new friend, Benny?"

"Enough with the Benny, and this is Zach. He's our house guest." Ellie waved a hello, and offered a "*hey*" before declaring herself ready for bed and sashaying off down the hall.

"Is she in deep shit?" Zach asked carefully, eyes widening as Ben chuckled.

"Nah, Mom will tell her she is not so lucky her brother is a cop, because if she breaks curfew one more time then she will get me to arrest her boyfriend."

"Oh." Zach sounded so damn serious and worried that Ben felt he should point out that his mom had been joking.

"I don't know what is going on in your freaky head, but that is what we call a joke around here, Stretch."

"Oh," Zach repeated. *Again with the blushing*, Ben thought. He encouraged Zach up the stairs after that, explaining that the town's idea of being on duty was making sure Ben had access to a phone and was in uniform.

"Doesn't mean I miss Christmas breakfast or present opening, but I do need to be up at six."

"Uh huh."

"You okay in this room on your own?" He cast a critical eye around his brother's old room, focusing on the worn furniture and the posters, the cups and trophies that Mom had kept, the boxes in the corner for Goodwill, and wondered what Zach felt when he saw this. "It isn't much," he began, but he didn't get any further as Zach interrupted his flow of conversation.

"It's awesome," Zach said, sounding eager and thankful. He wrapped his long arms around his body, hugging himself. "It's a bed."

Zach's excitement was infectious, like a child's before Christmas morning. Ben smiled warmly. For the first time since he'd started his new job as a cop in his hometown, he felt like he was making a difference in someone's life. He didn't discount finding lost dogs and mediating neighborly disputes, but to have taken Zach in, this sparkly-eyed innocent who was lost to his family... Well that made him feel very good.

"Sleep well." He started to leave, then on impulse turned back, taking a single step and pulling Zach in for a quick hug. He released him immediately and left the room,

throwing, "Merry Christmas, Zach," behind him as he closed the door.

Zach just stood. Immobile. He wrapped his arms around himself, warm from Ben's touch, and suddenly grinned like an idiot. Leaving his clothes on, with the lessons in his head that he had learned on the street, he climbed under the soft quilt and snuggled down, his heart a thousand times lighter. This could be the biggest turnaround in Christmas history, from church bench to warm home and a family in the space of two hours. It didn't even matter that it was only for one night.

It was a Christmas miracle.

CHAPTER 3

Mark took the steps three at a time, landing with a thud on the wooden hall floor and skidding to a halt by the front door. It wasn't that he was in any particular hurry to answer the knock at six in the morning on Christmas Day, but that was how he did everything in life, always at full speed.

"Coming," he called, dodging Annabelle, who scurried through the foyer with a brightly-colored package in her hands, and pulled open the front door. He blinked at the man standing there, his best friend since he was two, in his uniform and looking both serious and very cold. Quickly, Mark drew him inside, pushing the door shut behind him and watching as his friend stamped snow from his police-issue boots.

"Mark, do you have a minute?"

"Hey, Ben. Official visit?" It was the usual question from Mark, a standard joke whenever Ben arrived at their door in uniform. Now Mark was waiting for Ben's standard reply, usually something along the lines of crimes against short people. This was because Mark had towered over Ben since the famous growth spurt in his sixteenth year.

Instead, Ben just shook his head, and Mark paused.

His friend looked so damn serious, and something in him made him glance at his wife as she joined him, trying to hold their wriggling daughter for a Christmas hello to Uncle Ben.

"Do you need a lawyer at the station?" Mark asked carefully. He hadn't been called to the station in his official capacity before. He dealt with land issues and wills and there wasn't a lot of need for a criminal lawyer in Hill Valley. When his friend didn't immediately reply, he thought maybe it was his wife that Ben needed. Melanie had been the town doctor since her father retired four years before and was older than Mark; a fact Ben never let him forget. Maybe it was her help that Ben needed?

Ben shook his head.

"Kinda just need some help," he started. "I got a call out to St. Margaret's last night, someone spotted a kid hanging round the graveyard, and when I got there..." He paused. This whole Zach thing wasn't exactly official; he hadn't even reported what he had found for the administrative records. "There was this kid, like seventeen, scrawny, exhausted. I took him home with me, well, to Mom's."

"Do you need me to come over?" Melanie immediately asked, and Ben smiled. It was to his friend's credit that she didn't even stop to question why he would take a complete stranger into the family home. Added to that, it was Christmas day, she wasn't officially on call, and she was holding his godchild in her arms. He didn't think he could love her more.

Mark on the other hand was frowning, clearly focusing on the stranger-in-your-home part. Ben could see that.

"Maybe later, but at the moment he just seems exhausted and really damn hungry."

"No signs of hypothermia?" Melanie asked, snapping into doctor mode, but all Ben could do was shrug and look sheepish. He wasn't even sure he was fully aware of the symptoms of hypothermia. Melanie continued, "Did you see any of the umbles? I mean stumbles, mumbles, fumbles, and grumbles. If he showed any signs of these, it could indicate the gradual reduction in coordination of muscles and movement, and a falling level of consciousness."

"Is it just me or did you find that whole doctor list hot?" Mark said with a leer, but all Ben did was blink and shake his head.

"Umbles? No, nothing as serious as that. Maybe his coordination was a bit shot, but he was cold and tired, and he was eating Momma's soup like there was no tomorrow."

Melanie nodded, putting a wriggling Annabelle down on the floor and straightening.

"Well, I'm here if you need me. I mean, I need to go check on the Joneses a bit later anyway. Emma is due tomorrow, so I'll be over your way." Ben smiled thankfully, knowing he would feel better if Melanie could just check his young visitor over, if only by sight.

There was another reason he had dropped in though, and it was more to do with the fact that Mark was freakishly tall than anything else.

"One other thing though, I need your fugly sweater, man." Mark's eyes widened. *The Christmas sweater* was a legend. It was hand-knitted with great love by the formidable Mrs. Aniston, Mark's mom, throughout the year and wrapped with tender care for her son to open on Christmas day.

"My sweater?" Ben almost snorted out loud at the look of complete indignation on Mark's face.

"And some jeans man, if you can spare them." Mark blinked with a regular *huh?* on his face. "He's tall, man," Ben explained, waving his hand above his head in a gesture

of height, waiting for Mark to make the connection.

It was Melanie that disappeared into the laundry room, coming out with two clean pairs of jeans, two freshly ironed shirts, and last year's fugly sweater. She handed that to Ben, and then crossed to the tree, rummaging under it for a few of the many gifts that were piled there. With an exclamation of success she gathered together packages and added them to Ben's arms.

"This year's fugly sweater," she listed, "some smelly stuff, Christmas socks, and some Santa boxers." She looked up at Mark briefly, who wasn't that fazed by the fact his gifts were disappearing from under the tree.

"Thank you, Mel." Ben pulled her into a clumsy one-handed hug, the clothes clutched close to him, and then he moved to the front door.

"Take care, Ben." Mark knew his voice was full of questions and of warnings, but Ben clearly wasn't ready to answer them.

"You coming over tomorrow?" his friend asked as he made to leave.

"Wouldn't miss it, man," Mark answered, putting an arm around his wife as Ben took the step outside and pulled the door shut behind him.

"Thanks, babe." Mel squeezed him tightly.

"My presents, Mel..." Mark couldn't stop the disappointment filtering into his voice. Whatever the reason, it wasn't as if he actually received that many presents now he was a dad. Mel just chuckled and tucked her head up under his chin.

"I'll owe you one." Mark looked over his wife's head at Annabelle who stood in the front room inches away from the presents under the tree.

"I'm holding you to that."

The cold was a slap to his warm face, and he shrugged the collar of his coat higher around his neck, shivering at the wind chill. He wished he could explain to Mark but if *he* didn't understand fully why he had taken Zach into the family home, then how the hell was he going to explain it to his best friend? He needed to go back for a bit, drop the clothes off, check in with his momma and make sure Zach was doing okay. Drawing in a deep breath of frigid air, he began the short walk. He passed few people. Seemed he was the only idiot out this early on a snowy Christmas Day. It was beautiful. *His* town was crusted with the white stuff, the frost climbing windows, multicolored lights adorning the houses, glimpses of trees

inside the windows. A gorgeous painting.

Some questioned why he stayed, why with his college degree in his hand he chose to come home to work in the small police department when he could have done better for himself in Harrisonburg or Charlottesville.

Ben never questioned it, just went with his heart. Hill Valley, Virginia, nestled in the Shenandoah Valley was *his* town, and he wanted to be part of the tapestry of its history. As much as the Mercantile on Main, or Mr. Perkins who was a shade under ninety; Mr. P, who sat on the bench outside the very same shop, dispensing wisdom from the bottom of his whisky bottle.

When he arrived back home, Zach was still asleep, and his momma and Ellie were curled up on the sofa with breakfast. They both came to help Ben with the wrapped gifts.

"Who is he, Benny?" Ellie asked softly.

"Ben, not Benny," Ben automatically replied, "and his name is Zach, Zachary Weston. He's a runaway until the twenty-seventh when he turns eighteen."

"What was he running from? Do I want to know the answer?"

"Homophobic parents by the sound of it. I don't know much, but he needed somewhere to stay."

Ellie narrowed her eyes briefly. "I changed the label on one of the gifts for you," she said quickly. "It was just some small stuff, but if he is staying..." Her voice tailed off as he pulled his little sister into a hug of affection.

"Thanks, Ellie," he said simply, squeezing her tight then releasing her. "Mark donated as well, or rather, Melanie donated Mark's stuff."

Ellie held up the bright red sweater with the fluffy snowman on the front, from the pile of clothes Ben had brought from Mark.

"Oh, my God," she snorted. "She donated last year's fugly sweater."

Ben indicated the package under the tree, the large suspiciously squishy package. "And this year's," he pointed out, before snorting his own amusement. His mother, in full-on mom mode, held up the jeans that Mark had donated, eyeing the waist and remembering the thin boy that was upstairs in her spare room. Even Mark saw the jeans might well be the right length, but the waist was huge and the material would swamp him.

"Pass me my sewing box, Ben," she asked, settling back down on the sofa, and he imagined she was gauging just how much of an alteration she was going to have to do to the thick unwieldy denim. She thanked Ben as he handed

her the carved wooden box that held buttons and thread and needles of all sizes. Ellie held the denim straight as her mom started to adjust the material, and Ben just smiled fondly at them both.

"He's gorgeous, isn't he, Ben? All sharp angles and those amazing eyes," Ellie commented carefully, looking up at him all innocent-eyed, "and all that long floppy blond hair soft about his face."

And the smile, Ben thought to himself, a smile that, while shy and uncertain, was a glimpse of the grin Zach could have if he tried. It was so sad to see this boy so very wary and nervous, almost like a kicked dog.

"I wasn't looking," he denied quickly as his brat of a sister smirked again.

"I gotta go straight back, Mom. Heggerty said the fence is down at the upper quarter, and Jeremiah is swearing the unbranded mixed cattle are his and not Heggerty's."

"Will you be back for dinner, Ben? Jamie is here for twelve."

"I'll be here, Mom, promise, and..." He indicated the upstairs with a movement of his head. "If you need me for anything..."

"Go, Officer Hamilton." His mother smiled. "Go

keep the peace."

CHAPTER 4

Zach didn't move in the bed, not one inch. He had gotten used to not rolling over, of perching precariously on the edge of benches, or of sleeping upright on steps. Now his sleep was marked by its lack of movement, the quilt tidy and neat around him. It had been a long journey from Richmond to here, wherever *here* was: bus rides and train rides as far as his money, what little there was, could take him, until he had gotten off the train in this small town that he didn't even know the name of.

It was the polar opposite to his suburban hometown. A convenience store, a square, three sets of traffic lights, and a school that was maybe a quarter the size of the one he had attended until four years ago. It was the oddest sensation when he had walked back here with the cop, his skin prickling with the need to run at the same time he realized he had nowhere to run to.

He'd avoided personal conversation with anyone until the cop yesterday. He had managed to avoid seeing anyone by literally hiding in the graveyard until the Christmas Eve worshippers left the Church with laughs, Christmas secrets, shouts, family, and everything he didn't have. His Christmases had certainly not been about

laughter and gifts. They had centered on what people thought. Dressed in a suit that was too tight, too short, too —just not right— seated next to his dad wearing his uniform, medals on his chest. He had been his parents' first child, the one who was academically so gifted, but athletically not quite up to his dad's standards. His dad would say things like he would be 'okay' if only he learned how to play football, or basketball, or anything really.

He was his father's great hope. His dad was an ex-special forces sergeant who wanted his son to follow in his footsteps and enter the service of his country. He never listened when Zach said he wanted to be a writer and would tell Zach and everyone else exactly what Zach was going to do with his life. That tendency was never more prevalent than at Christmas, when the family unit was shown off at their annual visit to church. *This is my son. He has plans to follow me into the army, and yes, we are so proud.*

He opened his eyes carefully. There was none of the usual disorientation of waking to sirens and other discordant noise, just the peace of a quiet house and the warmth of layers of blanket and sheet. He sat up carefully, his neck tight and his eyes scratchy with lack of sleep, wondering what he was supposed to do next, and how easily he could get away.

As he moved he realized that something was lying heavy on his feet, and he saw jeans, a shirt and a sweater, something red, and assumed they were for him. He was slightly unnerved that someone, Ben he guessed, had crept into his room without him waking. That was so this very side of wrong. He shouldn't be letting his guard down like that, and he scrambled up and out of bed to pull on the clothes left for him.

There were jeans that were long enough, shirts that were loose on him and —jeez— that there was one snugly, soft, and totally ugly Christmas-themed sweater. He opened the door carefully. The hallway stretched empty, and quickly he used the bathroom, taking advantage of the toothbrush they had given him and the soap and hot water. It was good to feel so clean. It had been a long time. He resolved to find somewhere to stay, a warm place, no more sleeping on the streets. He was going to find some kind of a hostel.

He went down the stairs. The house seemed so quiet for Christmas Day, and he wondered if everyone was at church. When Zach thought about that, though, he realized it seemed odd that the family would leave a total stranger alone in their home. Odd. Or trusting.

"Hi." Zach spun round, grabbing at the wall as his

legs tangled and he stumbled. "Sorry, dude," the voice added, and Zach blinked at the young woman who stood in front of him, trying to remember her name. Elsa? Ella? Ellie?

"It's okay," Zach said quietly, edging back until he leaned against the wall, wondering how it was he could be so nervous with this slip of a teenager in front of him.

"You found the clothes then?" Ellie smirked, indicating the red sweater with the soft fluffy snowman. Zach looked down at the mockery of a sweater he wore, wanting suddenly to defend it. "Ben has this really tall, freakishly tall, friend," she continued. "Well, when I say freakishly tall, I mean tall like you, not that I am saying you are freakish. Err..." Ellie's words subsided.

"S'okay," Zach reassured her quickly.

"You need coffee, or maybe cereal," she summarized and moved past him into the kitchen. She switched on the kettle before rummaging in cupboards for various cereals. "Ben likes this stuff," she said, dumping muesli-type cereal on the table with the carton of milk. "And this is what I like," she said, adding various brightly colored kids' boxes to the pile. Zach just nodded, shyly grabbing at the box of Lucky Charms and exchanging a quiet smile with the girl who shared his love of a morning

sugar high. She nodded back at him, turning to pile the cereals Zach didn't want into the cupboard, shutting the door before they all tumbled back out on her.

"I so hope it's Ben who opens this cupboard next, just to see his face as muesli tips out over him. It would be so cool." She slipped onto the chair opposite Zach, watching him as he ate. For the first time in weeks, he didn't feel odd that someone was staring at him.

Ben's mother, Donna, came in to the kitchen, a phone trapped between neck and shoulder, a large box in her hands and words pouring out of her mouth in a torrent of instructions. "It's the red box, not the green one." She emptied the contents of the box onto the table. "No— Jamie, no— okay, yes, and don't rush here. I know it's only a short drive... okay— no— the snow..." Zach half listened at the fond amusement in the cop's mom's voice, at the glint of exasperation in her eyes. Her other son was obviously useless at following instructions. "Have you written it down, Jamie?" Laughing, she gathered the contents of the box into piles, gifts and ribbons and bows, and then finished the call. "Morning, Zach, did you sleep alright?" Zach blinked at the rapid change of subject and rose from his seat, his Lucky Charms half eaten.

"Thank you, ma'am, yes, I did."

"Good. Sit, finish your breakfast, honey." She started rummaging in the box, pulling out smaller boxes and bags, paper, and glitter, and Zach didn't hesitate long before scooping more crunch into his mouth. He needed to stock up before he left. He really couldn't take advantage of this change in fortune for much longer. He needed to fill up on food, grab his stuff, say his thanks, and then go. Of his own accord before they told him to leave. Zach finally stood, slinking past her with a murmured *'thank you'*, climbing the stairs as if he had fire on his tail, and she just watched him leave.

The front door opened and shut, and Ben was stamping snow off his feet as Zach came back down the stairs with a bundle of clothes in his hands, his thin jacket pulled around his frame. He stopped, looking at Ben cautiously.

"Zach?" Donna asked carefully. "You can't leave, sweetheart." Her words were calm, but Zach reacted badly. There was a sudden spark of defiance in Zach. Defiance and fear.

"You... you can't make me stay," he whispered. Ben stood between him and the door.

"I can," Ben said simply, folding his arms. He didn't add anything about arresting Zach, but it was unspoken. He

looked menacing and authoritative until Donna smacked him upside the head.

"Benjamin Andrew Hamilton, we will not be making Zach stay. Zach is invited to stay for Christmas dinner, and he is free to go at any point."

"Christmas dinner?" Zach asked, in what he hoped was his least pathetically hopeful voice, standing in the hall with his life's possessions in his hands.

"Take your clothes and stuff back upstairs. Ben can sort you out a duffle when you leave. Then come back down." She clapped her hands. "And then presents." Zach's heart sank. *Great*. He knew there had to be payback, and now he knew what it was. He was going to be made to watch other people open presents. Presents wrapped with love. Not books based around the army, or schoolbooks, but fun presents, things he wished he had received at five, at ten, at fifteen, things he had realized would never be his. The front door opened again. Startled, Ben shifted away from his guard dog position.

Zach identified a pathway through, past Ben's mom, past Ben, past the man and woman and two small children in the doorway, and to the snow and freedom beyond. Frozen in that moment, he saw Ben looking directly at him, hazel eyes curious, worried but largely accepting. Zach

remembered Ben's hug. He made a decision, possibly the only decision he had ever really made for himself, and climbed back up the stairs to his room. He felt Ben's eyes on him the whole way up the stairs.

CHAPTER 5

Jamie went straight to the kitchen when he arrived, not ten minutes after the conversation with his mom. He was wary of the stranger in his mom and sister's house. His wife Beth was curious, and their two children, Daniel and Charlotte, simply loved the whole present thing and didn't really have an opinion. Jamie called Ben into the kitchen, Beth and Donna raising eyebrows.

"He's big enough to hurt both mom and Ellie," Jamie started. "I can't believe you let him in the house. What were you thinking?"

"Jamie—"

"Don't Jamie me."

"Jamie, seriously, I don't know why. There is something about him. I trust him. Jeez, it's Christmas, man. Season of goodwill and all that."

"Season of axe murderers in our mother's house," Jamie grumped back, worried and not afraid to show his brother what he thought.

"I wouldn't hurt anyone," Zach blurted out, standing in the doorway, empty mugs in his hands. It seemed he'd been sent out by Donna for refills. Jamie winced, and then moved quickly, crowding the teenager. Ben watched,

almost dispassionately, as Zach cowered in front of his five foot ten brother.

"Ben trusts you, fuck knows why," Jamie snapped out, grabbing Zach's arm and spilling coffee dregs onto the kitchen floor. He pushed back Zach's sleeve. "Did you check?" he asked over his shoulder.

Ben felt guilt sweep over him, quickly followed by self-disgust, knowing exactly what Jamie was looking for. Desperately he looked at Zach. The boy was trying to pull away from Jamie's grip, even as Jamie twisted his arm looking for track marks, scars, anything that indicated drug use.

"I'm not—" Zach started, his voice full of shock and embarrassment.

"Not what?" Jamie pushed for answers.

"I haven't taken drugs, I don't use drugs. I don't even smoke."

Jamie stepped back, suspicion still on his face, facing his brother.

"Did you research him?" Zach gazed at Ben, probably unaware of just how vulnerable he looked and how his eyes were suspiciously bright with tears. Ben felt guilty. Yes, he had checked out Zachary Weston from Richmond, Virginia. No, there were no missing persons'

reports filed. Yes, his family still lived there. Yes, he had managed to track down Zach's home school registration and SATs results for the last four years. All as Zach had said. He didn't tell any of that to Jamie, simply and quietly pleading with his older brother to back off and let him deal with it.

"Boys?" Donna trailed in after Zach, catching the tail end of the conversation, "Jamie, let Zach go. He is our guest, and as such, you should treat him with kindness. Now come back in, Daniel is desperate to open presents."

Jamie relaxed and moved away from Zach, following his mother out of the kitchen. Ben waited until it was just the two of them in the kitchen.

"Did you check me out?" Zach said softly. "Are they trying to find me?" He clearly only wanted one question answered.

Ben closed his eyes briefly and then shook his head. "I'm sorry, Zach, but not that I could see." Zach's face fell, his expression bleak. Ben hated what he'd had to say. Zach's family wasn't worried about him.

"Is my sister okay? Does anyone know?"

"Your sister? No, there's nothing filed about her either."

"There won't be; she's at home still. My dad... he

isn't interested in her."

Ben watched as Zach unconsciously raised his right hand to the cuts that had healed and twisted around his left eye, at the skin discoloration where bruises never seemed to heal. He couldn't be aware how much that small gesture gave away, probably so used to hiding every emotion for so very long that he thought no one could see through the walls.

"It's been a while now," Zach finally said. His voice was giving him away, a broken voice, with a sadness that was so damn obvious.

"I'm sorry, Zach," was all Ben could say, in pure cop speak. "I'm very sorry..."

Zach slipped into the living room at the back, trying to make his limbs curl into a space small enough that he wouldn't be noticed, just watching as people opened presents. He slipped off into a world of his own where he was people-watching and enjoying their expressions as they removed the wrapping on each gift. He had dug himself farther back when the small boy —Daniel, he remembered— gave him a parcel. Instantly, Zach was the center of attention. He wanted to tell the boy that he was

wrong, that Zach wouldn't have presents under this tree, but he gripped the package hard, turning over the label to see his name on it.

"For me?" He looked directly at Donna, who smiled encouragingly, and finally when the others turned to watch Daniel open a box to reveal a remote control car, he felt he could open his own. Somewhat bemused, he lifted out a sweater in a rather bright green with an elf embroidered on the front and winced as he realized it was what Ellie had called fugly. It was ridiculous that something so very, very, ugly could make him feel special, even when he knew it was a present originally meant for someone else.

He thought of what his sister was doing today. Did she hate him that he had gone? Did she realize he'd had no choice? He closed his eyes, picturing her face, swearing that when he turned eighteen and felt better, he was going straight back to get her.

All too soon the presents were done, each person dispersing to place gifts in their rooms, or in the case of the children, leaving them scattered all over the floor, this way and that, making it fun to try and get from one side of the room to the other. Everyone moved with the exception of Zach, who sat in his corner, with a small pile of gifts, the ugly sweater, socks, boxers emblazoned with a grinning

Santa, aftershave, and a couple of what he had been assured were recent bestsellers. Quite a big haul considering.

Zach sensed Ben hovering and looked up as the cop crouched down in front of him.

"I'm still on duty — have to check in for an hour. Wanna come with?" Zach glanced out at the snow still falling, and nodded, which led to a scramble to find him suitable footwear and a thick winter jacket, courtesy of Ben himself, until he was bundled up like a huge teddy bear, a fact that didn't escape Ellie's notice.

"So cute," she said, pulling him down by the hood and placing a smacking kiss on Zach's lips. He made a noise halfway between a squeak and a no, which just made Ellie smile. She pulled back and indicated the mistletoe hanging over his head. Zach just blinked, not exactly sure what to say, looking at Ben who didn't seem angry. Maybe he should make it clear, tell her in no uncertain terms that he was not only gay, but that both of her brothers were watching his every move.

"One word, little sis," Ben piped up as he opened the front door and stepped out into the snow, waiting for Zach to follow.

Ellie looked curious. "One word?" Zach scuffed across the floor, sliding past Ben, looking up into the steel

sky and the swirling snowflakes, mesmerized by their random movements.

"Gay," Ben replied and pulled the door closed, laughter dying on his lips as he looked at the man-child standing next to him. Did Zach even know? Did Zach have any idea how beautiful he looked right now? Ben couldn't stop staring at Zach's expression, which alternated between thoughtful and sad as he stared up at the snow, random flakes landing on his skin and melting against his tongue as he poked it out to taste the ice.

Images from last night came to Ben unbidden. He was still not entirely sure why he had hugged Zach. It had been as if he had had no choice. He was, however, certain that at this moment what he really wanted to do was kiss him.

Shaking his head free of the impulse, he pulled himself together. A cop could not have any kind of feelings, sexual or just plain emotional, for a clearly underage charity case. He started the short walk back to the station, which in reality was little more than a large house, manned by alternating shifts of only five people, wondering what Zach would think of it. For his part, Zach was mostly

quiet, commenting briefly on the snow, and on the gifts he had received but staying away from the whole *my family isn't looking for me* thing.

The only person in the station house was Mitchell, three months away from retirement and the man who, in effect, Ben was replacing.

"Hey, newbie," Mitchell smiled, and then looked past Ben at the tall boy behind him. "Maureen made me bring mince pies over; they're in the kitchen." Ben's stomach rumbled. Mitchell's wife made awesome mince pies.

"Tell Maureen I love her," Ben replied, returning the smile. "This is Zach. He's a friend of the family, staying with us." *Best to get that out of the way.* Mitchell didn't question that. He simply picked up his thick jacket and waved goodbye as he went back to his warm home and his wife's cooking, which accounted for most of his generous stomach.

Ben showed Zach the desk he shared with Mitchell, the kitchen where they sneaked a mince pie each, and the two rooms at the back with bars and locks. Ben described it as the jail, pointing out that the last time it was used had been 1999 when a group of kids from the local high school spiked the prom punch and needed to just calm the hell

down. Zach looked alternately amused and bemused and Ben realized Zach probably never had a prom or anything like it if he had missed the last four years of public schooling.

Which only left Ben checking for messages and emails. Since there were none, it was time to leave. As they neared the front door, Ben stopped Zach with a touch to his arm. "I'm sorry your parents are idiots," he offered, not entirely sure how to word it, watching carefully as Zach shrugged. "Maybe they weren't as bad as you thought?" Maybe they could redeem themselves when they realized what they lost?

Zach didn't know what to say. How could he explain? How could he even word it to make Ben understand that his father had literally changed the locks and disowned him, left him with just the money he had from his last birthday. How would Ben ever begin to comprehend the level of hatred in Zach's house? He stared blankly at the man. Maybe Ben was right; maybe he *was* over-exaggerating. Maybe, if he thought about it, there had been love, or affection, or anything apart from blind obedience, maybe, just maybe, they hadn't tried to beat his

feelings out of him.

Sighing, his head suddenly very clear, he turned his back to Ben. He removed his jacket, lifted his sweater and t-shirt, and exposed half his back, knowing what was there. He heard Ben's indrawn breath, the sudden intake of air that indicated shock, but he didn't drop the shirt, just let Ben look. He knew what Ben saw; he had seen it himself in mirrors — scars from the stick his father had used, crossing scars from the belt. Almost all healed, almost all—

Ben caught Zach's hand, pulling it so the clothes dropped back in place, and then using it to turn him around to face him. Zach wouldn't look him in the eyes, shame washing his skin red that Ben had seen the evidence of sin on his body. He startled suddenly when Ben simply placed a finger under his chin and encouraged him to look up. He couldn't do it, and he shut his eyes tight. He couldn't look at Ben, didn't want to see the disgust that he had let this happen, that he was marked for his evil.

"I could kill them for what they've done to you," Ben said softly.

Zach opened his eyes, confusion washing over him. Ben surely wouldn't kill, but what he saw in Ben's face was scary, really, really, damn scary. Zach tried to pull back, abruptly very uncomfortable with the intense emotion on

this cop's face. "You— you can't..." he said quickly, watching as Ben's face changed from intense to soft in the space of a single heartbeat.

"I know, but I want to hurt someone back."

Zach felt the wall behind him, and the radiator touching his legs, the warmth nice against the chill of the air, and he wanted to cry. Someone was looking at him with such naked support. Someone believed him. The moment was frozen, Ben moving slowly closer, until only inches separated them, and Zach could see Ben's eyes were actually a mix of stormy gray and sapphire blue, intriguing, stunningly beautiful. He wanted Ben to kiss him, desperately, as much as he needed his next breath.

Instead, Ben just pulled him in for another of his bear hugs, patting his back carefully and stepping away with a thoughtful look on his face.

"C'mon, let's go enjoy Christmas for a couple of hours."

Zach felt a mix of disappointment and fear, and it scared him how much he wanted to kiss Ben, and how much he didn't want to face the family for Christmas at all.

Sighing, he trailed after Ben, back to the unrealistically happy household, with its sparkle and fire and its uncanny ability to make him wish for things he

could never have.

CHAPTER 6

Zach noticeably didn't know where to start. He was faced with an array of bowls full to the brim with buttery carrots and fresh baby peas and platters with piles of turkey and bacon. Instead he sat back, waiting for others to enquire if he wanted the food, and then taking similar amounts to what they had until his plate had no plate showing and gravy was touching the edges. Ben was pleased to then see the teenager virtually inhale turkey. He was totally absorbed in his food, unaware that he was making appreciative noises each time he chewed a mouthful. It made Ben thoughtful to watch this young man with the sparkling eyes, not talking, or joining in the teasing at the table, but focusing intently on the food and just listening to the chaos around them with a small smile on his face.

Zachary Isaiah Weston, seventeen, school records at thirteen showed him as a grade A student, his records cutting dead in the November just before his fourteenth birthday. His mom was a homemaker; his dad was ex-army. Nothing out of the ordinary, nothing in their records showed any kind of evil that would drive a father to beat his son for his sexual preferences. He had a sister, younger,

in school still.

"To blue bananas." His mom's voice broke into his daydream, and he realized he had almost wandered his way through the entire dinner with his thoughts and worries. He raised his glass of non-alcoholic beer in toast, watching Zach lift his glass also. Maybe Zach needed to know what the toast was for, seeing as how he was looking totally clueless.

"Dad," Ben started, looking at his mom, wondering if even after four years it was still too difficult for her to hear. She nodded and lifted her glass gently to indicate he should carry on. "He passed on nearly four years ago, and he made this dessert once, and to this day we don't know how he managed it, but he turned the bananas blue, hence the toast."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Zach said immediately, his eyes going straight to Donna. "It must be hard."

"I'm not saying it isn't," she began, "but like Ben said, it has been four years..."

Zach didn't push for more, just lowered his eyes and concentrated again on the food on his plate, happy when the chattering around him started up again. He glanced up

under his long hair and met Ben's eyes, blushing furiously.

Ben was excused from cleaning up as he was still in his uniform, and Zach was refused entry into the kitchen on the grounds that he was clumsy and pathetic, still not that far from being unconscious on a bench and all. Zach didn't even argue that he had been asleep, not unconscious, and drifted back into the front room where Ben stood holding Jamie's eldest in his arms. Ella, he remembered she was called. He helped her reach the star on top of the tree, whispering to her and making her giggle as he tickled her under the arms whenever she tried to reach up. Jamie's son was lying on the floor playing with a handheld game of some sort, a PSP, Zach thought, hopelessly out of the loop with the home schooling and friends-blocking. He kneeled down next to him, feeling like he should be saying something.

"Hey, Daniel."

"Hi," Daniel replied, his tongue poking out between the gaps in his teeth as he concentrated hard on the screen.

"What's that?" Zach asked, not really aware of game-etiquette but nonetheless deciding his curiosity needed to be satisfied.

"Ben 10: Alien Force." Daniel didn't need to put the duh on the end. Zach could hear it in his head and,

disappointed at himself and his chosen social interaction, he slumped back against the sofa and decided to wait out the time until everyone else came back into the sitting room. He was surprised when Daniel stopped his game and relocated to sit next to him, his Christmas shirt all crinkly and smelling of detergent, his hair spiked, and his face an open book. Handing Zach the game, he frowned as Zach held it gingerly in his hands.

"Haven't you ever played on a PSP before?" he asked Zach, his voice lisping with the missing teeth, shaking his head when Zach said a simple no. "S'upside down," Daniel pointed out, watching as Zach turned it around in his hands, and then proceeding to point out the different controls. Controls seemingly too small for Zach's large, uncoordinated hand. Instructions such as *push here*, *pull there*, *tilt the PSP that way— no that way*, followed as Daniel took pity on the Christmas guest. Zach was pathetically grateful that this small boy was handing over his precious gift, and he tried his hardest, he really did, ridiculously happy with his score, until Daniel decimated it in the space of twenty seconds, sending a cheeky grin Zach's way.

Zach knew his upbringing had been unconventional, and he didn't just mean since he had been virtually

imprisoned in his own home, but before that. He was the first born child of one of the only families without a working TV, one of the only families that had absolutely nothing remotely resembling a game machine or a computer in their home. He had rolled with it, his height always giving him the advantage of not generally being picked on for what he didn't have in his life.

Still, he was made to try out for all the school teams — it was his dad's rule. Competition was the route to good health and happiness. That is, if you listened to Samuel Weston, it went alongside no television, no money, and fatigues instead of jeans. He shifted as he watched Daniel with the controls. Never let it be said he wasn't a fast learner, and he could see what was happening on the screen as Daniel moved each control.

"Beat that," Daniel said, handing back the PSP and smirking at his new high score. Zach took the gadget gingerly, put his fingers in the same position as Daniel had and pressed start, managing to multiply his last score by ten before it all became too fast. He could feel Daniel pressed into his side, chuckling like a little demon. He could sense Ben's eyes on him, and he sent him a quick shy smile even as his character nose-dived off of a cliff to be smashed to his apparent doom on the rocks below, or something

equally dramatic considering all the noises emanating from the handheld in his grasp.

The rest of the day was more of the same. Jamie and his wife and kids left at around ten, both kids droopy and tired in their parents' arms. When they had gone, the house seemed quieter. Ellie made her excuses; the current boyfriend of choice was on IM. Then Donna decided to retire with new bubble bath, a good book, and a glass of wine. Ben had disappeared a while earlier to check at the station, but everything was quiet, and he had arrived back just in time to wave goodbye to his brother and family. It was now just Zach and Ben sitting on the sofa in front of the fire. The night pulled in around them, and the only illumination was from the lights on the tree.

"I realized I don't know the name of your town," Zach said carefully, not wanting to open the whole *how the fuck did you get here then* debate, but needing to know what kind of town held families as impossibly perfect as the Hamilton family, or this other guy's family, the apparently really tall guy who had donated his clothes, where people gave presents and rooms to a boy like Zach.

"Hill Valley," Ben replied, with a grin.

"Hill Valley." Zach rolled the name on his tongue; it sounded strange. "Kinda sounds made up." Zach added the

afterthought before he even realized what he was saying, and then immediately regretted it. A person doesn't go around insulting his host's town name for God's sake.

Carefully he looked at Ben who, with his head laid back on the sofa, had an honest to goodness laugh on his lips. "It does." Ben sniggered. "I always said it should be called Flatville, 'cause we sure as hell don't have big hills round here." He kept chuckling every so often as Zach searched for another subject to talk about, but Ben beat him to it.

"What were you gonna do? That is, when you woke up Christmas Day, where were you gonna go?" Ben sounded curious, but not official, and Zach wasn't sure what to say.

Zach shrugged. What was he going to say? That he had kind of given up, that he had no money left? "Winchester," he finally offered. "I was heading north, thought maybe I could pick up work there."

"Winchester is a fine place," Ben said in response. "But you don't have to go to another city and find work, you know." Ben sounded thoughtful. "What about college?" Zach smiled softly into his hot chocolate. College was just pipe dream.

"I didn't even graduate, and I don't have the money

for college."

"You don't strike me as stupid, Zach. You could get your equivalency, get a degree, make a life for yourself." Pain speared Zach. Everything seemed so damn simple when Ben said it like that, and irrationally, he started to feel angry.

"We don't all have apple pie lives," Zach spat, not sad, but angry, hostile, and feeling trapped. He pushed himself to stand, stumbling slightly and sloshing hot liquid over his hand and onto the carpet. Ben stood just as fast, grabbing Zach's arm.

"Zach, sit down," Ben said in a calm voice, instantly gentling the passion Zach felt and encouraging him to sit back on the sofa. "There is nothing about our lives here that you could remotely call apple pie perfect. We may not have a lot of crime, but we have poverty in pockets like you have never seen. Yes, we have a town that pulls together to help each other out, but we have crops that fail, cattle that die, and stores that close. We don't have a big college; it's desperately under-funded, but we have community learning. If you took a step back, wait 'til after Christmas maybe and then approached them for a place? This town may not have a lot of material things, but what we do have is a place you could be safe, somewhere to grow, maybe go

to the college..."

Zach interrupted with a disbelieving snort. "Where in this would you see me living?"

"We'd find somewhere. You could work for your keep, live with me possibly. I have my own house, admittedly a small one, but it has two bedrooms. You could stay with me, stay here in Hill Valley." Ben sounded pathetically hopeful and entirely convinced he had an option Zach should entertain.

"What about money?" Zach snapped in return.

"It's a poor community generally, but some of the farms need laborers. There's at least one store looking for a clerk. I don't know, but we'd find somewhere." Ben was clearly on a roll.

"Why would you do that? You want me to be grateful? Maybe bend over for you, pay you back that way?" Zach's chest was tight with anger.

"No— god no." Ben finally managed to answer, shaking his head, and his face flushing scarlet. "I just have— I mean, no. Do you..."

"Ben—"

"Shit, I really didn't know how to word this, please. I'm a cop, I'm trained to help, and god knows... I mean, Zach, you need to stop running. You're eighteen in two

days. Make a stand, draw a line. Just stop."

Zach unconsciously drew his knees up on the sofa, wrapping hands around them, his usual pose of self-protection. "I can't think," he finally said. "I just can't think." His voice was broken. "Can we just leave this?"

Ben made a decision, flicking through the TV channels with the remote. "You ever seen *Die Hard*?" he asked. "It's starting in five minutes, you wanna watch?"

Zach had heard of *Die Hard*. Being in mainstream school until thirteen he had a feel for popular culture as much as any person who nobody actually talked to. "Yeah, I've not really seen many movies at all," he replied, almost shyly. At least that would stop him having to think. Ben fiddled with a control, the television showing the news, the main topic of conversation being the snow that had blanketed the town, which then segued into the start of the film. Ben settled back, his hand resting along the back of the sofa, and Zach shifted away a little, wincing at the pain in his back and hoping Ben didn't see. Ben was so damn warm, soft, welcoming, and supportive, and before he knew it, his head was resting on Ben's shoulder, his long legs relaxing and stretching out in front of him. Zach tried to settle to watch the film, deciding it was going to be nigh on impossible with Ben so close, and then in the space of ten

minutes, he was totally engrossed in what was happening on the screen.

"I have so many movies to introduce you to," Ben said enthusiastically as *Die Hard* came to an end.

CHAPTER 7

All too soon the movie was finished, and Ben realized it was actually the twenty-sixth now, Zach's last day of being seventeen. He turned his face to cuddle against him, loving the simple affection this hug was giving him. He knew he shouldn't notice but Zach smelled like Christmas, a warm mix of the different aftershaves and colognes that he had received as presents. Ben sighed as he turned off the TV, sliding even farther down and back, pulling Zach with him until they lay side by side on the sofa, no mean feat given Zach topped six foot and Ben wasn't far behind. It was really only possible because they clung tight to each other. They just lay there talking about the film, about college, about things Zach had only ever dreamed about before.

Zach smiled. That innocent smile married with the puppy dog eyes, so intriguing, so damn sexy. "Why do you make it so that everything I want in this world seems possible?" Zach asked softly, pressing his head against one of Ben's hands, half closing his eyes.

"Because when you turn eighteen, anything is possible, Zach, if you want it enough."

The twenty-sixth passed in a slow, caramel soft, warm lazy river kind of way. Ben didn't have to go on duty until six a.m. the next day and so, in best middle child tradition, was simply hanging around his momma's house with the intent to relax and enjoy his family.

Mark and Melanie came over just after lunch, the kids running off for Christmas cookies in the kitchen. The two of them sat with Ben and Zach in the front room. Mark had smirked when he saw Zach in this year's fugly sweater, and Melanie had poked him hard enough for him to whine. Zach was a little worried by the banter, but still smiled when Melanie mentioned Mark was lucky to have gotten away with not receiving the brilliantly green sweater for Christmas himself. After a while Mark left the room, Ben following, muttering something about beer. Zach wasn't really listening, but was suddenly aware he was on his own in the front room with this woman who looked at him as if he were a bug under a microscope.

"So," she began carefully, "I don't know if Ben mentioned it, but I'm a doctor."

"No, he didn't mention it. Only that your husband was a lawyer and was way tall."

She continued carefully, "You know, as a doctor, I

can be here if you need anything."

"Anything?" Zach was doubtful that she could supply anything.

"Anything medical."

"Oh," he responded, and then subsided into silence. Apparently there was no way Melanie was going to let it rest.

"Ben said he found you asleep on the church bench, in the snow. How are you feeling after that?"

Zach blinked. "Fine, warm. I feel warm now, and I don't have like a cold or anything..."

"Is there anything you want to talk to me about? Whatever you told me, you know it wouldn't go any further than us."

"About what exactly? I told you I feel fine."

"Ben said you have wounds on your back. Could I just check them out?"

Zach sat open mouthed. He had shown those to Ben in confidence, and for his new friend to betray that confidence made him want to curl in a corner and hide.

"No!" he spat out quickly, shuffling away.

"Zach, no, listen to me. Ben is an officer of the law, and at the end of the day, he has a duty of care... and I am the doctor assigned to your case."

"I have a case?"

"Underage runaway living on the street? Yes, you are a case, at least until tomorrow, and I just say again, if some of the wounds on your back are not healing properly, possibly a course of antibiotics would help. Or it may be that you will need to go to hospital, have them opened up and drained, possibly debrided."

Zach just stared. The pain in his back had been getting worse, not better, he admitted to himself. And she was a doctor —and she seemed nice— and her husband did give over his fugly sweaters. Despite years of family secrecy ingrained at the end of a belt, maybe today would be a good day to accept some help? He could always run if she tried to make him do something he didn't want to, or if Ben tried to make him stay when he didn't want to. Running was easy.

"They may come back in," he finally said, looking to the door nervously.

"They won't; not until I tell them it's okay." She crossed to the drapes at the window, ready to pull them if he said yes.

"All right," he finally said, standing and slipping off the sweater, listening to her pull the curtains, giving him privacy, and then unbuttoning his shirt and pulling his arms

through the sleeves until he stood in the front room in just a Cowboys T-shirt and his jeans. Turning away from her, he took a deep breath and begun to lift the tee, waiting for her to say something. She said nothing, only tracing some of the healing scars and examining some that hadn't healed yet. He knew that one particularly bad one trailed from the middle of his spine and down past the waistband of his jeans, and she asked carefully if he could drop his jeans off his hips, which he did with some hesitation. One of the open weeping wounds went across one cheek and finished in the center, angry, raw, raised, the skin pink and pinched around the edges. He had seen it in the mirror and felt it when it wept. It made his jeans and shirts pull and stick.

"Zach, one of the wounds here, it's not nice, so I need to treat that and then dose you with antibiotics. I think you will be okay with that. The skin has semi closed, but it has trapped infection."

"Uh huh." His voice was quiet, distressed. "There may be..." How was he going to explain?

"May be what?"

"Splinters. There may be splinters from the stick..." He shrugged. He wasn't an expert; he didn't know. Melanie didn't say a thing, in fact she was very quiet, and then he sensed her crossing to her bag, which he now realized was

a medical bag. When she turned back to him, he could see tears in her eyes, and it made him sad.

"It's okay," he said softly, reaching out to touch her arm. "It's happened before. I always get better eventually." He was startled as she raised her hand to touch his cheek, and he flinched away before he could catch himself. "Sorry," he said quickly, trying to make himself stand still as she traced the bruises and marks around his face.

"How long has it been, Zach?"

"Two weeks," he answered immediately.

"No, I meant since the last time you were beaten, on your face?"

Despair built in the pit of his stomach. How could he even start to explain that one? That it was daily, that it was more than he could take sometimes? That sometimes he cried, and that when he did cry, he just made it worse for himself? "A week, nearly two," he finally answered. "The day I left."

"Can I take some photos?" she asked cautiously.

"Why?"

"For evidence, Zach. Evidence against whoever did this to you."

"No." Zach was adamant. He just wanted to forget it all. It was only him it happened to. His dad didn't hit

Rebecca, and there was no point to it...

"Zach, as your doctor, I must point out that, days, weeks, maybe even months ahead, when the physical wounds have healed, you will want to face what happened to you. Having photos will help. As someone who wants to be your friend, please let me do this."

Zach was suspicious, his thoughts tangled up in never and maybe, and he tilted his head, narrowing his eyes in concentration.

"He won't do this to anyone else. He never hit Rebecca, my little sister, not ever." His words were defined and clear. It was what he believed, and he wouldn't be moved on it.

"Okay."

"She wasn't a disappointment to him." *Wasn't a faggot like her brother, weak, useless, unnatural.*

"What if that changed? What if she grows up and finds a boy from the wrong side of town? Or a girl, even? What if she becomes something your dad doesn't want in the family?"

Shit, he couldn't even contemplate that. She was much smaller than Zach, so tiny, and so very much younger, and innocent. She wouldn't last as long as Zach did, not physically or mentally. He wriggled

uncomfortably, a sudden need to be with her knifing at him, immediately dismissed by the memories of the fear he had brought to his house just by being gay. As long as he stayed away, she would be fine; he was convinced of that. He had to be.

Now, to open himself up to the hurt of accusing his father, what was that going to solve? He didn't know what to decide, standing, waiting, thinking.

"Okay," he finally said, turning his back to her. Then making the decision that it was all or nothing, he dropped his jeans past his hip bones and to mid-thigh, so she could get photos of all the scars. Marks that crossed and lined from neck to thigh and from throat to stomach, some faded to almost nothing, some raised and raw, all of them vicious-looking.

"Most of these will disappear with the right treatment," she murmured, taking the digital photos as quickly as she could. He saw her wince, felt sorry for her, thinking that it must be awful having to deal with the pain of other people and yet have to remain detached.

"Zach, could you lie down so I can dress your wounds?" Zach did as he was told, laying himself carefully on the sofa, as much as his long frame would allow, and bit his lip in concentration as her firm and knowing hands

began to gently explore the pain in his lower back. "I'm going to numb the area, have a look for debris. I'm going to have to open it up and drain it, remove the infected flesh and splinters. I would rather be doing this in hospital."

"No hospital," Zach responded instantly.

"Are you sure?"

"Don't worry, I'll be fine."

She used Donna's magnifying glass to check closely. "I should really be doing this at the surgery," she muttered, and Zach winced again as the needle scratched his skin.

"Can you tell me?" *Tell me what you are doing.*

"I'm cutting open the wound and draining any fluid there, then I will be using thin tweezers to pull out any slivers in your back," she offered carefully.

"Is there much?" He heard the camera click as she was obviously cataloguing each stage.

"Not enough to worry, Zach. I'm just going to apply some antibiotic and bandage the area."

She finished and helped him to stand and then waited as he pulled up jeans.

"Thank you," he said, unable to put into words all his gratitude for the care she had given him.

She nodded a *you're welcome*. "You're going be

sore a bit later when the local wears off. If you need them, take some acetaminophen. Are you allergic to anything? No? These antibiotics are sample packs, but they'll do the trick. Five hundred milligrams; four times a day." She handed him five cardboard sample packs and stood back. "I'll file the photos with the police department as a closed record, Zach. That doesn't mean the police won't see them, if there is a need." By police, Zach assumed she meant Ben, and he shuddered inwardly. Great.

"I understand. Thank you, Doctor."

"Melanie is fine. Now, let's clear this up and get the rest in here. It's Christmas, and since I can't drink when I am on duty, I am in serious need of thrashing you and the boys at Trivial Pursuit."

CHAPTER 8

Ben raised his eyebrows and looked at Mark. Together, Zach and Melanie, as a team, were wiping the floor with them. Zach seemed to know something about everything. The only questions he wasn't so hot on were about entertainment, but Melanie covered that area with ease. They had the six slices, and were sitting on the center waiting for the final question. With bent heads, Ben and Mark decided on geography; Ben smirking, Mark looking confident. Other than entertainment, geography was the subject in which Zach seemed most hesitant.

"What two countries do Tyroleans come from?"

Ben read from the card.

Zach smiled at Melanie who just grinned back. "Austria and Italy," they chorused, and then proceeded to whoop loudly. Zach winced at the movement involved in jumping off his seat. Ben stared at his and Mark's one slice, and then at the laughing Zach and then at Mark, his eyes narrowing.

"I demand a rematch," he said, and frowned when Melanie and Zach kept laughing, wondering why it was so damn funny.

"Your face," Zach wheezed, sliding back into his

chair, "we so own you!"

Ben grinned sheepishly, very aware that yes, with Melanie and Zach's combined brains, they really did own Mark and Ben.

"How about Mouse Trap instead?" Mark interrupted the laughing, looking a little hurt, "I can do that..."

* * * *

"Your friends are nice," Zach said softly into the semi-darkness of the hall as they waved Mark and Melanie away and into the snow. It was eleven-fifty. Ben was off duty officially from midnight, and Zach was ten minutes away from legal freedom. It felt like Christmas Eve all over again.

"Yeah, Mark is a good guy to have at your back."

"I am guessing you and Mark have been friends a long time?" Ben heard sadness in Zach's voice, and it made him wonder just how lonely the boy had been. He didn't want the minutes leading up to his eighteenth to be sad, so he set about lightening the tone.

"Friends since I was really small, and I mean since he was shorter than me, which, believe me, is a long time ago."

"I like Melanie. She looked at my back. She's a good doctor." Ben touched a hand to Zach's shoulder and squeezed gently.

"I know," was all he said. How could he even begin to say anything else when he had taken one look at Melanie's ashen face and guessed that what she had seen wasn't good? He had wanted to see the photos, but Melanie had made him promise not to look until he was back at his desk as a cop, and not as the friend Zach needed. For his part, Zach seemed to want to gloss over it all and instead changed the subject away from his injuries.

"They have kids as well?"

"Hmmm, just one, Annabelle. She is so gorgeous and my goddaughter."

"A goddaughter? They trusted you with that?" Zach said, tongue in cheek, causing Ben to fake-punch his arm with a muttered "*ass*".

Ben locked the door, tidied up the living room, arranged cushions, and washed up the mugs and glasses. He poured water in the coffee maker, filled the basket and then waited for it to brew. When he'd tidied up the coffee he'd spilled because of his nerves, he looked at the clock. 23:58. Zach had followed him in all of this, like a puppy waiting to be told to go to bed, all floppy blond hair and

earnest blue eyes. Finally Ben couldn't avoid it any further, watching as the clock moved to 23:59, aware of every breath he was taking.

He watched as Zach just stood in the doorway, still with the puppy eyes, and talking about something, about Mark and his brother both having children, about being good parents, something like that, and Ben was trying to listen. Really he was. When the clock showed 12:00, he drew Zach into his arms for a gentle hug.

"Happy birthday, Zach."

* * * *

The clock showed 01:34 when Zach finally climbed into bed, snuggling, really snuggling, under the thick covers, leaving the drapes open to the wintry night. It was snowing and cold, ice marking the glass with beautiful crystal trails. He was inside, he was warm, he didn't feel hungry and, most of all, he was free. Free to be him, free to be gay. He was eighteen, and he had the whole of the rest of his life in front of him.

If he had nagging doubts about Rebecca, about what was happening now that he had left, he tried not to focus on them. He didn't think for one minute his dad would hurt

her; she was his princess. Still, he needed to talk to someone tomorrow, someone to maybe contact her or do something, anything.

Ben would help.

* * * *

It was last minute, and as things like this often were, it was casual and fun and chaotic and loud and just damned perfect. Ben started the singing with *'Happy Birthday, Zach'*, smirking when Donna harmonized, and they ended up hugging Zach from both sides. Jamie still held back, but at least he had a half smile on his face. Mark and Melanie arrived, Annabelle in a dress that Zach proclaimed beautiful and with a present in her hands, Zach's very own copy of *Mouse Trap*. Donna had banned all boys from the kitchen, finally bringing in an iced cake with a red 18 written on it. It was difficult to find space for it after the pot roast she had made before, but somehow Zach managed to inhale a large portion.

"Hollow legs," he said, grinning, patting his flat stomach in answer to Melanie's incredulous look and licked the final icing off his fingers.

It was everything Zach had never had on a birthday,

and he was the first to admit it was a little overwhelming, telegraphing to Ben, without even realizing it, that he could do with a short break. He was relieved when Ben pulled him out into the kitchen.

"I want to lay it out on the table," Ben started, smiling as Zach glanced over at the kitchen table, frowning. "Not that table." He smirked. "I mean you. Being eighteen now, you have so many options open to you; home, your GED, college, a career."

Zach could tell Ben was eager to hand everything over, leaflets, GED forms, prospectuses and application forms where he would be unable to do little more than fill in his name and his age. He blinked steadily as Ben rambled on, something about college and equivalencies again, about funding, or not funding, or sponsorship, or something along those lines. He wasn't listening. All he could hear was buzzing in his head, and a sudden sick feeling in his stomach. He didn't want to choose from the list of things Ben was saying, He couldn't; he didn't have the capacity to make a choice. Nor did he have the qualifications for anything other than casual work and to make enough money to somehow keep a roof over his head. If he harbored dreams of one day being a writer, of learning about the classics, of talking to peers who maybe

wanted to hear his opinion, of even having friends... Well, they were all pipe dreams, just as being here in Hill Valley was clearly a delusion.

He guessed he should have been prepared for this. Any thoughts he had cherished of a relationship with the cop were founded on nothing more than imaginings. What would a cop with a degree want with a dropout who never even finished school?

Zach pressed his lips together stubbornly at the options. He had already told Ben he didn't have a choice, that college wasn't open to him.

"Listen to me." Ben stopped briefly, passing Zach the whole pile of papers. He frowned as they slipped through Zach's hands and onto the floor. Zach hadn't even tried to hold on to them. "It's true, I checked their website. UVA offers late students places on an equivalency, okay, and you could get adult funding. Well, some adult funding; the rest you'd need to work for. But, hell I worked for mine."

Zach looked up, his chest tightening with hurt. Didn't Ben realize that to throw this at him just wasn't fair? He needed to move to the city, get work, find somewhere to live, so he could get Rebecca away from home. He needed to focus on that, not on some up in the air possibility.

"Can we go and eat more cake?" he finally offered quietly, not really knowing where that was coming from. His eyes were unfocused, and tears threatened to well up, leaving his throat tight. Ben was frowning, the start of anger maybe? He couldn't tell, and he backed slowly to the door. Ben was a strong man, and strong men changed when anger hit them. He knew that; he only had to look at his dad. Zach didn't want to talk about it, none of it, but he also knew saying no to Ben was going to make it worse,

Zach didn't want to make Ben, his new friend, angry. He wanted to keep him as a friend, thought maybe he could, but it was all going wrong. He didn't wait for Ben to answer about the cake, just moved quickly out of the kitchen, evading the cop's hand even as Ben tried to stop him from leaving. Zach stumbled straight into the front room, drawing attention to himself, hating that, and cursing the hopes that built inside him only to be pushed back by his own lack of belief that anything could go right for him.

"Are you okay, Zach?" He didn't know who asked. He just needed to be out of here, and with wide eyes, he looked to the door. People stood there, blocking his way out, Melanie and Annabelle, watching him, seeing him for what he really was. He couldn't breathe. Ben walked out of the kitchen behind him, asking him something— something

he couldn't hear. He couldn't get out, and he took the only path open to him, up the stairs, to the room he had been given, closing the door behind him.

Everything that he had been through at his family's hands, everything he had heard or been told, every mark his father had laid on him, had never pressed him to feel trapped like this, and he pushed haphazardly at the window just to get air in his lungs.

It was Melanie who breached the door, pushing it open, just her, no one else, and she crossed to stand next to him at the window. She spoke carefully, quietly, gently touching his shoulder, talking nonsense, about the cake, about his birthday, Christmas, Annabelle, Mark, his height, until finally the panic inside him was turning into just shivering against the snowy cold. She pulled the window shut and gently guided him, without him even realizing it, to sit on the bed. She continued talked with a low soothing voice, and he tried hard to focus on her as she touched his face, gently tracing the bruises that marked his skin.

"What?"

"This will happen sometimes, Zach. It's okay, it will be okay. This is just your head not being able to process everything all at the same time."

"It's pathetic!" *I'm pathetic.* Zach's voice was thick

with tears, and he needed help, the simple words pleading for her to do something to help him.

"Oh, Zach," she replied sadly, "you aren't pathetic, far from it, sweetie. But it doesn't matter how much I say it, you are not going to believe me yet. I promise you one day you will..." She didn't say anything else. She was clearly waiting for Zach speak.

Embarrassment washed over him as he processed what had happened, and he bent his head and groaned. "Oh— my— God..." he finally pushed out with a low groan. "What happened?" He realized he sounded as if he had just woken up from a nightmare where he had no control over his thoughts and his actions.

"Just a panic attack, Zach. Nothing you can't handle."

Humiliation, embarrassment, acceptance and then finally guilt churned inside him.

"Shit... Ben," he finally managed to say, covering his face with his hands and letting out another deeply felt groan.

"Do you want to talk to me about it?"

"It... Ben... says I can... Shit."

Melanie smiled. "It's okay. That was more coherent than I thought you might be."

"Shit," was all Zach could offer in return.

"Zach, look at me," she said, and he raised his gaze to hers. "You now have two options. You can go back downstairs, where I promise you no one is thinking any less of you, and get the whole seeing them all face-to-face over and done with... Or you can wait until the morning to do it."

Zach was stricken; he didn't want to face them now. He was embarrassed and ashamed. He wanted to hide here, but if he left it for another eight hours, he knew he wouldn't sleep, and the shame he felt inside would just build and build until he could do nothing but run. He stood up, deciding he needed to be strong. So he preceded her down the stairs, trying to look as normal as possible.

Ben was waiting at the bottom, pacing in the hall. He stopped and gazed up at Zach, his face a mask of misery. Not anger, but real anguish.

"God, Zach, I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't think. I was just excited. I should have left everything alone 'til later. It was all too much. I really... I'm just... I'm sorry." He waited, chewing on his lower lip, his eyes wide with questions.

Zach stopped in front of him. "I'm sorry too. I'm sorry I'm not ready to listen yet." Ben closed his eyes,

stepping that one step forward that meant he could touch Zach, resting his hands on Zach's arms, his face tipped up to look into Zach's eyes.

"I know you aren't ready, and it's okay. We can talk when you are, doesn't matter if it's five hours, five days or five years."

Zach's eyes widened, five years? He nodded and rested his forehead against Ben's aware of suddenly how cold he was feeling, cold to the core. "I'm cold," he said simply, closing his eyes as Ben wrapped strong arms around his thin frame. He allowed himself to be guided to the sofa where Donna was sitting, watching the whole interaction between her son and the boy he had pulled from the snow. She reached out and held Zach's hand, not giving him the chance to look away or apologize or anything else he was considering.

"Apparently we should avoid playing against you in Trivial Pursuit, or so Ben says..."

CHAPTER 9

More by luck than judgment, Zach had scooped up the paperwork Ben had given him, along with the local paper and other assorted magazines, to tidy up for Donna.

This led to him sitting with a coffee in hand in the peace of the kitchen, thumbing through each form and prospectus. The course he wanted, creative writing, stared up at him from page eight of the prospectus. He thought it through and put a piece of paper to one side to make a list. Lists were good. They summarized clearly in his brain why he couldn't go to college; no money, no accommodations, no car, and no graduation.

However, he realized that as he wrote the negatives, he was also adding counter arguments providing possibilities that would allow him to go. It was those reasons that seemed to jump out at him. Funding? He researched funding; he could get some. Work? He could do stacking shelves to start with. As for his graduation, Ben was right. The example questions for the GED were such that he could answer them in his sleep. Home schooled he might be, dumb he wasn't.

Then Ben's offer... *Live here, or move in with me, I have a house with a spare room, I have a car I don't use,*

we can split the bills. The store needs a clerk. I can loan you whatever money you need. You can owe me if it makes you feel better...

Ben's words were added to the list, little BH's next to each point, like just the initials being there meant Ben would be able to help. He managed to navigate as much Internet as he was able. He remembered a very different version of Windows than the one in front of him, and Google seemed to throw up millions of hits for the words college and funding. Still, he managed it, picking up speed on the way.

He couldn't make any phone calls. For the most part, colleges were on intercession. Excitement at the possibilities was building inside him, chipping away at the bleak life he had known before. He had decisions to make. He really needed to know whether Ben was serious, and also whether he wanted anything else from him. Because Zach sure as hell wanted something from Ben.

* * * *

It was at the New Year's Eve family gathering that it all started to unravel. "So, we have this thing," Donna explained to Zach, "where we get to the end of the year and

all of us think about things that happened this year, and tell each other some of what we hope for next."

"I'll go first," Jamie said quickly, standing with his arms around his wife, resting his hands protectively on her stomach, with a look on his face that could only mean one thing. "I want to thank the power company for power cuts in October, and I want our baby to be born healthy this summer." The noise was deafening, everyone congratulating them, looking at dates, the excitement so infectious Zach found himself grinning.

He looked at Ben who just had the biggest smile on his face, ever the proud uncle. It had just started to die down when Mark took his go, but when it turned out he too was thanking the power company, Zach's grin became a permanent fixture.

When it came to Ben's turn, Zach looked at him expectantly, wondering what he would thank this year for, not surprised when he started talking about getting the position at the Hill Valley station. He listened to his family and friends laughing and was proud right alongside him. He was surprised when his name was mentioned as a high point of the year.

"...and then rescuing my very own Zach puppy from a snowy grave," Ben smiled at Zach, "and deciding to

keep him." He added the last bit very quietly.

"And for next year?" Zach asked softly, aware that the clock was nearing midnight, that in five minutes it would be next year.

"Well, that's easy, I want you to stay here, get your life sorted, be happy... and..." He hesitated and then stopped.

"And what?" Zach prompted, talking to Ben as if he was the only one in the room.

"And I want to be the one who gets to help you learn all the things you want to know."

Everyone was quiet, waiting on Zach's decision. Was he going to stay here in Hill Valley, maybe start a new life with a family that wanted him? He needed to see his sister, get some sense in him of what had happened in their home, maybe press charges, and see what he could do to get his sister away from their dad. So many things to think about and to do. But when it came down to it, when he was asked to state what he wanted right at this moment, he didn't wait long to answer.

"Yes," he said simply, directing his answer to Ben. "I want big things — to see my sister, get an education, write." He looked at Ben with deliberate concentration. "I'm going to need that help."

CHAPTER 10

New Year's Day passed quietly. Ben was back on duty and Zach spent a long time in his room. Jamie had come over to set up the new TV his mom had bought at the sales and made time to visit with Zach.

"Hey." He knocked on the door to his old room and stepped in without Zach saying anything. Zach scrambled to stand, his hands pushed into his pockets. He felt wary, nervous, and judged the gap between Jamie and the door if he needed to get past him.

"Hi," he finally offered carefully, still very aware that Jamie had said nothing else and was looking at him with a very odd expression on his face.

"You doing okay?" Well, that was an open-ended question if ever he'd heard one.

"Kind of." *Good answer.*

"You know where I am if you want to," he waved his hand expansively, "y'know, talk and stuff."

"Thank you." Zach really wasn't sure what he could talk to Jamie about, but at least he wasn't checking Zach's arms for scars and threatening to send him back to the church bench.

"Okay then." Jamie nodded and left the room,

pulling the door shut behind him.

Donna checked in on him as well. He gave the usual reply; that he was fine, that he was reading. In fact, he was hiding, and he was sure from her expression that she knew that. Still, she didn't call him on it, bringing lunch and drinks a few times and, in the main, leaving him alone.

He didn't really know exactly what was wrong until his thoughts turned to his sister and to his dad, and it was only then he ventured downstairs. The house was empty, leaving him alone to his own devices. He crossed to the phone, lifted it from the cradle, and listened to the dial tone. They wouldn't mind if he made one phone call, would they? Donna had said he should make himself at home when she dropped some clean clothes on the end of his bed. He could always try and pay them back. He did have three dollars or so in change that he had placed in a small pile on the bedside table.

He dialed the number from memory, not his home, but the number for his best friend from when he was fourteen, Matthew Givens. Matt's sister answered, but she didn't skip a beat when he identified who he was, simply shouting out for Matt, nearly deafening Zach in the process.

"Yo," Matthew said with a definite smile in his voice.

"Hey," Zach offered carefully. They hadn't actually seen each other for the four years Zach had been out of the school system, and he thought the conversation would be a difficult one.

"Zee, hey. Where you at? Long time no talk."

Zach's chest tightened. It was impossibly hard to hear that nickname, a fond memory of when Zach and Matt had been best friends at four. Zachary had been too much of a mouthful, and Matt would just use the single letter Z.

"Could you maybe call me back on this number?" Zach didn't want to push his luck in this house, and Matt phoning him back was the ideal solution.

"Yeah, give me five," Matt instantly said. When the receiver went dead, Zach replaced the handset on the base and waited as patiently as he could for it to ring. When it did, it startled him from a daydream, and when he answered, he knew he sounded breathless. He pushed back the panic rising in him. This was Matt, for God's sake; Matt who was the person who talked him down when he realized he was gay, Matt who had tried to contact him a hundred times after he had been pulled from school. Every time he had come to the door, he had been turned away. Zach knew; he had watched from the upstairs window. His dad was a forceful personality, and Matt was only thirteen.

What chance did he stand of forcing his way into the house? Especially when his dad moved the whole family thirty miles outside of the city, and well away from all those influences who had "made my son gay."

"Zee?"

"Thank you for phoning back, Matt."

"No biggie. It is so good to hear your voice, dude! How long has it been?"

"Four years, I guess," Zach couldn't believe he was even saying those words, four years of almost total isolation.

"I can't believe it's been that long. Shit."

"I'm away from home now."

"Thank fuck for that. Don't guess your dad ever calmed down with all that army stuff and anti-gay shit?"

"No. He never calmed down." Zach closed his eyes tight. Matt had been the first to know about the person Zach was and had listened to him talk for hours at a time. "Came to a head when I refused his latest rehab program and wouldn't complete papers to enlist."

"Shit."

"Look, I need a favor, Matt. I'm sorry I am asking you this, but I don't know who else I can talk to."

"Shoot," Matt said immediately.

"It's Rebecca."

"What about her?"

* * * *

Ben turned off his computer when his research began to lead him in circles. It seemed one Samuel Weston, husband to Ruth and father of Zachary Isaiah and Rebecca Mary, was someone who kept his nose clean. There was nothing in the records against him, not even any warnings. Somehow his brutal hold over his son had completely evaded the authorities. Frustrated, he grabbed the pages off the printer. They held as many details as he could track down, including the most recent address, which according to his calculations, was only sixty-five miles away. It seemed Zach hadn't gotten as far away as he had hoped. He traced the map with his fingers, assuming Zach had bussed from the town where he lived and into the city, then on to where his money had finally run out, Hill Valley.

Ben felt impotent, wanting there to be something official he could do. Tapping his fingers on his desk, he eyed his phone thoughtfully. Maybe just having a quiet word with the local PD would have an effect. He almost reached to make the call, only pulling his hand back when

he contemplated how that might go down and how much trouble he could cause for Rebecca, Zach's sister.

Rebecca Mary Weston, fourteen, was still at school as far as records showed, indicating that she obviously had not been taken out of circulation as Zach had been.

"You off now, newbie?" Mitchell's voice echoed in the empty room, and he dropped a pile of folders on the corner of their shared desk. Ben looked up at the clock, realizing he had gone way past his five o'clock finish. It wasn't the first time he'd worked late. Living on his own, he had no one to go home to, and his work was so varied he didn't really keep to his hours. It could be an escaped cow, or a broken down truck blocking the traffic lights in the main road. It didn't matter when it happened. As the newest officer he was the one who covered it.

"Can I just run something by you?" Mitchell was an indispensable source of knowledge and experience, and a lump formed in Ben's throat as he realized that after June thirtieth he would be taking the older officer's place on the small team. Who was he going to look to when Mitchell left? He may be a newbie, but Mitchell seemed to listen to him and take his thoughts into consideration, whereas the others, whilst steady officers, liked to make fun of the gay cop.

"Sure." He poured himself coffee and leaned against the end of the small desk, tilting his head to one side and waiting for Ben to start.

"It's about Zach, the guy who is staying at Mom's."

"Your friend?"

"Well, not exactly. I had a call to the church on Christmas Eve, and I found him on the bench. He's a throwaway."

"Go on." Mitchell didn't display any reaction to what Ben was saying, and finally he relaxed into telling the whole story while Mitchell listened, and every so often, nodded.

"If he's eighteen, then it isn't really a police matter," Mitchell started carefully, holding up a hand as Ben opened his mouth to interrupt. "However, I do know some cops who moved into the city. I could get them to ask around, see if we can get some kind of connection in the force to wherever this family is now."

"Zach is worried about his sister. If we can just get a check on them?"

"Zach is worried?" Ben knew what Mitchell was asking. He was clearly not hiding his own fears very well.

"I just have this gut feeling." Ben pulled out the photos from the folder with Zach's name on the side, and

placed them on the desk so that Mitchell could see. "The Doc took these." He didn't need to add any words as Mitchell rifled through the photos thoughtfully.

"He pressing charges?"

"He just wants to make sure his sister is okay, then I think he will make a decision."

Mitchell straightened with a stretch then refilled his mug. "Leave it with me for a couple of days, son. Go home, you've done your day now."

Ben didn't need to be told twice, scooping up the photos and papers and sliding the whole pile into the folder before handing it to Mitchell. "Thank you." It didn't seem enough to just say that when the more experienced officer had said he would help, but Ben knew Mitchell would balk at anything else.

He walked the short distance back to his own house, hesitating at the gate and leaning against the post. It was a small but sturdy two story house with a yard and a garage to one side. It was his, left to him by his nanna. She had given Jamie and Ellie an equal amount of money, but she knew the bricks and mortar would always go to Ben. He was the one who wanted roots in his hometown, who needed community. Jamie wanted the big city, Ellie wanted to work in New York —doing what, she hadn't decided—

but she had no real desire to stay in Hill Valley.

It was mortgage clear, entirely his, and he loved it. Despite spending an awful lot of time at his momma's house, he spent time at his own place working on the yard. He even had food stocked in his cupboards. Admittedly it was store cupboard ingredients with long shelf lives; pasta, rice, canned goods, but if pushed, he could probably make some kind of tomato pasta dish. It was just that his mom was such a good cook, and since Jamie had left home and Ellie was out a lot, it was nice for her to have her son at home.

He opened his front door, picked up the mail and then placed it in a haphazard pile on the hall table. Tonight he needed to be with his mom, and with Zach.

Zach was so far under his skin it felt way past wrong, and it wasn't just the worry from the cop's perspective. He had deliberately tried to distance himself a little. The amount of shit he had been through meant that, to a cop's brain, Zach should be off limits. Unfortunately inside his head were images from Christmas and Zach's birthday, and he really wasn't sure how much longer he was going to be able to stop himself from touching.

Decision made —hands off— he closed his front door and half jogged to his mom's house, hoping he hadn't

missed out on the cold cuts that inevitably made up the evening meal on New Year's Day. Zach had an appetite that even outdid Jamie, and it was seriously important to get to the food first. He passed Ellie on her way out to God knows where, and after a quick exchange of brother/sister abuse, he was finally inside the house, inhaling the scents of potatoes and fresh greens. He was just in time, slotting himself into his usual chair, aware it was only him and his mom at the table.

"Not too late then, Mom?" he asked, frowning.

"Where's Zach?" Unspoken were the words *has he run?*

"I called him a while ago, he hasn't come down yet. Ben, I'm worried about him, he's desperate to check on his sister."

"I'll go see," Ben offered carefully, the cop in him worried and the son in him pissed that Zach hadn't respected his mom enough to come to dinner. Taking the steps two at a time, he skidded to a halt outside his brother's old room, knocking once. Hearing nothing and using cop's privilege mixed in with a healthy dose of man-of-the-house, he opened the door wondering if he would find an empty room.

What he did find was Zach lying face down on the bed, white buds in his ears and his shoulders shaking. Ben

took a step closer, touching Zach on his shoulder. He stumbled back as Zach scrambled up with a startled shout, half falling off of the bed and ripping out the ear buds. He had clearly been crying, his eyes red rimmed and his face puffy, and in a sudden motion, he thrust the iPod and buds towards Ben.

"Jamie said I could borrow them." He sniffed, gesturing again when Ben didn't immediately take them.

"It's okay. It's dinner time if you want to..." Ben didn't know what to say. All he wanted to know was why Zach was crying and whether he could help.

Zach dropped the player to the bed and stood tall, surreptitiously wiping at his sore eyes and squaring his shoulders. "M'okay."

Ben touched his arm gently, and time froze. They had been avoiding each other, avoiding contact, so caught up in the drama of how Zach had arrived here and his worries about his sister. Touch had somehow seemed inappropriate. Ben cradled the younger man's face with both hands, using his thumbs to trace the tears on high cheekbones, tears glazing the startling blue of Zach's eyes.

"This is stupid, *I'm* stupid... crying over music."

"Is that what it is that has upset you?"

"Jamie loaned it to me, and..." His voice cracked. "I

don't know half of what is on there. I haven't heard this kind of music for so long, not enough to know it, and the half I do know, the older stuff, it just reminds me of missing home."

"Home?" Ben inhaled a deep breath, sudden confusion in him. "Do you want to go home, Zach?"

He blinked at Ben's question, his eyes widening in shock, and then he dipped his gaze, as much as he could with Ben holding him still.

"No, I don't want to, but I miss Rebecca, and I... worry."

"That isn't stupid," Ben started, wanting to reassure him, but Zach interrupted.

"I phoned a friend today." He spoke quickly, as if he wanted to get that admission out there.

"Who?" Ben prompted as Zach stopped talking and then refused to look him in the eye.

"I left three dollars by the phone," Zach said hurriedly. "I wanted to call my best friend to ask him to check in on her."

"Okay, did he say he would do that?"

"Just from a distance, so Dad can't tell. Maybe he could get a message to her. I'm eighteen, I could be her guardian, get her away." Zach looked pathetically hopeful,

and Ben knew it wasn't the right time to tell him of what he had done today — that he had cops checking his father out as well. It could wait. He encouraged Zach to look at him, focusing on too-bright eyes and long lashes spiked with tears. His gaze dropped to full lips, and he couldn't fight the urge to place a kiss on the younger man's mouth, pulling back just as quickly. Now wasn't the time to kiss Zach; now was the time to reassure him with words.

"We'll find her, make sure she is safe. Trust me."

He started to say more, but Zach's tongue darted out to taste the kiss Ben had left, and he lost track of the words.

"Dinner's waiting, Stretch," he said instead. They had almost reached the door when Zach stopped.

"Is there a reason you don't touch me? I want you to touch me," he said quietly. The words hovered there, damning Ben as much as questioning him.

"Zach, it's difficult." How the hell was he going to explain this one?

"Is it me? Did I do something wrong?"

"No." Ben was quick to reassure him, but how could he say *it's not you, it's me* without sounding like he was reading from the cliché book of young gay love?

"Is it because of my back?" Zach's words were dull and dripping with self-recrimination as he crossed his arms

across his chest.

"Jesus Christ," Ben swore bluntly. "Is that really what you think?" Carefully and calmly, he pushed the door shut until there was a safe amount of wood between him and his mom's bat-like hearing. Then he turned to Zach. He was looking too much like a whipped puppy to really pull off the *I don't care what you think* pose he was trying for.

"I don't know," he said, his eyes glassy again and his thin frame dwarfed in the fugly green sweater.

Ben leaned back against the closed door, tugging on the sweater until Zach was unbalanced and leaning into him.

"God help me, but I want you so bad," he breathed as he claimed a kiss. The touch of his lips to Zach's was soft, but he pressed the advantage when Zach pulled back slightly and opened his mouth to say something. Ben simply tilted his head to deepen the kiss, sliding one hand up to twist into Zach's hair, anchoring him for more. Zach was quick to push his hands up and under Ben's shirt, rough and quick and needy, taking part in the kiss with an eagerness that shocked Ben to the core. Breathing heavily, he pushed Zach back, avoiding his lips as Zach chased for the kiss.

"Don't stop—"

"I have to stop myself. Otherwise I'm going to push you down on that bed and just take what I want."

Zach finally eased away, utter confusion on his face. "Do it then. I'm saying yes."

"I know you are, but hell, Zach, I want to do this right, okay? I want to make it good for us, I want you to feel well, and I want us to be alone, not with my momma sitting downstairs. Does this make sense?"

"I do feel well," Zach protested quickly, clearly trying not to wince as Ben touched his bandaged back.

"Uh huh," was all he said about that, and Zach gazed at him with the start of a smile on his face. "I think this thing we have here could be very important to both of us." It was vitally important that Zach understand how much Ben had considered the next move, how many times he had caught himself as he reached for the younger man.

"I think so, too," God, Zach sounded so damned shy. It was impossible to stop himself, and he pulled him in for a close hug. Zach, for all his height, leaned into Ben, burying his face in the space between shoulder and ear. Ben felt a rush of need to make Zach understand. Ben intended on being there for him in all he had to do to get better.

"That panic attack was a sign that maybe there is shit in your head that needs sorting. Your back is still

healing, you still look so tired, and you are only eighteen."

"Okay," Zach answered sadly, his shoulders slumping, and Ben realized instantly the mistake he had made. Maybe he shouldn't have listed everything pertaining to Zach first.

"And as for me, I'm a cop. Not just that, but I'm a newbie cop, fresh out of training. You were a juvenile in my care, and I am not going to be seen to be taking advantage of the situation. I need to give you professional help first, find out what is happening in your home, and check on Rebecca." Zach blinked at him as he spoke, fear and worry in his eyes as he mentioned Rebecca. "Come to dinner now."

* * * *

The phone remained ominously silent for a good three days, and Zach wondered if Matt had actually done as he had asked. They had been as close as brothers, had shared everything, but now it had been so long and Zach had never been able to contact the other boy. He counted on Ben coming through, or Mitchell, and getting information that way.

So when the shit hit the fan, it came from two

directions. First, it was the phone. Matt demanded to talk to Zach, his voice thick with some unnamed emotion as he blurted out what he had seen.

"He hit her, right in front of me, because she remembered me and smiled at me! Fuck, Zach, what do I do?"

"I don't... I..." Shaking, Zach handed the phone directly to Ben, taking the stairs three at a time and grabbing the duffel that Donna had given him for his clothes. Ben's voice echoed up the stairs, talking calmly, then silence, then just two words. Just two. "She's dead?"

Zach reacted in shock, jumping back down the stairs, skidding to a halt in the hall. Ben was nodding at something on the other end of the phone and looked over at Zach with a stubborn look of determination on his face. Carefully he replaced the handset.

"Ben?" he asked quickly.

"I'm sorry," Ben said softly, and there was something in his eyes, a finality, a grief, and the cold glint of temper. Zach suddenly lost all the strength in his legs as he fell to his knees in the hall. What had happened? His sister was dead? He felt Ben try to lift him. Heard words, but they were just noise around him. He felt sick.

"Zach. Zach. Look at me." He felt Ben shake him.

"Rebecca?" He felt like his entire world was disintegrating around him.

"No. Zach. Look at me. Zach. She's fine. Zach. Zach."

"Fine?" He lifted his eyes to Ben's, seeing the concern there, and saw the truth he was speaking.

"The cops Mitchell sent to check responded to your friend Matt's call. She's okay. She's at the station with them. I'm sorry, Zach. It's your momma. I'm so very sorry."

CHAPTER 11

Zach stood in a suit, crisp-new, bought with money he had borrowed from Ben, just enough for the suit and some new shoes. It was his momma's funeral, and he felt he needed to be there. She had never really been that much of an influence in his life, fading to lavender and silence as the years had passed. She had never stopped his father. Not once did she argue for her son, defend him, or even say she loved him. She was frail and tiny, small boned and easily breakable.

She died so very easily, falling and smashing her head on the kitchen table, her neck twisting and snapping, as easily as a twig snapped underfoot. She fell because Zach's dad had taken a belt to his daughter and that had clearly been the one thing his mother couldn't tolerate. She had put herself between her husband and her child, taken the beating, and fallen to her death.

His sister was hugging him tight and weeping against his new suit and, for her sake, he was pleased his mom had finally found her backbone, but it wasn't enough to make him cry as they lowered the coffin into the gaping hole of her grave. Snow had fallen here as well, and that fascinated him. He had imagined the snow to just be in Hill

Valley, in that picturesque town where the impossible niceness resided. He didn't for one minute consider the beautiful blanket of white that covered the place he felt safest would ever deign to fall where his dad lived.

He pulled Rebecca closer. What she had seen the past few weeks was impossible for him to reconcile, so he had pushed it way back in his head.

Ben had wanted to talk, wanted to go to the funeral, but Zach had stopped him.

"It has to just be me and Rebecca," he had said with finality. To his credit, Ben hadn't argued, leaving Zach to organize and work his way through what needed to be done.

"I need your permission to submit the photos of your injuries to the police here." Ben asked just before the funeral as he straightened Zach's tie and pulled him in for a final hug.

"Will it help?"

"It's peanuts compared to first degree murder for your mom, but yeah, I think they should know it all."

"If that's what they need." It was neither here nor there that people see what had happened to him. All that mattered was that his dad was out of his life and out of his sister's life. He was going to be the best big brother it was

possible to be. At eighteen, he could be Rebecca's legal guardian; that much he was certain of.

The service finished, a stiff breeze whisked the snow into soft clouds around the grave and Rebecca put a single rose into the hole. Zach couldn't bring himself to go near it. Silently, the two walked away from the grave and the minister and the empty words of the one or two people who had attended the service.

What was he going to do next? The house was a rental in his father's name, and his momma's blood stained the floor. They were not going back there.

"What are we gonna do now?" Rebecca gazed up at him, her eyes trusting, looking to her big brother for guidance to deal with this.

"I'll sort it out," Zach said, confident. Because come hell or high water he would.

It seemed that being told he wasn't needed at the funeral didn't stop Ben from waiting at the edge of the cemetery, leaning back against his car, watching as they left the grave and walked towards the exit.

"All right?" he asked, likely more for something to say than actually asking the question, and standing away from the car. He brushed at the seat of his, no doubt, damp pants.

"Uh huh," was all Zach could summon up.

"Wanna go home now?" The words were so simple, and Zach looked directly into Ben's blue eyes, wanting to communicate what he was feeling. *I don't want to go back to dad's house. It isn't our home. I don't have a home, and Rebecca doesn't have a home.* He didn't get to say any of it because Ben continued talking.

"Mom said she's got pot roast cooking, and she's put the spare bed up in Ellie's room. As long as Rebecca doesn't mind sharing?"

Suddenly the weight in Zach's heart lifted and Rebecca pressed closed to his side. His sister didn't know Ben other than as a kind stranger, even though he hadn't really left Zach's side in three days. Still, she could grow to know him, and she would love him, and his mom, and his brother and sister, and the assorted extras that came along with the package. Ben and his mom wanted the Weston siblings to come to them.

He looked down at Rebecca's face. She still showed the same vacant confusion he had recognized in his own face after one of his father's attacks. How long had his dad been hitting her? How long had he not seen it? Was it just since he had been forced out of the house? They needed a sanctuary, a home. It was being offered to them on a plate.

A home and a family, and as he looked back at a clearly hopeful Ben, maybe also someone he could count on.

"Let's go home."

CHAPTER 12

July fourth was just the best day ever; a picnic on the playing fields and a fireworks display watched from the blanket with his new family. Ben was on duty, but he did manage to make it to see the fireworks with them. It was the night of their first real kiss, in that half time of dusk, as they waited for drinks at the booth and chatted about Rebecca, football, and everything else that came so easy between them.

It was a gentle kiss, and Zach simply leaned into it and then pulled away with a heated expectation rising in him. He touched his own lips with a single finger, touching where Ben had kissed and looked directly at him.

Zach wasn't stupid. He knew why Ben pulled back all the time. He had turned twenty five in May, and he had explained how six years was too much of a gap. Not only that, but a police officer didn't take advantage of someone who was a guest in his momma's home. Zach never argued the point, just stole hugs when he could, spent hours talking to Ben, and tonight Ben had given him a simple kiss. It was a start.

It didn't go any further, but he was content to lean back against Ben and watch the fireworks, and if his hand

slipped down to cover Ben's? Well, no one could actually see in the dark.

* * * *

Thanksgiving marked two milestones. The news came through that their father had been put away for a minimum of twenty-five years, having pled guilty to all charges — manslaughter, as far as his wife went, abuse of minors, and willful child neglect.

Then Rebecca had her first real boyfriend, a young guy from her school, all holey jeans and leather jacket, and Zach did his big brother thing. He was stern and tried to go for intimidating the boy, which worked fairly well as he had bulked up since his life had settled into routine. He very nearly had the physique to match his height. He spent long hours thinking about his dad and what had happened to his mom, wishing he could find just one ounce of affection for either of them. His mom's only redeeming quality was that she had put herself in the way to protect Rebecca. He had gotten to the point where he realized he felt nothing for either parent. That lack of feeling scared him enough to go into counseling. He didn't want to be numb, to miss out on life and love because of what he'd

endured.

Counseling helped. He had sessions on his own, then some with Rebecca, and even one with Ben holding his hand. He had passed his GED and was determined to make this year *the* year that he was able to apply to colleges.

If anything, his life was perfect, too perfect, and the insecure seventeen-year-old still inside him, the one that would always be inside him, had worries over what his place was in the world.

His second Christmas in Hill Valley was when everything started to fall into place. Christmas, Zach decided, was a time of memories —other years that people remembered, gifts that were laughed over— and this year he had something to remember. He laughed with Mark over the fugly sweaters, he smiled when he didn't hesitate to fill his plate with food, and he even managed to get close to Daniel's highest score on the PSP.

Rebecca's boyfriend was coming over later, and he had plans for that one, making sure his little sister was safe, but for the moment, he just sat. Ben had actually managed to get Christmas Day free, on the understanding that he was covering almost the entire week from the day after Christmas right through to New Year's, apart from the

twenty-seventh. Zach's birthday.

* * * *

Ben counted down the days between Christmas and Zach's birthday. They were filled with quite a bit of secret, and then not so secret, kissing, and a whole lot of touching. At midnight, as Zach turned nineteen, he made his intentions clear, holding Ben in a close embrace on the sofa, not one inch of space between them.

Talking turned to kissing, nothing heavy, just gentle searching kisses; Ben's hands buried in Zach's hair, pulling him until he was half lying on top of him, both hard and heavy against each other. The kissing continued and grew more heated, Ben rocking up against the younger man, and Zach mewled low in his throat at the motion. It took everything he had in him not to touch, restricting himself to kissing, just kissing. Hot, mind-blowing, tongue fucking, sweet tasting kissing, and Ben was so close to coming in his pants just from that and the pressure on his dick.

He knew he really needed to slow down if he was going to hold onto the moral high ground, be the better man, be the adult. Gently, he eased back, Zach chasing the kiss and almost whimpering at the loss of Ben's mouth and

tongue.

"We need to slow down, Zach." He held Zach's head steady with his hands still twisted in long blond hair. He saw so much need and want in the blue eyes that his heart twisted with the effort not to just drag his face back down and carry on with the kissing.

"I don't want to slow down," Zach murmured, attempting to connect for another kiss. Ben avoided the searching lips, focusing on tousled, touchable hair, wide eyes, and an expressive mouth. Gently, he pushed at Zach to get up until they both stood in front of the sofa, Ben trying to control his desire for the oh-so-fucking-young man in front of him as he studied him. He considered Zach's height, how he loomed over people, how it was that he now stood taller, and his face seemed less death-row thin and more model lean. How he used his arms and hands to gesture all the time. It was mesmerizing, and as the digital clock showed 12:00, Ben had no strength left in him to resist just having one more taste.

"Happy birthday, Zach," Ben murmured between gentle kisses. He slid his tongue over soft lips, encouraging the kiss to go deeper, searching for the unique taste of the man who pressed close to him. Their tongues tangled in a test for dominance, and Ben filed that away for a later date.

Zach may well be a virgin to all this, but his instincts hinted that he was potentially just as forceful as he was tall. If only he had the confidence and experience to back it up. Ben felt Zach's hands over him, around him, moving him to align them, slipping to rest on the zip of his fly, hesitating, waiting for the yes, waiting for the one movement that said this was okay, that this is what Ben wanted.

Ben made a noise low in his throat, a *yes*, a *more*, a *now*, and Zach started to pull at material, his hands desperate to touch.

"I've never..." Zach's voice was tentatively questioning, and Ben knew he had to be the one to set the rhythm.

He pulled back from the kisses, rolling his hips into Zach, moaning as Zach's hand pushed into his boxers and circled him, hesitant at first and then harder as Ben pushed up into the heated circle.

"Move your hand," Ben forced out. "Whatever you like, I'll like." It was the best advice that he could give, and the same that Andy Mackenzie had given him in his senior year at school. Zach listened, beginning a measure of movement that was a pull and a twist at the tip, his fingers sliding through the pre-cum that collected at the tip of Ben's dick, as much as he could in the confines of the

fabric. Ben keened low in his throat and began kissing again, tasting the innocence and the need in Zach.

The kisses were more enthusiasm than technique, a clumsy exchange of lips and tongue and the sliding of rough hands on his dick.

He moved his own hands to find Zach, pulling at the button fly. Fuck, this boy was certainly in proportion, and Ben touched as gently as he could, trying not to go as fast as he wanted to. It didn't work. They moved at a frantic pace, their only goal to get off as quickly as they could, pushing into hands, kissing and learning and finding each touch that produced sighs, moans, and muttered profanities. For Ben, it was finding the pulse at Zach's throat, feeling the flutter of it against his tongue, loving the noises Zach made in appreciation.

Ben whispered promises in Zach's ear, pledges of caring, of being there for Zach, of not letting him fall, and it was to these promises that Zach's orgasm tore through him. Ben's was not far behind, listening to Zach breathing heavily as he kissed the promises into Zach's heart. Ben pulled back, looking directly into Zach's eyes, only a thin sliver of brilliant sapphire around the black. He had no words left, nothing he could say.

He had lost it so quickly, like a virgin on prom

night, between one heartbeat and the next, his hands tangling in Zach's hair and his words of apology swallowed in kisses.

Ben tried to still his rapid breathing, even as he was still kissing the man in front of him. The taste of him was not enough. He wanted more, but slowly there was a growing calm as real life intruded and the silence of the front room broke through Ben's thoughts.

"You okay?" he asked quickly, wiping a thumb over kiss-wet lips that curved into a smile under his touch. There was an anxiety inside him. What if Zach was freaked out by all of this? What if he was taking advantage? Maybe this should never happen. "Zach?"

"Fuck," Zach said simply, "being nineteen is all kinds of awesome."

They spent a long time on the sofa, just touching and kissing, one a.m. becoming two a.m. and onto three, until finally Zach caught Ben yawning, called him old man, and laughing, pushed him up the stairs. They split at the top to go to their own rooms with a final kiss and a whispered happy birthday, and Zach was finally in his small room, a grin so wide it hurt spread across his face.

Tonight, today, now, this was possibly the best birthday he had ever had, and it all boiled down to one thing. Family. Not just Rebecca, not just his family, Ben's family, and this little slice of heaven that was Hill Valley. It might not be real. He could wake up tomorrow on a street corner in the city and the whole year could have all been a dream, but for now he wouldn't even let thoughts of the future drift into his sleep.

CHAPTER 13

"I don't want his money," Zach snapped, pacing the small family room off the kitchen, the air still scented with Donna's earlier cookie baking session. Mark, who was reviewing the guardianship papers and had pointed out that Zach's mother had left a small inheritance, sighed patiently.

"It isn't his money; it is your mom's money, and she had put it into trust for you and for Rebecca."

"Blood money," Zach muttered darkly, pushing himself up and away from the table. He was determined to just get on with signing the papers making him Rebecca's legal guardian. Mark watched him carefully, and the regard made him feel nervous, edgy.

"Being guardian to your kid sister is going to mean you have to make some hard decisions, Zach. Take this money," he lifted the statement and waved it dramatically, "for Rebecca's education."

"We'll give it to charity," Zach said instantly, folding his arms across his chest.

"That's the way a boy might think, Zach. You need to put everything to one side and act like a man in this."

Zach knew he looked stunned, felt the shock inside him at the cruel words. He *was* a man. He was nineteen,

twenty in a little over two months, and it had been nearly two years since he had been thrown out of his house. He had been a throwaway, and he had survived, had found somewhere safe for himself and for his sister. They hadn't needed money from anyone. He didn't earn much from the store, but it was enough when neither he or his sister had to pay to stay where they were.

"What the fuck?" he finally managed to push out, balling his hands into fists and taking a step closer to Mark. The other man stood, and while there was little difference in height, in build the difference was massive. Mark was strong, fit, and Zach felt small against him. Anger was only going to get him so far, and he visibly deflated even as his volunteer lawyer touched him gently on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Zach, that was out of order," Mark offered, and Zach saw him wince as he said it. He shook his head sadly.

"No, Mark, you're..." He didn't finish the sentence, merely picked up the pen and scrawled his signature on each set of papers, the guardianship documents and the trust fund transfer form. He glanced at Mark, who merely nodded in mute approval, and then with no words spoken, he left the room, pausing briefly in the hall, wondering what he should do now.

Rebecca was cooking with Donna. He could hear the sounds of laughter and pans rattling, both of them singing along to the various songs on the radio, and he smiled. It was nice to hear Rebecca laugh.

The clock in the hall showed it was nearing three, and the tension in him was building to the point where all he wanted to do was run. He knew Ben had been on late shift this week and that last night had been his final shift before a two-day break. The guy was probably asleep, but Zach needed him, needed something, needed to shout and rail and have someone settle him down.

He grabbed his jacket, the crinkle of the plastic bag inside reassuring, and pushed his feet into worn sneakers. In seconds, he was out of the front door, his legs taking him as fast as they could to the small house that Ben owned. He vaulted the gate, landing as gracefully as he could on the path, and jogged the short steps to the door, knocking it firmly.

It wasn't long before Ben answered, so he obviously hadn't been in bed at that moment, but clearly he had only just rolled out of it. His hair was mussed, his sweats hung loose on his hips, and his chest was bare. Silently, he moved to one side to let Zach in, and Zach didn't hesitate, brushing past the sleepy man with a muttered, "Hey."

"You okay?" It was an innocent question, and what Zach wanted to say was that everything was fine, but that he was more than a bit pissed that his lawyer, Ben's best friend, had cornered him into accepting his mom's money. He wanted Ben to tell him that he was a man, that he had made the right decisions until now. But he couldn't find the words, and realized he had ended up in the hallway of Ben's house with obviously nothing to say.

Ben frowned, reaching out to touch Zach, his frown deepening when Zach couldn't help himself. He moved back.

"Talk to me, Zach."

Time stood still. He thought that was a cliché, but it really did stop between one heartbeat and the next. He moved his hand to cover Ben's and then to Ben's face, tracing his jawbone.

"I've been doing research," he started, leaning closer and kissing Ben on the lips once, before moving back and reaching into his pocket. He suddenly felt so damn shy. How did people do this? He was nearly twenty, and he didn't freaking know how to ask for what he wanted. He dropped his hand from Ben's face and reached into the bag, grabbing a handful of stuff and lifting it out. Ben looked down, a flash of incredulous surprise wiping away the

frown.

"I have condoms," Zach thrust them at Ben, "different sizes, 'cause I didn't know, and two different lubes. One of them is heated, and they had flavored ones, but I wasn't sure what you liked, so I got two of the popular ones."

"Jesus, Zach." Zach dropped his gaze. Ben didn't sound angry, or amused, or even completely overcome with lust as he had hoped. Instead, he sounded more as if he had gone into shock, and suddenly Zach felt uncertain.

"I've done it wrong, haven't I?" he asked miserably. "I just wanted you to know that I was ready and that—"

Ben swallowed the words with a heated kiss, pushing Zach against the wall and then backing off, concern carved into his face.

"I'm so much older than you, Zach."

"No," Zach returned quickly, so quickly he stumbled over his words, his tongue darting out to taste the kiss that Ben had planted on him. "You aren't too old for me, I'm not too young for you, we're just right." A flush of excitement started to build in him at the hooded intense gaze he was receiving, and he was hard and uncomfortable in his form-fitting jeans in the space of seconds.

"Bedroom," Zach growled, grabbing Ben's free

hand and pulling him to the stairs.

Zach wanted to stop and kiss, but Ben wasn't stopping, leaping up the stairs and straight to the left off of the landing, towing Zach into his room. The bed was still disheveled from where he had slept. He started to strip, pulling the sweats from his hips. Zach just stood there, gaping. Seeing Ben naked for the first time was like every single fantasy coming true.

He was struck dumb, the supplies dropping on the bed where they clattered and fell in a disorganized pile. He hesitated, looking into Ben's clear eyes. They showed a healthy dose of lust.

He smiled, consciously trying to make it more of a grin, but knowing it probably came off as more lecherous than plain happy. He pulled his jacket off, his shirt, and his T-shirt. Then with careful deliberation, in case he tripped over himself, he toed off his sneakers and pulled off his socks. Unbuttoning his fly was the last hurdle, and he achieved it quickly and efficiently until the jeans were a pool of denim on the floor and he stood in nothing but his boxers, his erection embarrassingly obvious.

Ben only waited until that moment, and with a muffled groan, he took that single step that had him up close and personal, his hands resting on Zach's hips.

"You okay?" he asked softly, and Zach found himself smiling at the question. He was far from okay. He was so damn hard it was almost painful, and he just wanted to be told what to do. Research had given him the basics, Tab A into Slot B using Product C after ensuring Product D is firmly in place. The mechanics of it were simple. The prospect, however, of having an A that big anywhere near his B was mildly worrying.

He was starting to stress. He could feel himself tensing, knew it was the turn of a coin whether he bottled it and ran, or stayed and made love with this gorgeous man who was capable of teaching him so much. Ben took the decision away, moving one hand to curl into his hair and pull his head down for a kiss. Zach wasn't completely comfortable in his own skin at the best of times. He thought he was too tall and ungainly. That single kiss, though, was enough to make him feel wanted. Beautiful, inside and out.

The kiss deepened, Zach slanting his head until he could taste more of Ben, sucking on Ben's tongue and then sweeping his own across the roof of his lover's mouth. He couldn't get enough, shuffling closer to press himself against the shorter man, chasing the kiss as Ben backed off and pressed gently on his chest to move him towards the bed.

"More," Zach muttered as he pulled on Ben's hand.

"Uh huh," Ben agreed. One shove and Zach was half on the bed and half off, scooting up until his whole frame was supported. Ben climbed over him to draw him into a sloppy open-mouthed kiss.

"I've been looking at some websites," Zach half whispered, wincing as Ben looked at him with a curious gaze, "I'm not sure on how this all works..." He waved a hand between them, indicating sex.

"Uh huh." Ben went back to kissing and holding and stroking Zach's face, his left elbow supporting his weight, his right hand trailing a path from throat to temple, tracing a pattern on Zach's heated skin.

"So can you maybe show... guh," Ben's hand had moved lower to sketch around his hard nipple, pulling on the nub, twisting gently. Lightning traveled straight to Zach's dick, and he couldn't form a coherent sentence. He suddenly realized his own hands weren't moving, but gripping the bedclothes. He groaned into Ben's mouth as a very sure hand moved lower, twisting into the curls at the base of his dick.

"Your hands, Zach..." Ben pleaded. His words were short and harsh amongst the endless kissing.

It galvanized Zach into action, and in one smooth

move, he pulled Ben to lie flat on him, craving the weight pinning him down. Ben's hand was trapped between them, Ben's dick rubbing at his hip bone, thrusting hard against him, so close—a hand pulling, twisting, searching, teeth on his nipples, a bite, a suckle. It was the most erotic thing Zach had ever felt, Ben naked and writhing against him, and an orgasm was building in the base of his spine. *Crap*, he was gonna lose it too quickly. They needed to slow down.

"Please... I'm gonna... We've gotta..."

"I need to see you lose it."

"I can't, I'm gonna—"

"Come on."

Zach lost it, white heat radiating from his head to his toes. He arched up into Ben, hearing and feeling an answering release from Ben, a gasp, a groan, a sigh.

"I've wanted you so much. *Shit*. I couldn't stop. I'm sorry..." Ben was saying something, but Zach really wasn't listening. The intensity of the orgasm had rendered him incapable of conscious thought, and his cock was twitching against his stomach. His nipples ached from Ben using them to push him so damn high so damn fast. *Bliss*.

They finally separated when the cold and damp pushed its way through the neediness of contact and made them roll off the bed. Ben led Zach by the hand to the bathroom, turning back briefly just to check to see that he was okay.

He looked tired, but he also looked more relaxed and loose, and he seemed more than happy to let Ben pull him about. One-handed, Ben started the water running then encouraged his new lover into the shower, propping him up against the tile and lathering up his hands. He soaped Zach across the chest, over shoulders, around the neck, massaging his flat stomach with soothing gentling strokes. Zach had filled out on Mom's cooking. It was a good thing to see. Ben hadn't much liked looking at gaunt Zach. It reminded him too much of how close he had been to maybe never meeting his lover. He had fallen in love with skinny Zach, and now held softly-muscled Zack in his arms.

"Gorgeous," he said simply and locked his hands around Zach's back, pulling him close. He tilted his head and dived in for a heated open-mouthed kiss, and his hands slid down, resting at the base of Zach's spine, aligning them, both hard again. Ben groaned low in his throat, their tongues mingling, heated and insistent. There was a battle for taste and touch as Zach became more confident, hard

against hard — a fight for control. It excited him and scared him equally, and he pulled back to watch Zach arch his head back, his neck bared to Ben's teeth and lips, his groin rough against Ben's, pushing for friction.

A primal urge pushed from somewhere deep inside Ben. He wanted to mark that pale skin, to own this amazing man in his arms. He kissed Zach's open mouth, biting and sucking on his oh-so-fucking-gorgeous lips, trailing a damp path and sucking down his chin, pausing at the base of his throat. He tested the flutter of a rapid pulse, sucking a small mark into the taut skin. He knew where each of Zach's hands were. One was scrabbling at the slick tiles for purchase and the other gripping tight on Ben's upper arm. He knew that he was the only thing holding Zach up, and a shot of lust burned hot in Ben at what he had in him to hold this naked need in his trusted hands.

He lowered his hands again, resting them momentarily on Zach's thighs, then up and under his backside, twisting him tight against him. Hungry, searching lips lowered to nipples, and he was pulling and teasing and drawing whimpers and moans from a blissed out Zach.

"Ben, we need to get out—"

"No," he said firmly. He pushed Zach flush against the tiles, his knees bending as he traveled farther down,

kissing and biting at defined hip bones "So gorgeous, so hot, taste so good..." They were words with no meaning, interspersed with kisses and bites, Zach's hand falling from his arm and resting in Ben's short wet hair.

For his part, Ben could see Zach hard and flush against his stomach and he couldn't resist a touch of his tongue to him. His knees solid now on the floor of the shower Ben's heated touch and the press of his mouth on Zach's sex anchored the younger man.

"Ben," he whimpered.

"I want to..." He wasn't above begging, so close. He wanted it so much, wanted to taste what he had only touched before. Above him, Zach tried to speak, tried to push out words, but nothing made sense. He released a strangled moan as Ben kissed his way from base to tip, open-mouthed kisses, licking and sucking, closing his mouth over the tip and sliding down. Zach melted down against the tiles, a cry leaving his mouth, his hands twisting and gripping Ben's hair. Ben's name left him on gasping moans, a litany of prayer, asking for everything, unable to offer anything in return, incoherent and out of his head with pleasure.

Ben hollowed his cheeks, alternatively sucking and moving and releasing, only imagining what Zach was

feeling, sensing his body moving, feeling him unconsciously tipping his pelvis, thrusting deeper. Ben moved back slightly as his gag reflex kicked in. Next time he thought, in an image so erotic it took him to the edge, next time he was going to hold Zach's hips, hold him down so he couldn't move, hold him down on the bed with one hand, the other hand on his dick, pushing up as his lips traveled down, wringing every ounce of pleasure from his lover.

Zach stuttered above him, a warning, and Ben felt his lover's body tense, rising on his toes, trying to pull back, and he pulled off, Zach coming hot and hard against Ben's neck and onto his chest. It was singularly the hottest thing that had ever happened in Ben's life, and he was so fucking close, he stumbled to his feet, blood flowing to his legs, tingling with sensation. He grabbed at Zach's hands, pushing them up above his head, held still in his grip.

Zach was malleable and shaking in Ben's control, still tight against him. Ben pushed close, finding the groove of a hip, rutting against him, his lips dragging final breathless kisses, Zach whimpering into his mouth. Ben could feel how close he was, on that desperate edge, waiting to topple over. He moved back from Zach, and the younger man leaned forward to chase the kisses, eyes open

and wide and fixed on him, their heated breaths mingling, the water cooling his heated flesh.

"So fucking hot," Ben said fiercely.

He could see Zach trying to form words as, with a rush of white intensity, he finished, heat and fire in him as he slumped into Zach, releasing his hands and letting him hold him, gasping for breath in the afterglow.

"B—enn," was all Zach could get out, all he could force past swollen kissed lips.

"Bed," Ben replied, trying to push himself away from Zach, but not getting far.

"I can't move," Zach whined softly, biting down on Ben's neck and then worrying the small mark with his tongue. "You have to move for me."

Ben snorted, arching his neck as Zach continued a path of small bites and licks and sucks up his neck, pulling him in for a quick kiss. "Get your lazy ass to the bed. We aren't finished yet."

"Are you trying to kill me?" Zach asked, closing his eyes and leaning his head back against cool tile. Ben said nothing, simply wrapped a fluffy towel around his lover and bundled him back to the bedroom. Laughing softly, he guided the younger man to lie down.

"You will be the death of me," he told him. He

settled down next to Zach and pulled him in for a hug, before turning back to his cell, thumbing through his contacts and connecting to his mom's number.

"I have Zach here with me, Mom," he explained. He gave nothing else away, listening as his mom warned him that Zach seemed upset and that Mark had left looking unsettled and worried.

"He's fine, we're talking," he reassured her and ended the call with a "Don't worry, Mom, I'm not on until tomorrow. I'll keep him here tonight with me."

He dropped the cell on the cabinet and curled back around Zach, drawing him back so they were spooning, resting one hand on his lover's stomach, the other curled under his own pillow. He smiled when Zach's breathing evened out, and it became obvious the younger man was asleep. Ben's shift pattern was playing havoc with the quantity and quality of sleep he got at the moment. He'd not long been awake from a good six hours sleep, but lying here curled up with a sleeping Zach in his arms it was easy to fall asleep again.

* * * *

Zach surfaced from deep sleep a layer at a time,

consciousness, then awareness, then embarrassment, and only then complete mortification. He stiffened in Ben's embrace, feeling the other man spooned behind him. Shit. He had come over here and pretty much thrown himself at Ben, thrusting lube and condoms at him and demanding sex! How the hell was he going to face him? Carefully, he tried to extricate himself, pushing at Ben's hand where it lay across his stomach and wriggling to ease himself off the bed.

"Where are you going?" Ben growled softly, his hand moving gently to stroke a line from stomach to hip. Zach bit his lower lip glad he couldn't see Ben's face. He needed to apologize or something, then he clearly needed to find a new place for Rebecca and him, 'cause, shit, he had screwed this up.

"Bathroom," he stammered. He finally pulled free and nearly ran to the small room, closing the door behind him. He then realized he was as naked as the day he had been born and just as vulnerable. He delayed for as long as he could, pissing, washing his face, and brushing his teeth with a new toothbrush from the small cupboard over the sink. Finally, he had no choice but to return to the room in the vague hope that maybe Ben had gone downstairs. No such luck. With a towel held loosely in front of him, he

stood staring at the gorgeous man who had taken him so high the night before. The attractive, built, sexy naked man who was out of bed and standing no more than three feet from him.

"Get back into bed," Ben said, clearly not inviting argument. With a smile, he moved past Zach to use the bathroom himself. Zach couldn't move. Ben didn't sound angry, hurt, or mad, or any one of the million awful things that Zach thought he could be feeling. In fact, Ben had sounded almost indulgent, and he found himself unable to run. So he climbed back into the bed and snuggled under the soft covers. A casual glance at the alarm clock showed it was not much past six a.m., and it was ridiculous how wide awake he was, even this early.

Ben came back in the room, saying nothing, just climbing back under the covers and scooting closer to Zach.

"Mornin'," he said softly, nuzzling his lips under Zach's chin, and tracing a line to the base of his throat.

"Morning," Zach offered in response, hoping that the kissing was an indication that Ben was not freaked out. The other man trailed kisses along his jaw line and finally, thankfully, all toothpaste mint and tongue, started to show Zach the very best way to start a day.

At first, it was nothing more than kissing, lazy and undefined, no purpose to it other than to taste, and Zach started to relax under Ben. When the kisses became deeper and more urgent, it was a natural progression, and when Ben was sucking on his nipples, laving them with his tongue and scratching his teeth across them, it was heaven. He was seriously going to lose it now if Ben didn't stop, but it seemed that wasn't what Ben wanted as he drew back to speak.

"You regretting this?" he asked, and Zach knew he was slack jawed. Ben was asking him if he regretted last night? Wanted to know if he regretted what was singularly the most incredible experience of his life?

"Fuck, no," he answered quickly, and Ben, the bastard, just laughed, before rolling and snatching the supplies on the nightstand.

"You wanna?" he said, nipping and biting at Zach's neck, focusing on the pulse in his throat.

"Fuck, yes!"

Ben wanted to take this slow, but it was almost impossible when he had Zach squirming beneath him. He hunted for the taste of Zach's skin, stopping every so often

to suck small marks of possession, murmuring his appreciation as he pressed his arm across Zach's hips to hold him still.

He used way too much lube, overcompensation for the tension he could feel in his lover, his hot fingers sliding, stretching, twisting, finding and massaging the gland that would send Zach skywards.

Zach was demanding, moaning and pleading continuously for more. Stopping wasn't even an option, and Ben tried to slow it down, but he was so close to losing it himself. He swallowed him down, no finesse, no pause, all hot sucking and slick movement. Zach was fucking up into Ben's mouth then down onto his fingers in frantic bursts of movement, arching and moaning and coming in a violent convulsive burst of white hot heat, choking out Ben's name.

Ben pulled his fingers out, not even able to take a moment to watch the way Zach was writhing under him. With practiced ease, he rolled on a condom, pressed the head of his cock against the loosened muscle, holding Zach in such a way that he could look directly in his eyes. He wanted to see everything as Zach wrapped his legs around Ben's waist, and he inched his way in, pulling back, pushing in, until at last he rested inside.

Ben waited for a sign, any indication of the pain

Zach must be feeling, words to say he could move, sweat pooling at the base of his spine and his arms trembling with exertion. Zach took the decision away from him, pushing up, his eyes glassy, a whimper from his mouth, and Ben moved, leaning down to capture kisses and words and pleas as he set a rhythm to make them fly.

He edged, almost reaching the peak, so damn close, but he didn't want to come yet. He wanted to know if Zach could lose it again. Zach was hard and hot between them, nails digging into Ben's skin, marking him, pulling him impossibly deeper and closer. Ben had never seen anything so beautiful as this man laid out under him. He could hardly breathe.

He needed to put his hands on him, wrap himself around him, he needed touch. "Want to touch you," he said in a breath, and stopping the rhythm, he rested his weight on one elbow, the other hand slick with lube circling Zach. It was awkward and perfect at the same time, and he was jacking Zach as he buried himself impossibly deeper then pulled out until only the tip of him was inside the dark tight heat. Every pass of his dick inside Zach made his lover groan and arch his neck in ecstasy, creating an opening for Ben to suck a mark low on his throat, even as he slowed his movements.

"So... close... fuck..." He tried to get a sentence together, then came the warmth of Zach against him as Zach stiffened under him and shouted his release.

It was too much. He couldn't stop himself, couldn't hold it, and he bowed his head to touch his forehead to Zach's, his spine stiff, his breathing ragged as he shot hard inside him.

He stayed still momentarily. He had lots of words in his head, but none that he could think of sharing. He held the end of the condom and slowly pulled his still hard dick out. He slid it off and dropped it into the small trash can by the side of the bed, his breathing choppy and sweat slicking his skin. He rolled onto his back, one arm over his eyes, the other holding tight to the headboard above him, listening to Zach as he tried to settle his own breathing.

"Fuck," Ben stuttered, stare fixed firmly on the ceiling.

"Uh huh," was Zach's less than coherent response.

CHAPTER 14: THIS CHRISTMAS

Zach sat in the churchyard on his twentieth birthday. Not for long and not in the cold dressed only in thin jeans, a tee, and wrapped in a blanket. He sat sideways on the bench, one leg pulled up under him, looking at the church. He was making new memories —his jacket warm, his jeans new— and all that was really missing was Ben.

Ben whom he lived with, Ben whom he loved. He leaned on his folded arms along the back of the seat, focusing on the intricate detail of the old church, then closing his eyes and counting down the time until his boyfriend was here with him.

"You can't sleep here." A strong voice broke through his daydreams, and he turned to face the cop looming over him.

"Sorry, officer." He smirked, leaning back against the seat again and hooking a finger through the belt loop of Ben's jeans, causing him to stumble and catch himself with outstretched hands against the back of the bench.

"You push it, and I might just arrest you," Ben pointed out, raising his eyebrows in mock seriousness.

"Is that a promise?" Zach parried, a wide grin on his face. He tugged again until Ben stumbled to sit next to him.

"Hell, you used to be so damn innocent. Now you just love pulling me around." They hadn't pursued this emerging caveman complex Zach seemed to be fostering. Ben was still guiding them, Zach happy to go with the flow. Until recently, that was. He flexed a muscle in his arm and winked lewdly, pulling his lover that final inch until he could steal a kiss.

"You make it so damn easy, feeding me up and pushing me to the gym all the time." It was a standing joke. It was actually Donna who was feeding both men up, Ben working long hours and Zach filling spare time with every single bit of studying he could. They inevitably arrived at their house at different times to find offerings from Ben's mom and neither said no. As for the gym, Zach alternated running with gym work, his lanky frame getting firmer, muscular and God, did Ben enjoy that. It was half the reason Zach kept himself in shape and improved on what he had been.

Ben pulled back slightly. "Happy birthday," he murmured against Zach's lips, and Zach tilted his head to deepen the kiss, sucking loosely at Ben's tongue in a slow sexy mockery of the lovemaking they enjoyed, to the point of exhaustion at times. No words were spoken, but it was Zach who finally broke the kiss, gripping Ben's hand and

helping him to stand then starting the short walk home.

They strolled in silence for little more than ten minutes on the morning fresh streets, passing the town square where he had caught Rebecca, who lived with Donna, out past curfew with the boyfriend at Thanksgiving. He glanced up at the clock built into the small library where he did most of his studying. It showed the time as nine-thirty, and he realized how much that simple clock face guided his day.

Ben stopped at the small convenience store, waving at Mrs. Johnson and thanking her for the doughnut delivery to the station the day before. Then he led Zach towards their home. The drapes were open, and a small tree stood in the window. The lights weren't on as they tramped up the pathway. Zach was adamant they were switched off when they left the house.

Using his key to let them in, Ben was laughing as Zach pushed him against the hall wall as soon as the door shut. Zach paused for a moment, looking into Ben's eyes filled with the absolute certainty and trust of love. He wondered how he had ever gotten so lucky.

It had been two years since they had met on that freezing night. His dreams then consisted only of a warm room, Christmas lights, and a loving family, dreams that

had been so different from the stark reality he'd lived. Two years and three days ago, give or take an hour or so.

He now lived in a world of safety, happiness and love. With Ben beside him every step of the way, he couldn't wait to walk into the future.

The Beginning

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RJ Scott lives just outside London. She has been writing since age six, when she was made to stay in at lunchtime for an infraction involving cookies and was told to write a story. Two sides of A4 about a trapped princess later, a lover of writing was born. She loves reading anything from thrillers to sci-fi to horror; however, her first real love will always be the world of romance. Her goal is to write stories with a heart of romance, a troubled road to reach happiness, and more than a hint of happily ever after.

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Two Plus One