



MEN OF RIVERSIDE

FINDING ELLIOT

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A Total-E-Bound Publication



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Finding Elliot

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**Warning:** This book contains sexually explicit content, which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

**Men of Riverside**

**FINDING ELLIOT**

**Serena Yates**

*Dedication*

For those who never give up hope that luck, determination and love may bring separated lovers back together for the happy ending we all crave.

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Ritz-Carlton: The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company

T&R: Boston Tennis & Racquet Club

Oscar: The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

## Chapter One

### Riverside, Texas

*Tuesday January 1, 2008*

“Elliot!” David pushed one last time and shuddered as he came into the condom in short bursts. The relief was as explosive as it was short lived.

“What the fuck?”

The stranger’s voice brought David back to reality. Shit, this wasn’t Elliot, the man he still loved. This was some stranger he’d picked up at the Riverside New Year’s party. They’d had a good time, but now he couldn’t even remember the guy’s name. He closed his eyes for a moment. The situation was too embarrassing for words.

“I’m sorry.” David pulled out, dealt with the condom and donned his clothes as quickly as possible. Thank God it was mostly dark so he didn’t have to look the stranger in the eye. “I’m really, really sorry. I shouldn’t have agreed to this.”

“I’ll say!” The stranger switched on a bedside lamp, trying to cover himself with the sheet at the same time.

The light made David look up. The only similarities with Elliot were the man’s dark curly hair and his deep blue eyes. Nothing else about him looked right, and David couldn’t for the life of him explain why he’d gone with the guy. Trying to forget Elliot was as close to an answer as he could come. Considering he’d been doing that for years, without even a trace of success, only made the situation even more pathetic.

“I’m really sorry.” David cringed at his inability to say anything more sensible. He’d had his share of encounters in clubs, even the occasional visit to a stranger’s apartment, but he’d never actually said Elliot’s name when he was with another man.

“Look, I know this is only a one-night stand. But we did exchange names and I sort of expected you to at least remember that.” The stranger sat up and raked a hand through his short curls. “It’s not a real problem for me, but I think you need help. You’re still hung up on this Elliot guy.”

David nodded. He’d gotten the message loud and clear this time. He couldn’t say or do anything to make this situation better so he left the bedroom, grabbed his coat from the back of the sofa in the living room and hurried out.

What had he been thinking? He closed the door of the stranger’s apartment behind him, made his way down the stairs and got into his car. The new year had started only hours ago. It was still dark and he was still alone. He shook his head as he drove along the deserted streets of his hometown. At twenty-two he should have known better than to expect another one-night stand to be the solution to his problem, no matter how attractive the guy had seemed.

He was still hung up on Elliot, even five years after they’d been forcibly separated when Elliot’s parents had moved away from Riverside. He’d never heard from Elliot again and hated to admit how much that still hurt. He hit the steering wheel with an open hand and the pain was almost a relief. He wasn’t one to make New Year’s resolutions, but this was different. There wasn’t anything he could do on New Year’s Day, but as soon as it was over, he was going to get help.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, David stood in front of the office of Russiter Investigations, his woollen coat pulled tightly around himself. He hoped that his friend Peter would arrive soon so he could step inside the office building. The cold January air was crisp enough to make him shiver, even though there wasn't much wind.

"David Lear, what a surprise to see you here this bright and early." Peter's voice came from behind him. "Must be urgent or else you'd have come at a more civilised hour."

"You're right, it's urgent." David shook hands with his former high school classmate and college buddy. He watched him unlock the office door and switch on the lights before following him inside, carefully closing the outside door behind him. "You may not agree, but please hear me out. And don't laugh."

"That depends." Peter grinned as he led the way to his tiny office about halfway down the corridor with all his colleagues' offices. "Peter Adams, PI" was proudly displayed on the door. He switched on more lights and a coffee maker that sat on one of his filing cabinets. "There's a rule that states that I'm not allowed to laugh at clients—"

"You're making that up." David smiled and sat down in the visitor's chair, across from Peter's cluttered desk. "But, if you want me to become a paying client so you can't laugh at me, so be it."

Peter's eyes widened.

"I do know that you need more paying clients, you've told me often enough." David grinned. "This is your lucky morning because I'm here to ask you for help."

"My paid help?" Peter looked so hopeful it was almost funny.

David nodded and glanced at the now hissing coffeemaker.

"Okay, in that case you can have some coffee." Peter got up, filled two mugs with the steaming liquid and handed one to David. "But I'll only let you pay if this is a real case, hear me?"

"Oh, this is a real case all right." David sipped the scalding coffee and sighed in relief as the caffeine made its way to his brain. "It's been something that's been on my mind for a while and I've decided that I need closure once and for all."

"Oh shit, this is about Elliot, isn't it?" Peter sat forward and stared at him.

"How did you know?" *Not that it matters.*

"What, you don't think being your best friend all these years means I know what's going on with you? We may have never talked about it after the first few weeks, but I've noticed that you haven't attempted to have a relationship again." Peter shook his head but his eyes showed a deeper understanding that came from his own situation. Or so David guessed.

"All right, yes. I can't seem to forget Elliot and the wonderful time we had. Even though we were only fifteen when we met in high school, we really connected on more than one level." David rubbed his temples, trying to dispel the encroaching headache.

"I know." Peter's voice was soft, and his eyes mirrored David's pain. "I saw you with him. I watched you become friends, then more. I really hated that his parents reacted so violently just because they found you kissing each other. You never even had time to say goodbye before they left town, did you?"

"No, I didn't. Maybe that's why I just can't seem to put Elliot behind me." David sat back in his chair, trying to relax. He had to focus on the current problem. "I keep expecting other

men to affect me like he did but none of them has. I've come to the conclusion that I need to find out what happened to Elliot. I've got to have some kind of closure before I can move on."

"And that's where I come in, isn't it?" Peter slurped coffee in noisy little sips. "You do realise that there's not a whole lot I can do without having a real case, don't you? One that includes a formal report that I can base an invoice on, a briefing... you know what I mean?"

"No, I didn't know that. But I guess you just told me. So, how much *can* you do with what I gave you so far?" David finished his coffee and put the empty mug on Peter's desk. "Without breaking your PI code of ethics, that is."

"What do you want me to do?" Peter pulled a notepad from one of his desk drawers and dug out a pen from underneath the stacks of paper in front of him.

"I'd like you to find out where the Watkins family moved, where Elliot is today and what his current situation is." What David really wanted to know was why Elliot hadn't contacted him. Not that he expected Peter to find the answer to that question.

"I can probably get you that information." Peter looked up from his pad. "But what are you going to do with it?"

"I'm not sure. I guess it depends on what you find. I think I just want to know what happened, to get some sort of clarity." David shrugged.

He couldn't explain his feelings better, because he wasn't going to admit that what he really hoped for was to find a way of rekindling the friendship he'd shared with Elliot... if not more.

"Hey, I understand." Peter put his pad onto his desk and sat back in his chair. "I'll do everything I can because I know how important this is for you. It won't be too expensive, either."

"It doesn't really matter how much it costs. I can handle it, so don't worry about that." His salary as assistant sports coach of Riverside High wasn't huge, but he was paid enough to cover his simple apartment and the odd luxury here or there. Not that finding Elliot was a luxury. It had been bugging him for so long that it had become a necessity.

"I'll get you the information, don't worry." Peter looked reassuringly confident.

David was relieved to have finally put operation 'Finding Elliot' into motion.

\* \* \* \*

David was thoughtful on the short drive back to his apartment on the east side of town. Finally admitting that he needed to find out what had happened to Elliot and doing something about it felt right. He might not like what he found, and he was scared that Elliot might have moved on. But at least he'd know. Clearly, not knowing hadn't worked for him at all.

The next thing he needed to do was talk to his boss to let him know that he'd need some personal time. David was certain that Peter would be able to find out where Elliot was. He was also honest enough with himself to admit that he was going to go and see Elliot no matter what the situation was. He might or might not let Elliot know that he was there, but he needed to see the guy with his own eyes, even if it was only one last time. Closure wasn't going to happen any other way.

As soon as he made it to his living room he grabbed the phone and crashed on the couch. Greg Tully, the Riverside High sports coach who'd hired him right out of college, was nothing if not predictable. Even though the school was closed during winter break, Greg would most likely be in his office this early in the day, catching up with paperwork to ensure everything was ready for the next semester. It was a good place to call him and avoid disturbing his family time.

“Greg Tully.” His boss sounded surprised.

“Hi Greg, it’s David.” David paused, suddenly nervous. After all, he’d only worked for Greg for six months and he was already going to ask for some extra time off.

“Hey, David, good to hear from you.” Greg sounded as if he was in a good mood. The paperwork must be going well. “I hope this call doesn’t mean you’re in trouble or anything?”

“No, no trouble.” David laughed.

The man was more like a father to him than a boss. He’d helped David get his football scholarship after his parents had kicked him out of the house on his eighteenth birthday. Just over a month before graduation. If it hadn’t been for his friend Rick’s parents, who’d taken him into their home, and Greg helping him set up his future... David didn’t even want to think about what could have happened.

“So, if you’re not in trouble and you’re calling me during winter break, it must be a favour you’re wanting.” Greg’s smile came through loud and clear.

“Uhm, yes.” *How did he always know?* “Actually, it’s a huge favour but I’m desperate enough to ask anyway.”

“Go on.” Greg chuckled. “Let me have it.”

“Well, do you remember my friend Elliot?” David held his breath, not sure what sort of a reaction he’d get from Greg. They’d never talked about what had happened... had never needed to.

“Of course I remember Elliot. He was such a great kid.” Greg’s voice sobered. “I never told you, but I despise his parents for what they did.”

“Y-you do?” That was very encouraging.

“Yes, I do. You two were so obviously in love, it was cruel for them to just move away to separate you. Yes, it probably wasn’t clever of you to get caught kissing, but there were other ways to deal with it. Kids that age get into trouble like that all the time. There was no need for draconian measures.” Greg cleared his throat. “Sorry, got a little carried away there.”

“That’s all right.” God, it was more than all right.

David had never been sure what Greg’s position on gays was. Now he knew. He sagged back against the sofa with relief and closed his eyes for a moment.

“I know we’ve never discussed this, but I’ve got a big brother who’s gay, so I have no issues with your being the same.”

“O-okay.” David swallowed, trying to take it all in.

“So, now that we’ve got that out of the way, why don’t you tell me what you want?” Greg sounded amused.

“Right. Okay. It’s been really bothering me that I don’t know where Elliot went all those years ago and what’s happened to him and if he’s okay. So I’ve just asked my best friend Peter, who’s a private investigator, to track him down for me. I’ll have to go see him and make sure that he’s okay.” David forced his mouth shut. He was going into babbling mode.

“Finally.” Greg breathed a sigh of relief. “I’ve always thought you should go after him. The two of you were so close, you need to know what’s what.”

“Yes, I do. It took me this long to admit it, but it’s really important.” David took a deep breath. “So I want to ask you if I can have some time off.”

“Of course you can. We’ll just declare it family time. Don’t worry about it. How much time do you need?” Greg made it all sound so easy.

“I don’t know. I’m hoping a week will be enough, but I really have no idea what I’m facing.” David was relieved that Greg was so supportive.

“Okay, tell you what. I’ll put you in for two weeks, just to be sure. No matter what happens, once you find out the details you might need some extra time to come to grips with it. Just keep me posted when you can, okay?” Greg was already shuffling some papers, probably getting the forms or whatever lined up.

“Thank you so much, Greg. I really appreciate it.” One less problem to deal with. One of the smaller ones he’d faced, but still...

“Just make sure you do the right thing, okay?” Greg rang off.

Yeah, whatever that was going to be. At least David was off to a much better start than he’d dared imagine when he decided to go for it, just a little over twenty-four hours ago.

\* \* \* \*

### **Boston, Massachusetts**

*Friday January 4, 2008*

“I thought the client would like a print ad with some extra pep.” Elliot Watkins hung his head, waiting for the real storm to break loose.

His father’s initial reaction to the new advertising concept had been less than enthusiastic. Raised eyebrows, lots of head shaking and an increasingly red face were not good signs.

Elliot hated making his father angry. Not because he loved him. His father taking him away from Riverside had killed even the last vestiges of affection. It wasn’t because he wanted to be a good son, either. He’d given up on that long ago. Ever since he was a little boy, he’d never been able to make his father happy or proud, no matter what he’d tried. His father’s attitude had only gotten worse over the last five years since he’d found out Elliot was gay. It seemed to have increased the man’s determination to ‘make a real man’ out of Elliot in any way he could imagine. They’d had too many fights and disagreements to count. So why should this latest work project be any different?

“You couldn’t be more stupid if you tried, could you?” His father’s voice was low and controlled but experience said that only meant he was truly angry underneath the carefully maintained facade.

Elliot remained quiet, hoping against hope that would be enough for his father to back off. He knew he wasn’t very good at writing advertising copy—never had been and probably never would be—but his father ran an advertising agency, and he expected Elliot to take over one day. His father was determined to make Elliot follow in his footsteps and perform according to his standards.

“You knew that these people weren’t looking for humour. I mean, did you even consider their corporate image? It’s all about family values, none of this trendy nonsense you put into the print ad design.” His father sat down on the other side of the conference room table, a sure sign that it was going to be a prolonged session.

“But that’s exactly why I think they need a bit of a change. The brief said they wanted to appeal to younger audiences, so the campaign has to be trendier than what we’ve given them so far.” Elliot still didn’t look up. His father would see that as a challenge, and Elliot didn’t want to make things worse than they already were.

“Your job isn’t to think, Elliot, your job is to do what you’re told. When will you get that through that thick skull of yours? If you don’t listen, how the hell do you expect to learn how to run this business?” His father snorted. “I’m beginning to doubt you ever will. And where will



that leave the family legacy?"

Elliot didn't care about the family legacy. All that hoity-toity stuff his parents and sister were into—pretending to be a part of high society and being seen as important people—left him completely cold. He'd never been interested in any of his father's ambitions. Ever since his father had moved the family away from Riverside and the only boy Elliot had ever loved, he'd worried about it even less.

His father didn't care about Elliot's goals, either. He'd wanted to become an architect but did his father listen? All he cared about was Watkins & Hobart, the advertising agency he and his business partner, Mike, had founded almost thirty years ago. That company was his father's life, the confirmation of his status and his ticket to Boston's most important business associations and social clubs.

"Are you even listening to me?"

His father's rough voice brought Elliot back to his current predicament.

"I'm listening, Dad." Elliot sat up and tried to look attentive.

He hoped this would be over soon. He wanted to go home, even though the apartment his parents had picked for him was much too pretentious. Beacon Hill wasn't to his taste, but he'd had no choice about where to live. Everything was all about image for his parents. At least his home was his to do with what he wanted. He looked forward to closing the front door behind him so he could have a nice quiet evening reading a book. Maybe he'd listen to some music.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you! Or is that too much to ask?" His father's voice dripped with sarcasm. "You're going to fix this situation. I want you to work on this campaign, and keep working on it until you get it right. I don't care what it takes, but I'm going to make a businessman out of you one of these days. You've got to learn to deliver what the client expects. You have until Monday morning."

"Yes, Father." God, not another ultimatum.

No matter what he did, Elliot knew his father wouldn't be satisfied with his work. His sister Melinda would have been much better at this job. She even had the right degree, but she was married to a colossal asshole who lived in the last millennium and insisted that she stay at home. They didn't even have children! Why she put up with her antiquated husband's opinion and edicts Elliot would never understand.

Struggling with the print ad for the rest of the afternoon wasn't fun but at least it ended when he finally left the office. Since it was a Friday, he had the whole weekend ahead of him. His father may have expected him to work, but he wasn't going to do it. Not this time. He didn't stand a chance of coming up with something that his father would like no matter what he did, so he might as well enjoy his time off. He'd need to be as rested as possible to face another week of pure torture.

Once he was in his car he breathed a sigh of relief. Getting out of that office and his father's immediate presence was half the battle. As he left the company's parking garage he realised he was much too keyed up to go straight home. Excess energy buzzed inside him. Even though he was mentally exhausted, his body was ready for a serious workout.

Turning the car around at the next junction, he headed towards his fitness club. The T&R was the oldest athletic and social club in Boston, handpicked by his father as the only appropriate place for Elliot to be seen exercising. It wasn't his favourite place to go to the gym, but if it kept his father off his back, it was as good as any of the others around town.

He quickly found a parking spot and went inside. After he presented his member card, he went to the locker room. Not five minutes later, someone else entered. Elliot looked up. *Oh, shit.*

Sven. The blond Adonis had been sticking to Elliot's side like glue for the past five weeks, unwelcome as gum on his shoe.

"Hi, Elliot." The man's grin was wide.

"Hi, Sven." Elliot nodded briefly, wishing to give no encouragement. He had no idea why Sven was so friendly. The other spies his father had seen fit to send after him so they could report his activities had always remained in the background. Sven seemed to have his own agenda. Initially, after he'd appeared for the first time a few months ago, Elliot hadn't thought he was one of his father's men. But since Sven drove the same kind of unobtrusive dark blue sedan the other spies had, always seemed to be around when Elliot went to the gym and had occasionally followed him home, Elliot had no doubts.

"You want me to spot you?" Sven took off his street clothes, quickly changing into his gym outfit.

"Nah, it's okay, I'm just going to do cardio tonight." Elliot tied his laces, not looking up. It may have been impolite, but he didn't want Sven any closer to him than absolutely necessary.

"Okay." Sven walked up next to him as they entered the gym area. "Mind if I join you?"

Elliot shook his head, trying very hard not to roll his eyes. It seemed that there was no getting away from Sven today.

Once on the treadmill, he was able to shut his mind off for a while. Watching the news on the screen overhead kept him occupied. After he ran ten miles, he was physically exhausted enough to call it a night.

"Good workout?" Sven was apparently still with him.

"Sure." He used his small towel to wipe his face and neck.

"Want to have a drink?" Sven followed him into the locker room.

"Sorry, can't make it tonight." He pulled his duffel from the locker. *Can't the guy take a hint?*

"Maybe next time?" Sven started pulling off his clothes in clear preparation for a shower.

"Maybe." He shrugged.

That was it. Elliot was out of here. There was no way he was going to get naked in a shower and face more questions from Sven the spy. He put on his sweatpants and a sweatshirt, getting ready to leave. He could shower at home.

What the hell had his father been thinking when he hired this a-hole?

\* \* \* \*

He'd expected the evening to be quiet and relaxed. Instead, he was shocked to hear the doorbell just as he was ready to sit down for dinner.

He opened the door and took an involuntary step back.

"What, you're not happy to see me?" Patricia Hobart stood there with her usual haughty look on her face, her clothes immaculate and her bleached hair in some fancy style that involved lots of curls. The amount of makeup the woman was able to pile onto her face surprised him every time.

"You'd think you'd be able to remember a date with your fiancée." She pouted. "What's wrong with you anyway? You can't seem to remember anything we've agreed to do together and you're not even grateful when I pick up the slack. You could at least be happy to see me. I mean, I had to drive all the way over here just because you forgot to take me to dinner like we'd agreed. And you know how I detest driving during the rush hour. It's just so draining!"

"I'm sorry, Patricia." Elliot felt the need to apologise for forgetting their date although he wished she'd used the phone instead of coming to see him. This way it would be far harder to get rid of her.

"So, how are you going to make it up to me?" Patricia leant into him for a kiss on the mouth, all smiles.

He barely turned his head in time for it to hit his cheek instead. He couldn't stand the thought of this woman kissing him. Any woman for that matter, but he'd had to suppress his feelings to avoid his father's wrath.

"M-make it up to you?" What would she want him to do this time?

"Yes, make it up to me. What did you think?" She stormed into the apartment without giving him a further look. "You can't really believe that this is the way to treat your future wife. Not even you could be that stupid, could you? I mean, we both know you have no idea how to behave in polite society, but you *are* aware of the basics of how a relationship between two people works, aren't you? It's a two-way street. Making up for colossal mistakes like forgetting an important date with your fiancée does require some sort of compensation, right?"

"Of course I'll make it up to you." Elliot was so tired of being told what to do that he was tempted to drop everything and run away.

Except he'd tried that once, just after starting college. He'd decided he was old enough to stand on his own two feet, even if it meant washing dishes. His father had simply hired two musclemen to bring him back. He'd been formally grounded for six months and had been under guard ever since. Sven was just the latest, if somewhat odd, example of the close scrutiny Elliot constantly endured. He couldn't do anything without his father knowing about it, and since his father wanted him to get married to this woman, Elliot saw no way out. Not before he had access to the trust fund his grandfather had set up for him. But that was another three years from now. At this rate, he wasn't going to remain sane long enough to enjoy the money.

"Good, that means we're finally going to set a date for the wedding." Patricia's smile was triumphant as she sat down on his sofa, patting the space next to her in a clear gesture for him to join her.

"Wedding?" Elliot stubbornly remained standing.

How the hell had they gone from him making up for a missed date to setting a wedding date? That must be yet another example of the so-called female logic, which Elliot would never understand. He'd known it would come to this one day but he was still shocked that it had happened so soon. He'd hoped to be able to put off the dreaded event for much longer. Indefinitely, if at all possible.

His gut cramped and he broke into a cold sweat. Even his hands grew clammy. He hated Patricia with a vengeance. Not just because his father had picked her for him, but also because he truly couldn't stand her bossy demeanour. How was he expected to spend the rest of his life under her thumb?

"Yes, wedding." She looked at him as if he'd just crawled out from under a rock. "You know, the ceremony that follows an engagement?"

"Of course I know what a wedding is." He was close to losing his calm.

"So, what's your problem then? You're looking at me as though I'm asking the impossible." She crossed her legs and squinted at him. "You're not going to start talking about having to wait again, are you?"

"Well, it's not as if we have to wait, you're right, of course." He had to be careful what he said because she'd report everything back to his father. "But I do think that it might be wise to

give this a little more time. After all, we've only been engaged for a little over six months."

"That's one of the most stupid things you've ever said. Are you trying to be obtuse on purpose, just to annoy me? We know we're going to get married anyway, what's the point in waiting?" Patricia's eyes bored into his.

He finally had to look away.

"There's no problem. It's just that I'm really busy at work and would prefer to be a little more established before tying the knot." That sounded responsible, didn't it?

"Established? What do you mean, you need to get more established? This is our fathers' company we're talking about. It's not as if you're under probation or anything. You're going to be running the company at some point. What do you think—that they'll fire you? Don't be ridiculous!" She gave him a disdainful look.

One thing was certain: the woman wasn't going to back down easily this time. Determination was written all over her face. Her fisted hands spoke volumes.

How the hell was he going to get out of this one?

## **Chapter Two**

### **Riverside, Texas**

*Tuesday January 8, 2008*

"So, what have you found out?" David was finally back in Peter's office after almost a week of silence.

He couldn't wait to hear what his friend was going to say. Surely he had something of interest to report after this long. David had been very hard pressed to stay away and respect the time Peter needed to do a good job. There was nothing he could have contributed, but still. Once he'd made the decision to find out what had happened to Elliot, nothing seemed to move fast enough for him.

"Uhm, well, there's good news and there's bad news." Peter stared at the notes in front of him as if they were going to help him decide what to say.

"All right, give it to me. No particular order, I just want to know where Elliot is and what he's been up to." David was going to shake it out of Peter if needed. He'd waited long enough.

"When the Watkins family left Riverside, they moved back to Boston. Thomas Watkins, Elliot's father, apparently co-owns an advertising agency with someone called Mike Hobart. Turns out that Elliot's parents originally moved to Riverside so that Mrs. Watkins could be close to her very sick mother, who lived and recently died here. But the family's roots and future were always in Boston. Elliot finished high school there, went to Harvard to study marketing and is currently working for his father's company. Nominally, he's a copy writer but everyone expects him to take over the company once his father retires. That's what my sources said, at least." Peter sighed.

"There's more, isn't there?" David shivered with the cold dread that seemed to have frozen his heart.

Peter very rarely looked this serious. David guessed that something strange was going on, something even more strange than Elliot's failure to contact him for so long.

"Yes, I'm afraid there is." Peter closed the file containing his notes, placed it on the stack to his left, and looked up at David.

"Out with it." He didn't want to miss a word, and moved to the edge of his seat.

"It's been a long time since Elliot left here." Peter shifted in his seat.

"Ripped away from here, without any say, is closer to the truth. It wasn't like he wanted to leave." David was amazed at the white hot anger that rose inside him even after all this time. He'd thought that he was over the disappointment and the hurt, but in that moment he realised that nothing was further from the truth.

"You're right. He may not have wanted to leave originally, but it looks as if he's adapted and moved on. There's no easy way to say this, so I'm just going to say it. Elliot is engaged to Patricia Hobart." Peter crossed his arms and leant back in his seat.

The brief flash of pain in his eyes was gone so quickly that David suspected he'd imagined it. What had that been about?

"Engaged? Elliot is engaged? To a woman?" David had thought he couldn't get any angrier but this latest bit of information had done it. His Elliot who'd never shown interest in any girl and had sworn he was in love with David. And now Elliot was engaged to some woman?

"Yes, that's the information I have." Peter shrugged. "She's the business partner's daughter, so the two fathers have quite possibly set this up for business reasons. It doesn't necessarily mean that he loves her."

"Yeah, right." David was so hurt it was hard to speak.

The small kernel of hope for a renewed friendship had grown into more over the past week. Stupidly, he'd opened his heart to the idea that he might be able to rekindle more than friendship with Elliot. Letting all of his feelings surface again after having suppressed them for so long, only to have them crushed, was more painful than he'd expected. Elliot was engaged? How could he do this?

"What? You don't think it's possible that the engagement is the fathers' idea?" Peter was obviously ready to give Elliot the benefit of the doubt.

What good was blaming the fathers going to do? Elliot was still engaged, so he must have at least agreed with the idea.

"Of course I think that's possible. I just don't think it's very likely. That's not who Elliot is." David took a deep breath, focusing on the fact that people changed over time. "Or at least, it isn't who Elliot was. He wouldn't have participated in some business setup to include his personal life. He never really got along with his father, so he wouldn't do something this personally intrusive just to please a man he neither loved nor respected. No, it looks to me as though he's in love and has forgotten all about me. I mean, why didn't he contact me in all those years? There was nothing to stop him after he turned eighteen, was there? And yet, there was never a single letter or even a phone call."

"It's possible that he really loves her, I guess." Peter frowned. "My instinct still tells me that this has been arranged by the fathers rather than by Elliot and Patricia themselves. I mean, look at the facts of the situation. The fathers co-founded an advertising agency thirty years ago. Now they have a son and a daughter. They might just want to keep the company in family ownership."

"But that's a totally antiquated way of doing things." David couldn't believe it. More than that, he refused to believe it. That just wasn't the way things worked. "Nobody in this day

and age still thinks like that, do they?"

"I don't know, I guess there are people in high society, people with money, who still live in the past." Peter shook his head. "And the fact that Elliot never got in touch with you could be because his parents stopped him. From what I've seen, his father keeps him under pretty tight supervision in the business, so that probably extends to his personal life as well, especially where the past or any potential attempts to get back in touch with you are concerned."

"That stopped being a valid excuse once Elliot turned eighteen. He was free to do what he wanted then. I mean, look at me. My parents kicked me out when I turned eighteen and I had to make it on my own. Granted, I had a football scholarship to get me through college, but I still had to pay my own way. Surely he could have done the same?" David got angrier and angrier the longer he thought about this. If Elliot really loved him, he'd have made some sort of effort to get in touch.

"Just remember that not everyone is as strong as you are. And if Elliot's parents were determined to continue influencing his life they could have easily done that. Their money and position would have made it very easy. It doesn't mean that Elliot didn't want to talk to you." Peter tilted his head. "That's what's really bugging you, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is." David was surprised with the strength of his own reaction. "And I'm going to get to the bottom of this. If Elliot really forgot me, after saying he'd love me forever, I'm going to make him pay."

"Shit, that doesn't sound like you at all. What are you thinking?" Peter was staring straight at David as if trying to read his mind.

"I'm thinking that I'm going to use the personal time my boss has already given me. I need to go to Boston and find out what's been going on. I refuse to live with this level of uncertainty for another five years." David needed to do this and he was going to stick to it.

"Don't you think you're overreacting?" Peter raised his eyebrows. "I mean, you don't even know what happened to Elliot and why he's gotten engaged."

"No, I don't think I'm overreacting." David squashed the annoying little voice in his head that insisted that Peter might have a point. "I've suffered long enough."

"And you've already asked Greg for personal time? You really are serious about this." Peter still looked dubious.

"Yes, I am." David leant back in his seat. "I should have done something about it years ago, I realise that now. If Elliot isn't willing—"

"Or able." Peter narrowed his eyes.

"Okay, if he isn't willing or able to get in touch so we can figure out where we stand, then I need to be the one to do it." David sighed. "We were such close friends. Getting back that friendship is worth a lot of trouble. Never mind getting closure about what we meant to each other beyond that."

This was as much as he was going to say about his hopes for more than friendship with Elliot. He didn't want to look as stupid as he felt about still being in love with him.

He took a deep breath. They'd spent enough time talking about him and Elliot. He was clear on what needed to be done. Time to start the counter-offensive. "That reminds me. When are you going to stop being stubborn?"

"Me? Stubborn? What about?" Peter did his best to look innocent but there was a knowing suspicion in his eyes.

"Come on, you know what I mean." David smiled to make sure Peter wouldn't see his next words as an attack on his lack of initiative regarding his personal life. "Or should I say

‘whom I mean’?’

“You’re not going to start bringing up Adrian again, are you?” Peter looked tired, exhausted even, all of a sudden.

“Of course I am. You didn’t think I’d forgotten about it?” David watched his friend closely. He wanted to help, but not at the price of putting more stress on Peter than he was able to bear.

“No, I don’t guess I did. Can’t blame me for hoping for it, though.” Peter looked down at his cluttered desk.

“Look, I know you’re not really comfortable talking about it.” David sighed. “Hell, I wasn’t willing to discuss Elliot until about a week ago. But you’ve got to admit that it’s more than a little ironic that you’re finally helping me find my lost lover—”

“Adrian and I weren’t really lovers!”

The vehemence and pain behind those words made David wonder, but he wasn’t going to question Peter about that.

“That’s neither here nor there, and you know it.” David was going to make his friend see sense if at all possible. Having seen the light, so to speak, so recently himself, he was now determined to help Peter as well. “The fact is that you two were very close all the way through high school. And yet, you didn’t know why Adrian suddenly up and left right after the prom. None of us did. You were devastated, if I remember correctly.”

“Shit.” Peter put his elbows on his knees and buried his face in his hands.

“I don’t want to upset you.” David got up and stood next to Peter’s chair, gripping his shoulder to show his support. There was more going on here than met the eye, that was for damned sure.

“It’s not your fault.” Peter’s voice was gravelly.

“I know. But this is obviously hard for you.” David squeezed Peter’s shoulder before letting go. “Believe me, I know. But I also know from personal experience that doing something about it will make you feel a lot better.”

“No, it won’t.” Peter looked up with red-rimmed eyes. “Not in my case. You’ve got to believe me when I say that my situation is very different from yours. Even if there was something I could do about it, it wouldn’t make me feel any better at all.”

“But...” David saw real anger flash in Peter’s eyes.

“I know you mean well, David, but I’m asking you to leave it alone.” Peter’s gaze turned soft again. “Please, leave it be. Adrian left for a reason and even though I miss him like hell, every single day, I respect his wish not to be found. If he wanted me to know where he was he’d have let me know by now. If not me, he’d have contacted his family. He obviously doesn’t feel as strongly about me as I do about him.”

“Okay. I’ll leave it alone.” *For now.*

Apparently there was way more behind Adrian’s disappearance than David had realised. Once his own situation with Elliot was resolved, he was going to get back to this. Peter looked much too miserable to be left to his own devices.

\* \* \* \*

The trip to Boston on Wednesday morning had been uneventful. David had easily found an affordable hotel near the city centre where Elliot worked. None of them were booked out at this time of year, so he’d found a special offer and settled into the Central Boston Residence. It

was a well-renovated historic building with much more ambience than some of the more modern places he'd checked out over the Internet. And it was close to Boston Commons, so there was at least a bit of green not too far away. He already missed Riverside with its many parks and countryside nearby.

He knew from the information Peter had given him that 'running into' Elliot at his fitness club was his best option. It had a bar that was accessible to non-members, and apparently Elliot liked going for a drink there before making his way home. If Peter was right, and Elliot was under surveillance, meeting in public was the best option.

After spending the afternoon orienting himself, David grabbed some dinner and went to bed early, intending to get a good night's sleep. Instead he was still awake hours later.

He stared at the ceiling, wondering what would happen when he saw Elliot again. Would he look very different? Was he going to recognise David? Would he be happy? Shocked? Indifferent?

God, David wished it was over already. Anything was better than this uncertainty. He closed his eyes for the nth time. He needed to get some sleep. Finally tired enough to drift off, he imagined the meeting in the club's bar the way he wanted it to go.

In the dreamspace between wakefulness and sleep Elliot looked amazing. Deep blue eyes stared at David, bright with happiness. Elliot's black, curly hair was still long enough for David to bury his hands in. Elliot smiled, showing his dimples to best advantage. Then he opened his arms. Ignoring the other patrons of the bar, David stepped into his lover's embrace, and the world vanished around them as they kissed.

Feeling his lover's hard body against his, hearing the soft breaths and smelling his musky scent was beyond exciting. But being inside that safe circle of warmth and acceptance, even if it was just a dream was just as important. God, he had missed that so much.

Now that he finally was where he'd wanted to be for so long, David relaxed and was able to fall deeply asleep.

\* \* \* \*

### **Boston, Massachusetts**

*Thursday January 10, 2008*

On Thursday evening, Elliot walked into the elegant bar of the T&R, exhausted from his long workout. The week so far had not gone well, and he needed a break. The wood panelling and relatively low lighting always calmed him, as did the relaxing atmosphere and quiet efficiency of the staff.

He should really get something to eat to replenish his energy, but more than food, he wanted a drink before going home. Not only had Sven been after him again during his workout, but Patricia might very well be waiting for him at his apartment. He needed some peace and quiet before facing her wrath.

She hadn't been happy last Friday after he'd kept evading her attempts at setting a date for their wedding. He'd been successful—barely—but he'd paid the price. Her usual report to his father must have been less than favourable because his father had been on his case during the Sunday family lunch. His mother had attempted to keep the discussion on harmless topics, without any success. The open animosity had made the detested weekly gathering even worse than usual. He'd hardly slept that night.



Patricia's demeanour during the charity event they'd both attended on Monday had been even icier than usual. She'd said all the right things to make everyone believe they were very much in love. Any unsuspecting onlooker would have seen nothing unusual about their relationship. Whenever they were unobserved, though, she'd been cold and downright nasty. She was out to get him for not doing what she wanted.

He hadn't heard from her since, so an emotional hurricane was sure to break loose any time now. She'd never let him get away with ignoring her wishes. He was not looking forward to the confrontation and in urgent need of some liquid fortification.

He went straight to the bar and sat down on one of the leather-covered stools.

"The usual, Mr. Watkins?" The bartender smiled at him.

Elliot nodded, grateful for not needing to say more, and his colourful drink was served within minutes.

"Here you go, Mr. Watkins. Enjoy your Safe Sex." The bartender winked at him and turned towards his next customer, the man to Elliot's right.

"I like Safe Sex." The guy chuckled.

A shiver of recognition travelled down Elliot's spine. That voice...but it wasn't possible.

"I'll have one of those too, please." The man's voice shook slightly, as if he was trying to control his emotions.

The bartender nodded at his other customer and turned around to fix the drink. His movements were quick and efficient as he pulled the various juices from the fridge and started mixing them.

Elliot took a couple of minutes to work up enough courage to turn his head to see who was sitting next to him. When he did, he stopped breathing from the shock. He'd heard right. The man sitting next to him was David Lear, his first and only love. The man he had longed for, dreamt and fantasised about for five long years. He'd given up hope of ever seeing him again. But he'd never stopped loving him.

David was more grown-up than he remembered, but the deep brown eyes set in a rugged face with a square jaw, the spiky blond hair and the broad-shouldered body were the same. His long, well-muscled legs were encased in elegant dark slacks and he wore a light, brown turtleneck that made his golden skin glow.

His chest was wide and the muscles Elliot had loved to caress showed clearly through the top's relatively thin fabric. David was in excellent shape, just like when he'd been their high school's quarterback. Elliot took a deep breath and the scent of spicy cologne mixed with David's natural musk hit his senses. Dizzy, he almost fell into David's arms. This was what he'd missed, that overpowering sense of strength and confidence that was so typical of David.

Just in time to avoid embarrassing himself completely he pulled back. He'd seen Sven leave the club earlier, but he never knew who else was watching and he couldn't afford to let anyone report this back to his father. David didn't deserve to have his life destroyed as well. And there was no doubt in Elliot's mind that, if reminded, his father wouldn't rest until David had been punished for making Elliot gay, as the stupid man had put it. Elliot was going to do whatever it took to avoid his father going after David.

"Elliot? Are you okay?" David's eyes had been curious at first but his gaze had now turned worried.

The familiar warmth made Elliot feel right at home. How he'd missed this.

"David? My God, is it really you?" Elliot could only pray that this wasn't another dream. He'd had them often enough, usually waking up with tears in his eyes as he realised they

weren't real. Even if nothing could ever come of it, just seeing David again made him feel warm inside where he'd been so cold for so long. Even though this could never be the reunion he'd dreamt of, maybe they could get some sort of closure, which would enable him to move on.

"Yes, Elliot, it's really me. Surprised?" There was a sudden hard glint in David's eyes.

"Yes, I am. I mean, after all these years..." He took a deep breath to try to calm down.

With his father still ruling his life there was no point in telling David how much Elliot had wanted to see him again. How he'd tried to get away and been reined back in unmercifully. The fear of that happening again, and the possible punishment that would go with it, had paralysed him. But the pain of sitting right next to David and not being able to touch him was almost more than he could bear.

"What? You didn't think I could find you? Or maybe you didn't want me to find you?" David's mouth had turned into a straight line, his lips thin as he pressed them together.

"Of course I thought you could find me. I just assumed you wouldn't want to after I left without even saying goodbye." Elliot had a hard time keeping back his tears.

He hadn't imagined their reunion to be like this, so hostile and full of accusations. He had stupidly dreamt of them falling back into each other's arms as if nothing had happened. He had longed to feel David's arms around him again, protecting him, making him feel safe and wanted. The reality was more than disappointing.

Not that he could blame David for his animosity. After all, he didn't know how closely Elliot had been watched and how impossible it had been for him to initiate any sort of contact without fearing for David's safety as well as his own.

"Why wouldn't I want to? It was more difficult for me to find you than it would have been the other way around, and at first I was just as powerless as you were. Our parents were in charge of our lives, after all. But as the years passed, and I realised you weren't going to get in touch with me, I admit that disappointment took over. Now, at the very least I think you owe me an explanation for not contacting me. I mean, once you turned eighteen, your parents couldn't tell you what to do anymore, right? And you knew where to find me, didn't you?" For a few brief seconds David's eyes showed the pain he must be feeling.

"I did want to contact you. I even tried once. But unfortunately my parents kept interfering in my life and it was impossible for me to get in touch without the risk of being found out." Saying this aloud for the first time, Elliot realised how pathetic it sounded. Shit, it made him look like a coward. Worse, it made him realise that he actually *was* a coward.

"I can't believe you just said that." David snorted and shook his head. "Do you think my parents were happy that their youngest son was gay? Do you have any idea what sort of hell they made my life until I turned eighteen and they figured that was old enough to kick me out of the house? But once I was on my own, I was able to build a life for myself. It wasn't easy, but I did it. I'd hoped you'd have done the same, but I can see that I was mistaken."

"I'm sorry." Elliot had the hardest time keeping his face in a neutral expression. Nobody here could know what was going on between the two of them, or how deeply he was affected.

"My father is a lot more vindictive than yours. He's determined to make me his successor as CEO of the agency he co-owns and he's done everything he can to keep me under his control."

"Is that really what happened, Elliot?" David looked lost for a moment. "Is that all you're going to tell me after all this time? That it's your father's fault?"

"Well, yes." Elliot wished it was different, but the sad truth was that he'd let his father take over his life.

"Why do you let him tell you what to do?" David's eyes burned with curiosity. "Even

now, when you're twenty-two and should be your own man? I just need to know, because I don't understand that at all. It's killing me that you've been unable to resist his influence."

"I tried." Elliot closed his eyes for a moment. He tore them open again, not wanting to miss a single second of looking at David's face. This short time with him was too precious to waste. Maybe he should have tried harder? Tried again?

"You can't have tried really hard." David shook his head, looking sad. "I can't help but think that you'd have succeeded if you'd really wanted to."

"You don't know my father very well." Not that Elliot knew him that well himself, but he'd learnt what to expect. "He's determined to realise his plans for his company's future, and his family is going to play a major role in it. Meaning me, since I'm the only male heir. He isn't one to let anyone get away from him. And he's definitely got his mind set on me staying here and running his company one day."

"From where I'm sitting it definitely looks like he succeeded in making you believe that your life is his to run." David finished his drink and put down the glass with an audible thunk, his eyes unreadable now. "I'm sorry to see how bad it's gotten for you. But I guess your reaction answers my question."

"You don't understand." Even as he said it, Elliot realised how stupid it sounded.

The pain in David's face as he flinched was heart-wrenching.

"Oh, I understand. I understand completely. I'm glad I came here to find out what has become of you. Maybe I can...never mind." David slid off his stool and just stood there for a moment, looking a little lost and a lot hurt.

"David, don't go. Please, we need to talk." Elliot couldn't bear the thought of losing David a second time—this time with a lot of ill will between them.

Last time had just been fate. They'd been too young to do anything about what had happened. But this time they were both adults and should be able to fix their problems, make sure they got rid of all the misunderstandings. He knew he'd never be allowed to go back to Riverside, let alone to live with David. But ever since he'd laid eyes on David again, he'd hoped to get to a point where they could be friends, stay in touch, maybe talk on the phone now and then.

"I don't think there's anything to talk about with your father obviously still in charge. Even if we did manage to reconcile our differences, from what you've said it's pretty clear he'd just ignore it. I couldn't live like that, but I hope you'll enjoy the life he has planned for you. Looks to me like you're well on your way. You won't even acknowledge what we had." David grabbed his jacket from the next stool over, slipped into it and walked towards the exit. Just before going through he turned around. "Goodbye, Elliot."

Then he turned his back and walked out of Elliot's life.

Elliot sat without moving for a good five minutes. His heart hurt, his gut clenched and he could barely breathe. There was a low-level hissing in his ears, which he knew didn't come from outside, and he felt dizzy. But the Earth didn't stop turning, as much as he wanted it to. He'd have to find a way of dealing with this new situation.

Something fundamental had changed. Slowly the mental and physical haze lifted, and Elliot took a deep breath.

David was right. Elliot had been a coward. He truly had taken the easy way out by not standing up to his father and just accepting the fact that the man was running his life—was going to run his life forever. As powerful as his father was, he wasn't omnipotent. Elliot had played a significant part in giving him the power he had, so there must be a way of taking it back.

Why had he never seen that before?

Well, it was time to make some changes. Seeing David again made Elliot realise what he'd lost. The man wasn't just physically more gorgeous than ever. He'd had the courage to find and confront his past after all these years. And it sounded as if he'd had to overcome a few obstacles of his own. He was obviously strong and proud, someone Elliot wanted as his friend, if nothing more.

Of course, Elliot had always wanted their relationship to be so much more. He'd never questioned that. Believing there was no way he could get what he wanted had held him back for too long. He'd have to be careful, of course. His father was still out there and would be doing his best to stop them.

But with David as determined as he seemed, and both of them adults able and willing to shape their own lives, weren't they bound to be stronger than his father? Elliot could only hope so. For the first time in years he was ready to try.

It would be hard, but maybe he could still try to get David back. The pain in his eyes had hurt, but it had also given Elliot hope. If David was in as much pain as that look said he was, he was as badly off as Elliot. He wouldn't feel that deeply if there wasn't at least a remainder of some of the love they'd shared. A small spark like that was all they needed to rekindle their love.

The first step was up to him, though. He'd have to stand up to his father, take back his life and reshape it into something he wanted. Then he could go after David.

Yes, it was time to become the man he'd always wanted to be.

He was going to turn a new leaf and that was going to start with breaking off this stupid engagement to Patricia. Then he'd see about the rest.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Boston, Massachusetts**

*Friday January 11, 2008*

David sat in his hotel room back at the Boston Residence, nursing a drink from the well stocked mini-bar, and stared at the wall. It was a luxurious room and a nice wall, but the fact that he was here alone instead of with Elliot made him feel depressed and lonely.

He wasn't sure what he'd hoped for when he'd gone to see Elliot. His adamant refusal to see the truth about his dependency on his father, combined with a clear lack of willpower or any backbone to stand up to the man, baffled him. He hadn't expected that and had no idea how to deal with it.

He was tired and had a headache that was quickly getting out of control. Seeing Elliot after all this time had totally drained him.

No, that wasn't quite true. He'd been happy to finally see Elliot again. When he'd first walked into the bar, David had felt his heart speed up. The old attraction was definitely still there, at least for him.

He'd been elated to find that Elliot was better looking than ever. He'd grown to about

David's height of six-foot-two, maybe an inch or so less. Elliot's body had filled out nicely, his black hair was still unruly, only cut much shorter, and his one brief smile proved that Elliot's dimples were still prominent when he was happy. His deep blue eyes had been filled with longing at first, but that openness had disappeared so fast that David was beginning to wonder if it had existed only in his imagination.

That was really what had him so depressed. Elliot hadn't shown more than a flicker of emotion at their reunion. One smile was all David had gotten. Except there'd been an intensity in Elliot's gaze that was in total contradiction to the words he'd uttered. It almost looked as if something else had been going on under the surface.

But what? How was he supposed to guess Elliot's thoughts, especially after all these years? So much could be going on in Elliot's life that David didn't know about. At least they'd gotten around to discussing Elliot's father and his role in what had happened. But they hadn't even started dealing with the situation around the mystery engagement. What was going on there? Would Elliot claim he'd been forced into that as well, just as Peter had suspected?

Before he could follow that thought further, his cell rang. He put down his drink and checked caller ID before opening it.

"Yes, Peter, I did meet with him." David chuckled, his friend's eagerness briefly relieving his depression.

"So, what happened?" Peter didn't sound amused.

"It was really strange." David closed his eyes to focus. His feelings were trying to overwhelm him, disappointment and anger chief among them, but he needed a cool head if he wanted to make it through this with his heart intact.

"Well, you haven't seen each other in five years, it was bound to be a little strange." Peter sighed. "What did you expect, David?"

"I don't know. I mean, I know what I hoped for was unrealistic." Expecting their connection to still be there had been nothing but wishful thinking. His fantasy of taking Elliot into his arms and kissing him until everything was back to where it had been was just that, a fantasy. But still. "I thought there'd be some emotion, some sign that Elliot was either happy to see me, even just as an old friend from high school, or that he was really angry with me for not coming after him earlier."

"Elliot didn't react at all?" Peter sucked air in between his teeth. "That isn't like the Elliot I remember."

"Exactly." David nodded. Then it hit him. "That's what's wrong here. Shit, I didn't even see it because I was too busy being angry at Elliot."

"What do you mean?" Peter sounded puzzled.

"I mean that Elliot wasn't his usual bubbly self. Not even close." How was he going to explain this sense of wrongness to Peter? "It wasn't just that he was more relaxed or more grown-up because five years have passed since we last saw each other. I sort of expected that. No, the problem is that it was as if he was only a shadow of his former self. He tried very hard not to show any outward reaction to what we were talking about. Almost as if he was being watched."

"Well, based on the information I've got, his father does seem to be a bit of a control freak. I wouldn't be surprised if he had some of his men keep an eye on Elliot." Peter sounded thoughtful.

"Uh-huh. And it looks to me like he's got his son on a very short leash." David scratched his head.

Why hadn't Elliot been able to break away, though? Was it because he hadn't wanted to or was something more sinister going on here? After all, he had mentioned that he'd tried to break away once. David could have kicked himself for ignoring that statement. It had possibly been the biggest hint Elliot had dropped about what had been going on, and David had totally missed it.

"So, what are you going to do?" Peter was definitely amused now.

"I'm not sure if there's anything I *can* do. I think it's up to Elliot to figure out if my return is enough of a reason for him to try. If the situation was bad enough to stop him from breaking free until now, he may need a little time to consider his options and come up with a plan. I suspect he may need to regain his sense of independence first. One thing is for sure, my plan of taking revenge is on hold until I find out a little more." David wasn't one for waiting around but this time it seemed like the right thing to do. He just had to make sure that Elliot would be able to find him.

Going back to the bar at the fitness club around the same time of day would probably be a good start. Elliot might be back for another drink there. David could even have Peter leave a message with Elliot's secretary so that he'd know how to get in touch. Peter was just an old friend from high school, after all. His name wouldn't necessarily ring any alarm bells if Elliot really was being watched. Yeah, lots of possibilities there. At the very least Elliot might realise that David was still interested in talking to him.

"Sounds good to me. I never thought revenge was the right answer in the first place. It usually isn't." Peter almost sounded wishful. He was probably thinking about his situation with Adrian again. "Anyway, keep me posted, all right?"

\* \* \* \*

Elliot followed a perfectly dressed, meticulously made up and very regal acting Patricia and their waiter to the table he'd reserved for dinner. He wasn't looking forward to telling her that he was breaking the engagement. In fact, he'd been sure she'd make one hell of a scene, given the chance. So he'd decided on a public place to try to prevent it from becoming too ugly. He wasn't in the mood for more drama.

He surveyed the lavishly decorated dining room of the Ritz-Carlton. Crystal chandeliers, white damask tablecloths and exotic flowers on each table added to the restaurant's allure. Not that he cared, but he'd been sure that some of his father's clients would be having dinner here. As it turned out, he spotted several within minutes, all of them present with their wives or business associates. For once he was grateful for the lack of privacy. He'd need the protection their presence afforded him before the evening was over.

He didn't like the formality or the decorations all that much but he knew that Patricia loved to be seen here. He wanted her to feel secure as long as possible, so he could say what he needed to say. If she interrupted him before he was done, he might never get the chance to finish his side of the story.

She was truly in her element as she nodded to anyone and everyone she recognised, finally sweeping down onto her chair with a flourish as if she were royalty. Glancing around as if to make sure they had the best table to be seen by as many people as possible kept her busy for a few moments.

After the waiter had left them with the menus, Patricia lost no time in letting Elliot know what was on her mind. She put down the leather-bound sheets, briefly fiddled with her hairdo,

and focused on him.

“I do like the way you apologise.” She looked like a predator, ready to pounce at any moment. The little smile she allowed to show was almost sadistic. “I was very relieved when you called me last night.”

“A-apologise?” Elliot looked up from his menu a little taken aback at the speed with which she was pushing her agenda. Not even waiting for drinks to be served was fast even for her.

“Of course apologise, silly. You brushed me off so rudely the other night when all I was trying to do was set a wedding date. It really hurt me, you know?” She managed to squeeze a tear from one immaculately made-up eye.

“Oh, that.” He almost smiled.

Her very predictable reaction gave him exactly the opening he’d been waiting for.

Maybe he wouldn’t have to sit through the entire dinner. If he played his cards right, she’d be far too upset to stay, and he could go home and call David. Getting his phone number had been so easy, much too easy in fact. Perhaps David had wanted to be found. Not that Elliot minded. The mysterious message from Peter, an old friend he hadn’t spoken to in years, had just been too convenient. Elliot had called, of course. The conversation with Peter had been a little awkward, but Elliot hadn’t cared. Getting David’s phone number was worth a little discomfort.

“Yes, that.” Patricia looked at him expectantly, batting her eyelashes for good measure.

Was she trying to charm him into believing she was harmless? He knew better by now. Or did she believe that her charms would wear him down? Granted, he’d done everything to let her believe that up until now. Things were about to change.

“Well? Come on, get on with it, I want to hear it.” She wasn’t going to give up.

“What, right now? We haven’t even got our drinks yet.” Elliot was almost beginning to enjoy letting her think she’d get what she wanted. The disappointment when she realised how wrong she’d been would make his revenge even sweeter.

“Of course right now. What’s the point in waiting? At least then I can enjoy my dinner without the awful stomach cramps I’ve had to endure since our horrible fight. You know how upset and emotional I get when things aren’t right between us.” She pulled a lacy handkerchief from her purse and dabbed at her eyes. The performance was worthy of an Oscar.

“All right, if that’s what you want.” He put his menu onto the table and straightened his back, ready to do battle. “I’m going to ask you to remain quiet until I’ve finished what I want to say. It’s very important. I need to get this out, and would appreciate you not interrupting me before I’m done.”

Patricia’s eyebrows rose and her mouth opened before she thought better of it. A silent nod as she closed her mouth confirmed her agreement.

“There’s no easy way to break this to you, so I’m going to come right out and say it. Our relationship isn’t what it should be for us to get married. We’ve never really seen eye-to-eye on anything. The wedding was much more our fathers’ idea than ours. The last six months of us trying to agree on anything have pretty much proven to me that we make an awful couple.” He paused for a few seconds.

He watched the mounting horror on her face and wondered how long she’d be able to remain quiet. The widened eyes combined with the trembling lips were clear indicators that she was about to lose her cool.

“But—but...” She leant forward in her seat looking as if she was ready to explode if she wasn’t given a chance to speak.

“I’m not done yet.” For once he had the upper hand and he decided to milk the moment for all it was worth. He’d suffered her trying to dominate every aspect of his life for long enough. “Anyway, as I was saying, since we make such an awful couple I have decided that it wouldn’t make any sense to get married. I really don’t want to spend the rest of my life fighting with you about pretty much everything. So, I’m formally breaking the engagement.”

“You can’t...” Her eyes were as big as saucers and she started fanning herself with the menu, gasping for breath as if she were a fish out of water. “You can’t just break off the engagement like this.”

“Why not?” He leant back in his chair, pointedly looking around the dining room to make sure that she remembered where they were. “This agreement is between two people, after all. If one of us, in this case me, doesn’t believe it makes sense anymore, it can be broken.”

“But you can’t!” She stamped her foot, her face now as red as the lobster on their neighbours’ table. “You just can’t!”

“I rest my case. We don’t agree on anything.” He enjoyed using those words again. He’d banned them from his vocabulary after the first major temper tantrum Patricia had thrown when he’d tried to refuse her something early on in their relationship. “I *can* break off the engagement and as a matter of fact, I just did. You can keep the ring, of course.”

“That’s it!” She dropped the menu, picked up her purse and stood so quickly that her chair toppled backwards. They had everyone’s attention now but she didn’t seem to care. “I don’t have to take this nonsense from you. You’re out of your mind if you think you can get out of your promise like this. We have a contract, and I’m going to make you stick to it. This is not over by a long shot.”

Patricia stormed out of the restaurant and Elliot almost laughed out loud. He was sure there would be consequences once his father found out what he’d done, but right at that moment, he couldn’t have cared less. He was finally free of the threat of having to spend the rest of his life with that woman.

Even better, he was now ready to go after David, the only person he really wanted. He was the only man Elliot had ever loved. Even though David had walked out of the bar last night with every indication of never wanting to see him again, the fact that his contact number had been so easy to find gave Elliot hope. He was sure they’d be able to discuss their differences and solve their problems. All he needed was another chance.

He could hope, couldn’t he? It was all he had left.

\* \* \* \*

### **Boston, Massachusetts**

*Saturday January 12, 2008*

David stood just inside the modern-looking restaurant Elliot had picked. The directions he’d given revealed that the place wasn’t too far from David’s hotel, so he’d walked, getting some much needed exercise. With its soft lighting, dark brown furnishings and welcoming staff, the Laurel Grill and Bar looked like a very relaxing place. David grinned. He could use all the help he could get to make this meeting a success. His future happiness was riding on it.

He’d rarely been more relieved than when Elliot had finally called him two days after their catastrophic initial meeting. He’d also rarely been more nervous about having dinner with someone. He wasn’t going to call it a date because he didn’t want to get his hopes up. And yes,



he admitted to himself, he did hope for something more with Elliot. More so now than when he'd first come to Boston. After all, this time it had been Elliot who'd initiated the contact, indicating that he was interested. At the very least they were finally going to really talk to each other.

The hostess took his coat and he followed her into the dining room. It was decorated in brown and tan tones and, together with the wooden floor, created an atmosphere of elegance without being intimidating. Candles on every table added to the ambience. The restaurant was almost full, but the murmur of conversation wasn't intrusive.

Elliot had picked a romantic spot for their dinner.

And he'd been waiting for David, another good sign. Elliot sat at a table in a corner, one which promised some privacy. He was wearing a nicely tailored navy blue sport coat and a crisp white shirt with the top two buttons open. His curls had withstood any attempt at straightening, making him even more attractive. David had always loved those wild curls.

Elliot looked up when David approached, and his quick, genuine smile said all David needed to know. The relief made his heartbeat speed up in anticipation, and his knees almost buckled. He covered up by quickly taking his seat.

They ordered drinks, and their server told them the specials before he left.

"Thank you for coming." Elliot looked relieved as he picked up the menu.

"No problem. I didn't like the way our last meeting went any more than you did, and I'm very happy to try to figure this out with you." David glanced at his menu and was impressed with the choices. The restaurant offered some interesting flavour combinations, and almost everything sounded tempting.

"Shall we order before we talk?" Elliot took a sip of water, his hand shaking a little.

"Fine by me." David was suddenly quite hungry. He'd been too excited and nervous to eat anything earlier in the day. And how pathetic was that? "Is there anything special you'd recommend?"

"I haven't been here very often but their specialties are fresh fish and steaks. Their pasta dishes are great and so are most of their vegetarian selections." Elliot shrugged. "If you ask me, the best thing on the menu is their brownies. They even sell them online now."

"They probably won't let us have them as a main course though, will they?" David was delighted when another smile crossed Elliot's face.

Elliot still had a sweet tooth, or so David guessed. When they'd been teenagers, he'd loved to bring Elliot unusual candy and pastries. Feeding Elliot's hunger for sweets would surely be even more fun now. David had this recurring fantasy involving Elliot and chocolate mousse. Maybe they'd get around to making that a reality now. He'd imagined what the dessert might taste like when licked off Elliot's skin, but he was sure the reality would be even better.

Shit, this man could still get him hot without even trying. David carefully adjusted himself under the cover of the tablecloth.

Their waiter soon returned with the drinks and took their food orders. When he was gone Elliot looked so nervous that David took pity on him.

"So, since our meeting the other day didn't go all that well, what do you say we start from scratch and catch each other up on what's been happening in our lives?" He might get more information this way. He really needed to understand what was going on with Elliot. Why was he so subdued? Once David knew the truth, he'd have a better idea of what to do next.

Over the next couple of hours they exchanged stories about what had happened in their lives since they'd last seen each other. David was shocked to hear how strict Elliot's parents had been, and not just about which college he needed to attend. Their meddling had included his job,

where he lived—still close to home on Beacon Hill—and even whom he was going to marry. As each story was told, David was beginning to worry more and more about the lack of resistance from Elliot. Didn't he need to be free of all this interference and lead his own life?

Elliot hung on his every word when David told him about his parents kicking him out on his eighteenth birthday, and how Rick's parents had taken him in without question so he could graduate. How he'd spent the summer with his brother Harry in Oregon, and how he'd managed to get his college degree by obtaining a football scholarship with Greg's help. His current position as assistant high school sports coach made Elliot smile.

"You always did like to teach, didn't you?" Elliot pushed his empty plate away and sat back in his chair. "I remember your weekends coaching Little League."

"You weren't too happy with that back then, were you?" David finished his wine, a rare treat for him since his athlete days, and leant back.

"No, I wasn't. I knew I should have been more generous about it, but I just wanted to spend as much time with you as possible. When you were coaching, you weren't with me. It was as simple as that in my seventeen-year-old brain." Elliot grinned and his dimples finally made an appearance.

David realised how gorgeous Elliot really was. Grown-up Elliott had retained all his boyish charm. The need to kiss him became almost overwhelming. But he had to hold back. There were too many uncertainties, and he wasn't ready to accept half-measures. He had a feeling that it was all or nothing, or they'd never make it as a couple.

"So, where do we go from here?" David held his breath. This was it.

During their talk David had gained a better understanding of everything Elliot had been through. He understood the reasons Elliot found it hard to get away from his father's influence, or rather, his tyranny.

David was hoping for a sign that Elliot was willing to make some changes. His father was clearly never going to allow the two of them to have the relationship that David wanted. The real question was whether Elliot was on the same page, and if he was ready to finally stand up to his father to get it.

"I don't know." Elliot suddenly looked very pale and sad, slumping in his chair. "I just don't know."

That wasn't exactly a promising reaction, but it was a start. Already, it sounded better than the adamant refusal to admit there was anything between them or the seemingly unbreakable need to do what his father wanted. An admission like this might be all Elliot was ready for at this point. The real question was whether Elliot was determined to go through with some sort of initial step. And whatever that was, was it going to be enough for David to feel they had a future? He owed it to himself, no, to both of them, to not settle for anything less this time.

Elliot was scared. He'd told David most of what had happened, and it wasn't a pretty picture. He'd only left out the details about the trust fund. He was too ashamed to admit that money was his excuse to put up with all the stress and interference from his father. While David had been interested and outwardly calm as they'd talked, Elliot found it very hard to figure out what David was actually thinking. What if Elliot's cowardice, now that its full extent had become obvious, would chase David away?

Elliot had no idea what David wanted. He'd shared the events of his life over the past five years easily enough, but he still hadn't said anything about his expectations of their relationship, not even if there was going to be one. Was David even interested in picking up where they'd left

off?

It was frightening to think that Elliot might not have anywhere to go once he broke his father's rules and was kicked out. Because once he blew Dad off, that was what would happen. Was that threat enough to hold him back anymore?

Hell, no.

"Where do you want to go next?" David looked at him as if he expected a ready-made answer.

"Away from here." Elliot was surprised at the clarity of this thought. "I'd never really thought about it but now everything suddenly seems different."

"Why is that?" David leant forward.

"I just...I never had anything positive to look forward to. Running away seemed impossible after that first attempt. I was too scared of the consequences if I got caught again. I was sure they'd be much worse the second time around. And I'm afraid to admit that I've always been pretty sure that he would catch me. The personal and professional pressure my father kept up meant that I never really had the time or energy to think about anything. That sounds awful, doesn't it?" Elliot couldn't believe how brainwashed he'd been into accepting his situation.

"Yes, it does. But that's because it *is* awful." David still looked as if he was waiting for something.

"You hate me for being a coward, don't you?" Elliot looked down at his trembling hands. He'd certainly realised that he was no hero, not like David, who'd made a life for himself even without his parents' support. Oh, God, what if he wasn't strong enough or good enough to deserve a future with David?

"I admit that I was pretty angry when I first found out what had happened to you. Since you knew where I was, I'd always hoped you'd get in touch with me once you were free of your parents being able to tell you what to do." David's voice sounded sad. "But I didn't hate you then and I don't hate you now. I mean, I can sort of understand why you did what you did. But that's all in the past. I need to know where we go from here."

There'd been a definite 'we' in there and Elliot's heart jumped for joy. Maybe there was hope?

"I know where I want to go." Elliot swallowed, hesitating just slightly before finally voicing what he'd only dared think for so long. "Away from here. I'll have no money, but you didn't have anything either when your parents kicked you out and you appear to have done quite well."

David nodded, a slight smile on his lips, but he remained quiet.

"I'd like to move back to Riverside. I loved living there and it would be far enough away from my family to hopefully mean no interference from them. I have no idea if you're willing to put up with me being there, but I'd love to pick up where we left off." There, he'd said it.

"That sounds great, it really does. But how do you know that you'll be able to go through with it? Based on everything you've just told me, I don't think it'll be easy." David looked sceptical.

He had every reason to be hesitant. Elliot hadn't exactly given him any reasons to hope for decisive action from his side.

"I know it won't be easy." Not that he cared about that anymore. The promise of being able to have a life with David would get him through anything. Even his father's wrath. Even waiting for access to his trust fund was suddenly far less important than he'd previously thought. "In fact, I know it'll be damn difficult. I broke off my engagement with Patricia last night and—"

“You did?” David’s eyes widened and his mouth stayed open for a moment before he shut it with an audible clack. “You actually did that?”

“She was getting on my nerves more every day, what with all the talk about setting a wedding date suddenly taking centre stage. I never wanted to marry her in the first place and I think the only reason she put up with me was because her father wanted her to for business reasons. So, once I realised how much of a coward I’ve been, I didn’t see any reason for continuing the charade.”

“Does your father know?” David frowned.

“Yeah, she called him first thing this morning, complaining about me.” Elliot winced. “It wasn’t pretty. He tried to get me to change my mind, explaining how important this union was for the business. As if I’d care. He wanted me to apologise and was threatening all kinds of consequences. I didn’t say anything and just let him rage on.”

“So where did you leave it? Did he get the point?” David tilted his head, waiting for an answer.

“I don’t know if he did or not. I told him clearly enough, but he only hears what he wants to hear. So I suspect I may have to repeat it a couple of times until it really sinks in that I’m serious.” Not that Elliot planned being around that long. Definitely not long enough to find out if any of the threats of public humiliation, removal from the will or preventing him from accessing his grandfather’s trust fund were actually true.

“But you did everything possible to make your point clear, didn’t you?” David’s gaze was intense and Elliot couldn’t look away.

“I did. And I have no intention of changing my mind. He and Patricia may think they can make me do what they want, and they would have been right in the past. But those days are over now.” Elliot took a deep breath and waited for David’s reaction.

“So you’re a free man?” An impish grin made David’s beautiful full lips curve upwards so that he looked almost like a pixie. A very well-built pixie.

Not sure where this was going to lead, Elliot nodded. His breathing quickened at the heat in David’s eyes. This was the look he remembered. His response was immediate and unmistakable. With his pants suddenly a size too small, it was hard to sit still. All he wanted was to bend over the table, reach for David’s face and pull him in for a kiss. This desire, this immediate and urgent wanting between them, was what he’d dreamt and fantasised about.

David’s gaze grew smouldering under his scrutiny and a slight flush reddened his face. Surely that meant the same thing it had five years ago?

## Chapter Four

“So, how are you going to use that freedom?” David liked that Elliot had broken the engagement. He was clearly serious about changing his life if he’d managed to defy his father. Encouraging to say the least. Even if it might take him a bit longer to make his father back off, the result would be worth it. Mostly in terms of Elliot’s self-esteem, which meant the most of all.

David’s heart was jumping for joy and real hope took hold of him, making him feel warm with anticipation. The first steps had been taken, the rest would follow. Elliot’s determined look had told him all he needed to know.

“I-I don’t know.” Elliot held his breath.

“Would you like me to make a suggestion?” David grinned.

“Yes, yes please.” Elliot nodded. “But if it doesn’t include going somewhere more private, I don’t think I’m interested.”

David’s eyes went wide and he laughed.

“What? That wasn’t what you were thinking?” Elliot waved at their waiter.

“I’m not saying.” David pulled the napkin from his lap, delighted with the playful tone. He’d forgotten how much fun it was to kid around with a lover. Elliot was still the only man he was comfortable enough with to let go like that. “I was wondering about those brownies you mentioned, though. Can we take some to wherever we’re going next?”

“Aha, your sweet tooth is still as bad as mine, isn’t it? No problem, I’m sure they’ll be happy to wrap some up for us.” Elliot handled the payment and asked for a small box of the famous brownies.

Minutes later they were standing outside the restaurant, the wind colder than David remembered. He didn’t care. Thoughts of what he wanted to do with Elliot once they were alone warmed him.

“Where to now?” Elliot frowned. “I don’t want to go to my place because my father is having it watched. He’s probably got his spies on us right now.”

“He’d really do that?” David’s eyebrows rose. The whole situation was disgusting, almost dehumanising. How Elliot had put up with it he didn’t understand.

“Sure. He wouldn’t think twice about it. He sees it as making sure that I’m safe.” Elliot snorted. “He even called his spies ‘bodyguards’ the one time I asked him about the men who follow me almost constantly. He’ll have to get used to not sending them after me, but I don’t think my one fight with him this morning was enough to make him stop.”

“Well, there’s my hotel. It’s not far from here, near Boston Commons. I walked earlier and it only took a few minutes.” God, he hoped Elliot was going to say yes. He wanted him in the worst way.

Elliot nodded and they walked to *Columbus Avenue*, took a left on Arlington, then a right. By the time they’d entered the hotel, David was aching for a touch from Elliot. They made their way to the elevator, which was thankfully empty at this time of night.

David had barely turned around from pressing the button for the eighth floor when he found Elliot had moved close enough for their noses to almost touch. They were nicely matched in height, with Elliot only an inch shorter. His deep blue eyes were burning with desire. He linked his fingers with David’s. David’s cock stirred.

“I want you.” Elliot’s voice had deepened. His lips touched David’s for a much too brief moment, making them tingle. “I want you so badly.”

“God, Elliot!” David leant forward, trying to capture the man’s lips. That touch had him desperate for more. His cock was well on its way to full hardness.

Elliot stepped closer, and they touched from chest to thigh. They both hissed with a mix of desire and disappointment when their hard erections encountered the cloth of their pants and thick coats instead of skin. It felt incredibly good even through layers of fabric. David couldn’t wait for the real thing. He was likely to instantaneously combust with arousal, but he wouldn’t mind. He’d been without this kind of passion for too long, and he was going to enjoy every second.

Elliot’s hot breath caressed David’s lips before their mouths met for a kiss that had them both moaning within seconds. Elliot’s tongue moved in a tender caress. David sank into the sensations, forgetting everything around him as he chased Elliot’s hot tongue, trying to touch more, feel more. Elliot tasted of mints and desire.

The discreet *ding* of the elevator arriving at their floor jolted David back into reality. He withdrew reluctantly and looked into eyes that had darkened with lust. He squeezed Elliot’s hands and gave the stunned man a slight push out of the elevator. What he wanted to do next, and soon, was not suitable for public consumption.

With one hand still holding onto Elliot’s, David quickly walked down the corridor to room eight-fifteen. He fumbled his key card out of his pants pocket, opened the door, pulled Elliot inside and shut the door behind them before locking it securely.

While one hand slid upwards from the doorjamb to switch on the light, David used his other to cradle Elliot’s head. Elliot opened their coats. David pushed his whole body up against him and dove into another passionate kiss. He ground his hard erection against Elliot’s, much relieved their pants were the only obstacle between them now.

Moaning his desire into Elliot’s mouth, David deepened the kiss and breathed in Elliot’s scent. He was so hard that he didn’t think he’d make it much longer. The thought of coming in his pants, like he had that very first time he’d done more than kiss with Elliot, made him laugh and enabled him to pull back for a moment.

“What-what’s so funny?” Elliot’s face was flushed a deep red. His lips were swollen and his breath came in small gasps. He was the picture of male arousal.

“Do you remember the last time we did this?” David saw awareness dawn on Elliot’s face.

“Oh God, you mean that time in the locker room when everybody else had left after your second big game?” Elliot chuckled.

“Yeah, that’s the one. I can’t believe that after all this time we’ve come back to exactly the same situation.” David stepped back and pulled Elliot farther into the room.

“Well, it’s not exactly the same situation.” Elliot smiled as he took off his coat, dumping it on a chair. “For example, I see a nice comfortable bed here and it looks like you’ve got a mini-bar over there in the corner.”

“You’re very observant.” David got rid of his coat before dropping it on top of Elliot’s. “And thanks to this little humour break we might actually make it out of our clothes this time.”

“Sounds good.” Elliot kicked off his shoes and started tearing off his clothes. David forgot his own as he watched his soon-to-be lover slowly reveal his body.

Elliot’s shoulders were broad, his pectorals clearly defined. His dusky pink nipples stood out against his alabaster skin. His taut abdominal muscles led David’s gaze downward to where

his long fingers were fumbling with the belt buckle.

“Here, let me help.” David stepped towards Elliot and put his hands on his lover’s trembling fingers.

Elliot dropped his hands to his sides. David went to his knees as he opened the belt, button and zipper. The heat from Elliot’s groin caressed his face as he pulled down the pants. The outline of Elliot’s hard cock was clearly visible against the fabric of his black boxer shorts. David pressed a short kiss against the growing damp spot before bending down farther to get rid of Elliot’s socks.

Once done he slid his hands to the back of Elliot’s legs and moved slowly upwards along his calves to the back of his knees, caressing his muscular thighs and finally resting them on the covered cheeks of his well-formed ass. A careful squeeze made Elliot jump. David did it again, and Elliot shook his head and laughed.

“You’re next, I believe.” Elliot reached behind him and grasped David’s hands, pulling him up.

Elliot opened David’s shirt button by button, putting a hot kiss on each newly discovered patch of skin. David shivered when Elliot gave each nipple a lick before continuing by sliding the shirt off. Pants and socks were next. Once he was done he looked up into David’s eyes.

“I’ve dreamt about this so many times, it’s hard to believe that it’s finally real.” Elliot smiled and took David’s hand, pulling him towards the bed.

“You dreamt about me?” David moved the blankets aside before sitting down on the edge of the bed. He pulled Elliot onto his lap, the man’s legs outside his thighs so that their groins touched. “I’ve dreamt about you many times, too. Except for the last few years when I didn’t really want to admit that I still missed you. I’m sorry about it now, but I tried to forget you.”

“I know.” Elliot nodded and moved closer, sliding his arms around David’s neck. “It hurt too much.”

“Yeah.” David slid his arms around Elliot’s middle and started caressing his lover’s strong back, his hands pressed flat against the hot skin. “But no more talk about pain right now, okay? We’ll get back to reality tomorrow, but for tonight, I just want it to be the two of us. I want to touch you and kiss you, feel your body against mine and make love to you.”

“I can do that.” Elliot nodded and slowly moved closer until their lips were almost touching again. “I can so do that.”

This kiss was slow and gentle. Hot, wet tongues slid against each other in a dance of pure tenderness. David closed his eyes and let himself sink into the feeling of holding Elliot in his arms, finally skin-to-skin and with nothing to interrupt them for the next few hours.

Elliot’s hand pressed lightly against David’s chest, pushing him onto the bed. Elliot followed him down but remained on his hands and knees so David could scoot farther up until his feet were off the floor. Elliot bent down and started placing hot kisses on David’s forehead, his nose and both cheeks, before travelling along his jaw line and down his neck towards his shoulder. He licked along his collarbone.

David trembled with anticipation. He kept his hands on Elliot’s back as he moved down, languorously kissing his way across David’s pectorals. Elliot licked first one nipple, then the other. God, he’d forgotten how sensitive they were. No one could touch him the way Elliot did. When he came back to the first nipple to lick and suck on it some more, arousal zinged straight from the now stiff little nub to his cock. By the time Elliot moved to the other nipple, David was ready to grab the man and pound into him with all he had.

He’d never hurt his lover, though, and the things that Elliot was doing to him were much

too pleasurable to do anything other than enjoy them.

Finally, Elliot seemed done with David's now aching nipples and started licking from his chest downward across his abdominals. After a few swirls of his bellybutton that made him giggle, Elliot slid his tongue just inside his boxers' waistband and licked a slow, hot trail from left to right. The contrast between the warm tongue and the cooler air caressing his skin just before the waistband slipped back into place increased David's arousal even further.

His hands moved to Elliot's shoulders and higher to take hold of his curly hair when he started kissing his way towards David's engorged cock. The little nips and licks that Elliot placed along his erection made him groan and his hips started to buck towards that hot mouth.

Elliot took pity on him and pulled down his boxers, throwing them off the bed. David lifted his head in time to see Elliot remove his underwear as well. His cock pointed straight up from its nest of dark curls, long and thick, with a pearl of pre-cum poised at its tip. David couldn't resist. He reached out and swiped it off with his thumb.

Elliot moaned, and his gaze followed David's hand, mesmerised as he moved it towards his mouth and licked off the glistening drop. The slightly salty taste was as delicious as he remembered. God, he'd missed that flavour.

With a loud groan, Elliot crawled back over David, undulating over his body. A little wriggle aligned their cocks for optimum friction. He buried his face between David's shoulder and neck, kissing and licking the sensitive skin as he started moving his hips.

David thought he'd died and gone to heaven. He tipped his head farther back to make it easier for Elliot to reach all his favourite spots and started moving in counterpoint to Elliot's thrusts. The tension rose quickly. Both of them were more than ready to come.

"God. So good!" Elliot's voice was muffled against his skin.

His husky words touched David deep inside.

In answer he gripped Elliot's ass cheeks, pulling him closer to increase the pressure between them. Cocks and balls touching and rubbing had both of them moaning in helpless abandon. The tell-tale tingle of his approaching orgasm urged David on.

"Fuck. Elliot." David gasped for breath. "Gonna..."

"Yeah, come on, baby. Come for me." Elliot fastened his lips against David's neck and started sucking.

That did it for him. David's entire body froze as his release spurted between their bodies, quickly followed by more heat from Elliot's throbbing cock. They kept moving, their shared cum helping their bodies slip and slide until their balls were empty.

Elliot collapsed on top of David.

Breathing hard, they held each other as if they were never going to let go again. David wasn't able to think clearly, but at that moment he knew that he would do whatever it took to keep Elliot in his life this time.

Once he'd regained some control over his breathing, he carefully shifted so they lay next to each other. He used the corner of a pillowcase to clean them up, discarding the pillow onto the floor when he was done. With his last functioning brain cell he remembered to pull the blankets across their cooling bodies. He switched off the light and yawned.

"Nap?" Elliot sounded as if he was already half-asleep.

"Nap." David smiled as he pulled him closer, fitting their bodies together.

This would be their first night in the same bed. They'd never been able to do that before. David grinned. There'd be quite a few more firsts between them from now on, if he had anything to say about it. He finally had the future he'd always wanted within his reach. He was going to



grab it and hold on as hard as he could. Nothing was going to take Elliot away from him now. He wanted round two after a short nap. Yeah, that sounded like a good plan.

\* \* \* \*

Elliot lay on his side, a hot body pressed against his back. He kept his eyes closed and snuggled more deeply into the embrace as he remembered what he and David had done a little earlier. Kissing and touching David had felt like coming home. Falling into bed together as if five years hadn't passed had felt so natural, so right. The longing for David that he'd held deep inside him for all that time, hidden even from himself to make the separation more bearable, had finally come out into the open. The need to be with David had always been there, but its intensity, now that he'd stopped suppressing it, was almost scary.

In many ways being with David was too good to be true. Even now he couldn't quite believe it had actually happened. He'd dreamt about it for so long that he was tempted to pinch himself to make sure it was real this time. But that would have required moving, and he wasn't ready for that. Feeling the tangible evidence of his lover pressed up against him was too precious. He wished the moment would never end.

Being in the same bed with his lover without the need to get up and rush home was wonderful. They'd never had this when they were younger, and Elliot was determined to do everything in his power to ensure their future would be full of moments like this. It felt better than anything he'd ever imagined.

"You awake?" David's voice rumbled against Elliot's back, his lover's hot breath fanning across the skin between his shoulder blades.

He sighed as shivers of delight raced down his spine. He loved that deep voice, so much more expressive than it had been five years ago. It went straight to his heart and made his cock take notice.

"Sort of." Elliot didn't really want to move.

David chuckled and tightened the arm he had around Elliot's middle. A warm hand was pressed against his stomach, delightfully close to his cock. When David started placing wet kisses along Elliot's shoulders and onto his sensitive nape, his cock stirred with interest.

"Mmm, that's very nice." Elliot moved his hand to cover David's where it was set on his stomach, stroking the knuckles.

"Nice enough to make you move?" David's kisses along his shoulders and back continued.

Elliot sighed with pleasure.

"What did you have in mind?" He opened his eyes to silvery moonlight streaming into their room. They'd been too distracted to close the curtains earlier. That was a good thing, because Elliot was able to see David's face once he'd turned around.

"This." David's hand slid up Elliot's back to caress his nape. Moving his head closer, David's hot lips touched Elliot's mouth in a tender caress before he licked along Elliot's lips. "I want to kiss you."

With a soft moan Elliot opened his mouth and met David's exploring tongue with his own. Heat quickly rose between them, as did both their cocks. Grunting with arousal, they pressed their groins together and matched their bodies' movements to those of their tongues. Slipping and sliding against his lover, Elliot was sure he'd reached paradise.

When Elliot pulled back to take in some much-needed air, David's brown eyes had

turned almost black, his pupils huge and dilated with desire.

“I want you to make love to me, Elliot.” David closed his eyes for a moment before looking back at him. “I’ve missed you so much and I need to feel close to you again. Will you please take me, make me yours? The same way I made you mine all those years ago?”

Elliot’s arousal spiked, and his hips involuntarily bucked. He hadn’t taken another lover after David, not with his father constantly watching. If he had slept with anyone, it would only have been for the physical release. What he really wanted was so much more than a quick fuck could ever give him. Somehow he’d known it would only be possible with the man he’d never stopped loving.

Hearing David say the same words, echo his feelings, brought the realisation that he wanted that intimacy with his lover. To have David trust him enough to let him be in charge meant that his feelings were as strong as Elliot’s.

“You don’t-you don’t have to, if you’re not ready. I just thought it would be nice for our relationship to be equal in all respects.” David’s eyebrows drew close together and he looked very vulnerable, almost hurt.

“Oh David, I do want to make love to you. I was just too overwhelmed with it all for a minute. I haven’t, you know, done that with anyone else.” Elliot blushed.

“You haven’t?” David’s eyes widened.

“Well, no. My father’s vigilance made sure that there was no opportunity for more than the very occasional hand job in some club’s bathroom. And I certainly wasn’t about to do anything with Patricia.” Elliot shook with revulsion.

“So, if it hadn’t been for the surveillance, you would have? Done something more?” David did sound hurt now.

“No, that’s not what I meant.” He sighed and pressed a quick kiss to David’s lips, trying to reassure him. “I mean, I did feel attracted to a couple of other men over the years. But I was still hoping against hope that we’d be together again at some point, so I didn’t even want to try. It wasn’t rational, but it just felt wrong to be intimate with someone else while I was hoping we could find a way to come back together.”

“It was the same for me, you know?” David pressed his face against Elliot’s neck, as if trying to hide. “I only ever had one-night stands. Probably too many, because I used them to try and make myself forget you. But it never worked and I never let any of them fuck me. Looking back, I realise that I couldn’t deal with the thought of opening myself up like that to anybody else. Weird, huh?”

“No, not weird.” Elliot’s relief made him light-headed. “Just very touching, I guess. Some people would probably say sentimental.”

“There’s nothing wrong with sentimental, is there?” David’s face emerged from its hiding place. A small smile lit up his face.

“No, there isn’t. As long as both of us are feeling it, I guess we’re safe. And it’s not like we need to tell anyone, right?” Elliot grinned and took another passionate kiss.

Lips smashed against each other, tongues tangling. Elliot let his hands roam all over his lover’s body. He explored David’s stomach, his flanks, moved up to feel his strong back muscles, then slowly moved down towards his ass cheeks. When he squeezed one buttock, David moaned. Squeezing both resulted in David’s groin grinding into his.

Elliot’s cock perked up even more.

Still kissing his lover as if it was the last kiss they’d ever share, Elliot slid his fingers to the top of David’s tempting crack and massaged the sensitive skin just above it. It was so soft

against his fingertips, he wished he could touch it forever.

“Hmm, yes.” David pulled away from their kiss and arched his back, bringing their groins into even closer contact.

“You got any lube and condoms?” He hated the thought of not feeling his lover’s bare skin but protecting each other was the right thing to do until they got tested.

“Ah, can’t think when you do that.” David blinked and pulled back, looking pained at the loss of contact.

“Don’t want you to think.” Elliot almost giggled with joy when David blushed bright red. He didn’t let up on his caresses for a second. “Want you to tell me where the lube and the condoms are.”

“Bathroom, I think.” David closed his eyes when Elliot’s middle finger briefly slid between the tops of his ass cheeks. “God, want more of that.”

“Hold on, I’ll give you more in a minute. Let me just get the stuff.” With an effort, Elliot pulled away from his squirming lover and made it to the bathroom and back in record time. Thank God David’s wash bag had been neatly organised.

The picture that greeted him made him stop in his tracks. David lay on his back, legs spread invitingly. His head was on the pillow, his eyes were closed and he was slowly stroking his leaking cock.

“Shit!” Elliot was back on the bed, kneeling between David’s hard-muscled thighs in no time. “Do you have any idea how sexy you look when you open up to me like this?”

“I was hoping to give you a little show.” David raised his eyelids halfway. “Didn’t want you to lose interest.”

“No chance of that.” Elliot took a deep breath to calm himself. As if he was going to lose interest in David. He made him so hard it almost hurt. “Not for at least the next sixty or seventy years.”

“Good.” David smiled seductively. “How do you want me?”

“On your back, just like this. I want to see your eyes when I take you.” Elliot dropped the towel and condom he’d grabbed onto the bed, and opened the lube with shaking fingers. He was going to make sure David was well prepped, but whether he’d make it inside before coming from just looking at and listening to his lover was going to be a close call.

Once he’d squeezed a generous amount onto his index and middle fingers he used his thumb to warm it up. David’s eyes never left Elliot’s when he reached out and touched the skin just under David’s balls. Stroking slowly made David moan, and when Elliot moved down towards the tiny pucker, carefully touching the soft skin there, David actually whimpered.

“Yes. Please. Feels so good.” David closed his eyes and stretched into Elliot’s hand, trying to increase the pressure.

But Elliot wasn’t going to hurry. Still moving slowly, he circled the wrinkled opening several times before putting pressure against it. David sighed and relaxed immediately, welcoming Elliot’s fingertip inside. His breathing sped up as he felt the heat inside. Going back for more lube, he started pushing farther inside with his middle finger. David wriggled his ass, trying to get the probing finger deeper.

Elliot smiled as he pushed all the way in. He slid his finger in and out until there was no resistance. He added more lube and a second finger, making David moan with pleasure. When his knuckle touched the small protrusion inside David’s channel, his lover’s eyes flew open and he gasped for air.

“Yes! There!” David lifted his hips for a better angle and started moving with Elliot,

fucking himself on his fingers.

Elliot was breathing hard, trying to keep his arousal under control. David was so hot. The sounds he made as he writhed on Elliot's fingers were driving his hard-on up and up. He couldn't wait much longer.

"Please! More. I need more." David's head came up and the look he gave Elliot from hooded eyes was a very clear invitation to move things along.

"I can do that. Just give me a minute. I want to make sure I don't hurt you." Elliot scissored his fingers.

David dropped his head back onto the bed, groaning.

Elliot added a third digit and kept moving in and out of the tight opening until David grabbed a pillow and shoved it under his ass in an unmistakable gesture of get on with it. Elliot grinned and withdrew his fingers from the now twitching hole, wiping his hand on David's cock for lubrication. David watched, his eyes huge, as Elliot opened the packet and rolled the condom onto his painfully hard shaft.

"Ready?" Elliot lined up his cock with David's opening and bent over his lover so he could kiss him.

"Yes! Please! Don't want to wait any more." David grasped Elliot's upper arms to hold on and nodded. "Do it!"

Elliot moved forward, the swollen tip of his cock spreading, then entering David's hole. The tight heat enclosed his cockhead and he almost came. After a few moments to regain his composure, he pushed forward, meeting very little resistance. David was obviously ready to let him in. They stared into each other's eyes as Elliot slowly pushed all the way inside. When he bottomed out he sighed and moved so their chests touched. He slid his arms underneath David's shoulders in a tight embrace and David's arms wrapped around his middle, mirroring his clasp to complete the circle.

Elliot started moving very slowly, gliding in and out while peppering David's face with kisses. When David responded, the passion quickly mounted. Being inside the man he'd always loved was more amazing than he'd ever thought possible. He'd never been so close to another human being. Thrusting into David with quickly growing intensity he could feel their connection growing stronger.

David looked back at him. The love in his eyes mirrored Elliot's feelings, pushing him higher. He was soon slamming inside David's clenching channel with increasing abandon. Their tight hold of each other's bodies didn't give him much space for movement, but the intensity of the contact was more than enough to bring him very close to coming within minutes.

"Shit! So good!" Elliot panted with the need for air, trying to hold back his orgasm. He was so close, but he wanted desperately for David to come with him.

"Yes! Gonna..." David's hard cock rubbed against Elliot's belly.

Elliot could feel David's pre-cum adding more natural lubricant to the sweat already coating them. Elliot merged his lips with David's, now madly pounding into him, and the kiss was the final bit of passion that pushed them over the edge. David screamed into Elliot's mouth as tremors of release racked their bodies. Hot semen splashed their stomachs. With a grunt, Elliot pushed in one last time and let go. He shuddered as his balls tightened and he came in spurts of unbelievable bliss.

They held onto each other as they enjoyed the fading aftershocks of their orgasms. Slowly coming down from the high, Elliot buried his face between David's neck and shoulder, his deep breaths taking in his lover's scent of sweat and semen. As far as he was concerned, it

was the best scent in the world.

“Wow.” David licked his earlobe and gave him a small kiss when his breathing had returned to normal.

“Yeah.” Elliot really didn’t want to leave but he had to deal with the condom, so he pulled out very slowly before tying it off and aiming it at the basket next to the bed. He took the towel and cleaned up David as best he could before that, too, went off the bed.

With a sigh he lay down next to David, opened his arms and pulled his sated but exhausted lover into his embrace. No words were needed as they wriggled their bodies into the closest fit they could manage.

“I love you, David.” Elliot couldn’t deny it any longer. Didn’t need to either.

“Love you too, my Elliot.” David’s lips touched his in a tender kiss. “I love you so much.”

A hot tear slid down Elliot’s cheek. He’d waited so long to hear those words again. The deep feelings for David that he had denied for years now totally overwhelmed him. A happiness unlike anything he’d ever felt before warmed his heart and accompanied him into restful sleep.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Boston, Massachusetts**

*Sunday January 13, 2008*

David didn’t like thunderstorms. They scared him on a visceral level, and he’d never been able to outgrow his childish fear of them. But this one wasn’t just louder than normal, it sounded weird, too. The thunder came in short sharp bursts, and there was absolutely no lightning. As close as the noise from the claps sounded, he should have been able to see something, even through closed eyelids. What was going on?

With a start he sat up and opened his eyes, totally disoriented for a moment. Hold on... where was he? He remembered Elliot when he groaned next to him, apparently struggling to rouse himself from a deep sleep.

David cocked his head and listened. The thunder was still there. It hadn’t been a dream. It came from the door to their left. Things were slowly coming into focus. They’d gone back to his

hotel for privacy, but now it sounded as if someone was banging on their door.

He checked the electronic alarm clock and groaned. It was six a.m. on a Sunday morning. What the hell did anyone want from them at this hour? Nobody in Boston who might be interested in them even knew they were here, did they?

With a big crash the door suddenly swung open, smacking against the wall for good measure. Light from the corridor backlit men in dark clothing. They looked tall and threatening, their muscles tense, eyes darting across the hotel room as if checking for threats. *What the hell?*

Before David could demand to know what was going on, they poured into the room, each one more grim-looking than the next. The two tallest and most muscular men wore identical outfits. Dark sweaters, black pants and army boots made them look like they were part of some kind of private security force. The one on the left still held several tools they must have used to get through the special locks that protected all hotel rooms against intruders. The one on the right casually pulled a gun, pointing it at the floor. The threat was still clear.

*What the hell?*

The security guys stepped aside after switching on the bright ceiling light, flanking the doorway like guard dogs before signalling the last intruder to stalk into the room. An older man, he wore street clothes, and looked slightly less intimidating physically. The scowl he aimed at David bore enough fury to make up for his lack of physical prowess.

The older man looked vaguely familiar, but the sudden bright light had blinded David. His eyes were still trying to adjust and he couldn't be sure of the man's identity.

"I want you to get your faggot asses out of that bed right now!" The man's voice was loud enough to carry through several walls. "Come on, move, both of you! Your perverted behaviour will end immediately. I won't have my son exposed to this sort of abomination."

"Oh God." Elliot hid his face behind his hands but didn't move.

"What's going on here?" David held up the sheets to cover his naked chest. He looked at his lover but Elliot was frozen in place. The parts of his face that were still visible were deathly pale and his breath came in short, shallow gasps.

"Isn't it obvious?" The man stepped closer, the threat of impending violence in every movement. He didn't look very strong, but the threat was unmistakable. "And before you try to get help from the hotel, let me tell you that the manager is a very good friend of mine who owes me several favours. In fact, he's even turned off all the relevant security cameras, so there won't be any proof, should you be stupid enough to try something."

Now that he'd stepped out of the bright glare, David recognised Thomas Watkins. His harsh features were contorted into the same mask of disgust that David had seen five years ago. His body was tightly coiled with tension, hands fisted at his sides in barely suppressed aggression.

"Well, why aren't you moving? I want you out of here right now and if you're lucky I'll only charge you with assault rather than rape." Mr. Watkins didn't even look at Elliot, staring into David's eyes, probably in the hope of making him do what he wanted by sheer power of will.

Elliot still hadn't stirred other than to cover his face.

This couldn't be happening again! The nightmare of being found in what was clearly a compromising situation in Elliot's father's eyes was as bad the second time as it had been the first. What was worse, David felt just as powerless as he had back then.

He'd often wondered what he would have done differently had he been an adult when it happened. From the looks of it, it didn't make too much of a difference. David's heart

constricted with the pain as he realised that opposing his father's wrath was probably one step too far for his lover.

"How did you find us?" David needed some sort of plan.

Maybe stalling for time would let Elliot recover.

"Not that it matters, but Elliot has been under surveillance for a while. For his own safety and to avoid a situation like this. Letting his baser instincts rule his behaviour is dangerous. I was hoping I'd be able to prevent another occurrence. Clearly, I underestimated both him and apparently you." Mr. Watkins took a deep breath. "Now, I'm only going to say this one more time. Get. Your.Ass. Out. Of. Here."

David didn't want to just up and leave, not this time. His first impulse was to fight for Elliot and their love, but the odds of three against one didn't exactly encourage him to try. Add the fact that at least one of them was armed, and he was in the weaker position by far.

"Elliot?" David put all the longing and love he felt for this man into his voice. He needed his lover with him in this, or there was nothing he could do.

Elliot didn't react beyond breathing more quickly than before.

"Elliot, what's wrong with you?" He was getting worried now.

"Don't you dare try to influence him any more." Mr. Watkins raised an arm, as if to hit him. "It was your fault all along. You corrupted him five years ago, made him into a pervert without any consideration for what that would mean for the rest of his life. If I hadn't gotten him away from you his entire career would have been ruined."

"I did not corrupt him. Being gay isn't a choice, or something a man can be corrupted into." David reached for the extra blanket at the bottom of the bed and wrapped it around his middle as he slid out from under the sheets to get to his clothes. They lay in a heap on the chair next to the small desk. There was no point in fighting Mr. Watkins if Elliot wasn't going to stand with him.

"Don't you dare contradict me! He was fine after we left Riverside, never showed any of those unnatural urges again. The minute you're back, I find him in bed with you. So don't you tell me that it wasn't your influence, which attempted to turn him into a fag." Mr. Watkins was bright red and his eyes sparkled with anger. "You almost ruined my son's life once, I won't let you do it again. I want you gone from here for good, never to return. If you ever attempt to contact Elliot again my lawyers will sue you for invasion of privacy. Or whatever the appropriate legal terminology may be. I'm sure they'll be able to come up with a fitting charge."

"Elliot, please say something." David started pulling on his clothes, some part of him still hoping that Elliot would respond.

"Will you shut the fuck up?" Mr. Watkins stepped towards David, fury pouring from his body. "I've told you to leave my son alone. If you don't start packing and get the hell out of here, I promise you, my men can be very convincing in ways you don't want to experience."

Fully dressed now, David started pushing clothes into his suitcase. Remembering his toiletries in the bathroom at the last moment he went to retrieve them and hastily added them to the rest of his stuff. He wasn't going to get into a physical confrontation with this man, never mind the others. They hadn't done or said anything so far but David was pretty sure that they weren't going to be on his side if he decided to put up a fight.

"Elliot? What's wrong with you?" He glanced at Elliot one last time, his heart breaking for the second time in his life.

His lover—ex-lover yet again—laid on the bed in the foetal position, his face covered with his hands. It was very odd to say the least, but David was out of time. One against three plus

a gun wasn't his idea of a fair fight. But what really got to him, what made him leave in the end, was the lack of any sort of reaction from Elliot.

He'd gladly have risked a beating from the thugs if Elliot had done anything, but...

David picked up his suitcase, and without looking at anyone, left the hotel room, agitated beyond his ability to describe in words. He was close to crying with the desperation of it all. It was so unfair. With Mr. Watkins in control and Elliot apparently unwilling or unable to stand with him, what chance did he have?

Why had he ever come here? Had he actually believed that anything had changed? Elliot's response had given him such hope but it looked as if Elliot's father was just too strong an enemy for Elliot to overcome.

David didn't want to face life alone but he didn't see himself forgetting Elliot any time soon, despite the disappointment. He hadn't been able to forget Elliot for five long years, so he doubted he'd change now. Even if the separation felt more permanent, his traitorous heart still loved Elliot, and probably always would.

Elliot's heart beat at three times its normal speed, he felt dizzy even though he was lying down and he was unable to move. Everything after first hearing his father's voice intruding into their sanctuary had vanished into a grey haze that was strangling him. His breath came far too quickly as panic completely and utterly immobilised him.

*Abomination* was the last word he'd consciously registered. Everything after that was a confusing jumble of sounds that didn't make any sense. He vaguely remembered hearing David calling his name a couple of times but even though he'd recognised the timbre of his lover's voice, he hadn't been able to make out any details. He hadn't understood what David had wanted from him. What really scared him, though, was that he hadn't been able to do so much as move a muscle to respond.

Shit, what was wrong with him? And what must David be thinking?

Prolonged silence finally enabled him to calm down enough to lift his hands from his face and take in his surroundings. He was alone in the bed and that almost caused a new panic attack. Where was David? Had he gone into the bathroom or had he left completely? Cold fear gripped his heart and he had to take another deep breath to help him stay calm.

Was he alone again?

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" His father's voice sounded as if it was right next to his ear. "Did that godforsaken faggot damage your brain as well as your common sense? We've talked about this often enough. These urges you feel are completely unnatural and giving into them quite obviously makes you stupid."

Elliot looked up into his father's furious eyes. He didn't care what the man thought, he just needed to know why David wasn't here anymore. Nothing else was important. Not even his father's rage. But he couldn't very well ask. He wouldn't tell him anything even if he *did* know.

"Answer my question, Elliot!" His father looked as though he was about to have a heart attack—face flushed, hair in total disarray, hands fisted at his sides.

"What-what question?" Elliot looked past his father and was shocked to see two more men in the room. Both looked like thugs, hired guns who'd do his father's bidding without question, like the musclemen who'd kidnapped him when he'd tried to run years before. One was even armed. What the hell was going on here?

"I asked you what the fuck was wrong with you. I've worked long and hard to erase the blemish of your previous lapse in judgement from your record. I called in a lot of favours to get



you into Harvard, never mind the position in the company that you now have. Not that you're very good at doing your job. But being the son of the CEO has to have some benefits, right? At least most people were willing to overlook your indiscretion, especially since you were only seventeen at the time." His father snorted. "And what do you do? You go off and get back in touch with the pervert who got you into trouble the first time. Don't you realise that you could have wiped out all that hard work with this one careless act? What if the press gets wind of this? Or even just one of my clients. Have you even considered any of that?"

None of these references to his father's work were news to Elliot. He'd heard it all before. What he really wanted to know was what had happened to David. He opened his mouth to say something, then shook his head and remained quiet. He'd learnt that was usually the option that got him into the least amount of trouble. He needed to get out of here to go and find David. The best way was to remain quiet so that his father would calm down and give Elliot a chance of escaping.

"You're not going to say anything? What, have your perverted activities made you mute as well as blind to the consequences of your actions?" His father took a step back and waved at Elliot's clothes on the chair next to the small desk. "All right, if that's how you want to play it, that's fine by me. Just get dressed and we'll have this mess fixed soon enough."

Fixed indeed. It took all of Elliot's concentration not to start shaking his head at his father's stupidity and stubbornness. He wasn't going to change his father's mind no matter what he said, so his best option was to get out of here as unscathed as possible. He needed to regroup and come up with a strategy.

Resigned to his fate for now, he got dressed and followed the others out of the room. He'd have to bide his time but he was going to escape. This time he had a real goal, and he would do more than duck his head and pray he didn't get found out. Trying to appease his father hadn't worked before, so he had to change tactics.

He just hoped that he'd get the chance to apologise to David. God, his behaviour must have looked so bad. Like a repeat of the events five years ago when neither of them had been able to stand up for themselves and fight.

Shit, he hadn't known that he was susceptible to panic attacks. At least that's what he thought had happened. He'd never had one before but if they were this debilitating, he'd better find a way of dealing with them. He never wanted to be helpless again. How could David believe that he was capable of standing up to his father if he froze so easily? How could he make himself believe it, for that matter?

\* \* \* \*

David was having a hard time suppressing his tears by the time he made it home. The flights and the two-hour drive back to Riverside from Houston airport had been long and exhausting. Unlike the trip to Boston, when he'd cherished some high hopes, he now felt drained. He had nothing to look forward to once he'd returned.

The trip had given him far too much time to think. Sleep had been impossible, not just because of the cramped conditions in the flight cabin, but because he was mentally too keyed up to relax enough.

So he'd kept replaying the scene in the hotel room again and again. Whichever way he looked at it, he couldn't figure out why Elliot hadn't supported him. At some point he'd realised that his initial reaction of feeling abandoned had probably been misplaced. Elliot, even as afraid

of his father as he clearly was, wouldn't have deliberately left David to his own devices.

Would he?

No, something must have been wrong with Elliot, and David hadn't recognised what it was, nor had he known what to do. Some of this mess was his fault. Again.

He opened the door to his apartment, dragged his suitcase inside and locked himself in. He had almost another week of personal time coming up and he was going to use it. He needed the time to recover from the shock of having found and lost Elliot yet again.

It was only seven p.m. but he was tired enough that he wanted to go straight to bed and sleep for the next few days. All the emotional stress he'd been through wasn't going to lead to a good night's sleep, though. What he needed was some strenuous physical activity. If he was exhausted, he might be able to fall asleep. The weather was cold but dry, so he decided to go for a run. That should make him physically tired enough to have a chance of sleeping through the night.

He put his suitcase onto his bed. He could always unpack later. Less than ten minutes later, he'd found his running gear and changed into it. He was back outside and pounding the pavement before he knew it.

He took the route to Winter Park. He liked the well-maintained, quiet paths. No dogs to chase him, or for him to stumble over, and hopefully no kids around at this time of night, either. The hour wasn't that late, but few parents took their kids out in the dark.

Focusing completely on his breathing as he ran, he was surprised to hear his name yelled from a small distance.

"David! Stop running for a minute, will you?" A man about his own height approached from behind and smiled as he caught up.

"Hey, Rick!" David had seen very little of his old friend. Both of them had been too busy with their new jobs since they'd graduated last May.

The men shook hands and continued running albeit at a slower pace. Catching up with the quirky lawyer who had moved in with his younger lover, Mark, last October would be a good distraction from David's problems.

"Good to see you here." Rick looked happy, if a little tired. "What have you been up to? Peter told me you were taking a trip."

That was the disadvantage of staying friendly with his high school buddies. Well, except that two of the five original friends no longer lived in Riverside. Elliot had been gone longest, because his parents had yanked him away before their senior year. And Adrian had vanished just over a year later. Nobody had seen him since their graduation prom. So now it was just the three of them, Peter, Rick and himself. They didn't meet formally but Riverside was a small town. They ran into each other quite frequently...in this case, literally.

"Yes, I was. Don't really want to talk about it." David squeezed his eyes against the tears that were burning to break free.

"Hey, no prob." Rick ran beside him in silence for a few minutes.

When David had recovered sufficiently it was time to ask a question of his own. He'd been curious about Rick's relationship with Mark for a while.

"How are things with Mark? It's difficult to imagine how you even find time for him, you work so hard." David wished he'd be able to worry about finding time for a live-in lover. Not just anyone, either. Elliot was still the only man for David.

"We're doing fine. Actually, with all the gigs he plays at various restaurants and any other venues he can find, it hasn't been a problem so far." Rick slowed down, getting ready to

leave the park towards his home.

“Sounds as if you’ll both need to make sure you spend enough time with each other.” David envied them the opportunity of being able to bond like that, then scolded himself for being uncharitable. Just because he and Elliot...

No more of that. He wasn’t going to let himself think about what he’d probably lost.

“Yeah, I think you’re right. He’s been getting all kinds of offers. No wonder, he’s extremely good-looking. But I do sometimes think that he must be tempted.” Rick smiled and held out his hand. “See you around, buddy. I hope you’ll be less of a stranger than you have been recently. It would be great to go out for a beer now and then, just the three of us, for old time’s sake.”

David shook Rick’s hand. He wasn’t interested in being reminded of old times. With the wound of having lost Elliot again still fresh, he wasn’t going to do anything that made it worse. Seeing the friends who all knew about Elliot having vanished, and had apparently already figured out that David had tried and failed to bring him back, wasn’t going to help him get over the situation. He wasn’t sure what would, but spending time with the people who knew his past so well surely wasn’t it.

\* \* \* \*

### **Boston, Massachusetts**

*Monday January 14, 2008*

Elliot hadn’t been this tired in a very long time. He’d spent Sunday afternoon thinking about ways to apologise to David while packing a couple of suitcases and a few things he might need initially. He could get the rest of his stuff packed and forwarded to him once he’d found a place to settle.

Since he hadn’t wanted to give his father any advance warning about his plans, he hadn’t dared call David. He suspected all his phones were tapped. His decision to leave was final, and he didn’t want to give his father a chance to stop him before the last personal confrontation. He hadn’t been able to sleep all night. Thoughts of David, various scenarios of how David would react and his own fear of not being forgiven had kept him awake.

It was now Monday morning and he’d thought about dragging himself into the office, but what would have been the point? He didn’t intend to do any work for his father’s company ever again.

Now that he had decided to stand up for himself, he might as well go to his parents’ home for the showdown. He could get away easily from there. He grinned as he parked his car in the street, purposely avoiding their driveway. He was so ready for this. The thought of finally gaining his freedom from their oppression put him in the mood to face anything.

He used the antique doorknocker, knowing it was still early enough for his father to be at home. As expected, Maria opened the door. She’d been their live-in maid ever since Elliot could remember. She greeted him with a genuine smile.

“Mr. Elliot, it’s good to see you here.” She stepped aside and closed the front door.

“Thank you, Maria. It’s always good to see you, too.” Elliot smiled back at her.

“What can I do for you?” Maria folded her hands in front of her.

“Oh, don’t worry, I can find my own way. I assume that my parents are in the breakfast room?” Elliot waited for her nod before proceeding past the kitchen to the normally sunlit room

at the back of the house. Of course, with there being no sun today, it would be a very gloomy place. Three walls of the breakfast room were glass, so it was like sitting outside with a view of the grey sky. Not the cheeriest place to be this time of year.

To his surprise his mother was alone, no hint of his father anywhere.

“Elliot? What are you doing here?” His mother got up from the large table and kissed him on the cheek. “Shouldn’t you be on your way to the office?”

“I need to talk to both of you and thought this would be the best time of day to catch you both in the same place.” Elliot took the seat his mother indicated.

“That sounds quite serious.” His mother had no idea.

“This isn’t going to be an easy conversation, no. But I’d rather have it with Dad present as well. Is he still here?” Elliot took the offered orange juice and swallowed a few sips for courage.

“Yes, I’m still here.” His father’s voice came from behind him and was as loud and obnoxious as ever. “What I want to know, however, is what you’re doing here? You know we have an important appointment with the McAllister team and you’re supposed to get the meeting room organised and set up.”

“Thomas, what’s going on? Surely there’s no need to use that tone of voice with our son.” His mother sat back in her chair, trying to compose herself.

She was very good at acting like the injured party and Elliot was fully prepared to see floods of tears before this was over.

“Shush, woman, you have no idea what you’re talking about.” His father gulped from a mug of coffee he held, but didn’t sit, probably thinking his height advantage would intimidate Elliot.

God, how he hated these games.

“Thomas! Really!” His mother picked up one of her fashion magazines and started fanning herself as if she was in a historical drama.

“All right, let’s get to the point.” Elliot cleared his throat, stood tall and stiffened his back. “I’ve come here to tell you that I’m leaving Boston for good. You can take this as my resignation without notice.”

“What?” His father spat out coffee onto his plate and the surrounding tablecloth. “Don’t be stupid, Elliot. You’re going to do no such thing. Your entire life is here. You’re tied to Boston both professionally and personally. You’re going to get married to Patricia post-haste and you’ll fix the job performance issues that I’ve pointed out to you time after time. Then you’re going to provide us with grandchildren so that one day our legacy can be passed on to the next generation.”

“Elliot?” His mother had stopped her fanning action, her eyes wide with disbelief. “You’ve never said you wanted to leave Boston before. What is this really all about?”

“You heard me. It’s quite simple. I’m leaving Boston and moving back to Riverside.” Elliot said. “You never asked me if I wanted to move away from my friends. You haven’t listened to me for five years. You planned my life for me without any concern as to what I wanted or needed. I’ve had enough of that. I want a say in how I live my life, so I’m going to do what I want from now on.”

“You will not. The idea is preposterous. I’ve told you this before, and I’m quite serious. I’ll strike your name from the will, I’ll make sure that you’ll never have access to your grandfather’s trust fund, and you’ll never be allowed to see your sister or any of the other members of our family ever again.” His father looked triumphant as if he actually believed this

was going to stop Elliot.

To be fair, so far it always had, even though the threat had never been spoken out loud except that one time right after they caught him and David kissing in the stables.

“And what makes you think that I care?” Elliot smiled.

“But-but you’ve always cared before. Even you couldn’t be stupid enough to throw all that away for an immoral lifestyle!” His father was beginning to look worried. Good.

“Then let me assure you that that’s no longer the case.” Elliot could sound haughty and arrogant with the best of them. After all, he’d learnt from a master. “Your most recent interference in my personal life has convinced me that there’s no hope of you ever accepting me the way I am. I love David and will do everything I can to win him back.”

“But you’ll be penniless. You have no means of supporting yourself. Don’t be an idiot.” Elliot’s mother looked horrified and disgusted.

“You don’t get it, do you?” Elliot sighed. There was no way to reason with these people. How could he possibly be related to them? All he could do was make it as clear as he could and leave. “I’m going to say this one more time. I don’t care about the money. I don’t care about the career you picked for me. And I certainly don’t care about getting married to Patricia to provide you with grandchildren. I’m sure Melinda and Robert will be more than happy to ensure the family’s future.”

“But she’s a woman! The children won’t carry our family name.” His father looked appalled.

“Dad, please, this is the twenty-first century. Melinda is a very capable businesswoman, even if you’re unwilling to see or admit that. She’s more than qualified to do my current job and will be a much better CEO once the time comes for you to retire. All you need to do is get over your stupid prejudice and give her the chance she deserves. And as for our family name? That’s easy. Just get them both to change their names to Watkins. Quite a simple legal procedure, you know?” Elliot started walking towards the door.

“If you walk out of this house and start living the perverted life of a social outcast with that-that man of yours, let me warn you one last time that there will be no way back. You’ll be cut off from your family forever.” His father wrung his hands, a sure sign that he was truly nervous.

“You haven’t listened to anything I’ve said, have you? *I don’t care.* Dad, Mom. I don’t want your money, and I can live without grandfather’s trust fund. I definitely don’t want to be part of a family that won’t accept me for who I am or whom I love.” Elliot turned around one last time and walked out towards the hallway.

He’d always remember his parents that way. His mother as white as snow and his angry father as red as a bright flame. For once they had nothing more to say. The relief that hit him when he finally walked out the front door almost made his knees buckle. He was free. Free to try to win back the man he loved with all his heart.

## Chapter Six

### Riverside, Texas

Wednesday January 16, 2008

“What are you doing here?” Wincing at his angry tone, David stepped back to let Peter into his apartment. He was usually more sociable, but the last few days had just taken it out of him. Not even an old friend like Peter was likely going to be able to cheer him up.

“Gee, thanks for the warm welcome.” His friend left his coat on the hallway chair and walked straight through to the living room. “You didn’t really think you could keep your return from Boston a secret, did you?”

“I didn’t...” But that wasn’t completely true. David hadn’t let anyone know, wanting a few days to himself to try to recover. He had to admit that he’d hoped that nobody would discover he was back until he was fit for human company again. Which, at this rate, might be never.

“Oh yes, you did.” Peter made himself comfortable on the sofa. “Maybe not consciously. But it’s now Wednesday and the last time we spoke was last Thursday. Right after which I get this frantic call from Elliot to check if you’re in Riverside. He asked for your cell number so he could get hold of you. It made me wonder why you hadn’t given it to him yourself, but in the end I gave it to him since I was pretty sure you’d want him to be able to call you. Nothing since then. Looks to me as if you’re trying to hide. Is it because you’re mad at me?”

“No, I’m not mad at you. You’re right, I wanted Elliot to be able to get in touch with me. Don’t ask why we didn’t exchange numbers the first time we met. It’s complicated. As for hiding? I guess maybe a little. Mainly because I didn’t want to go back to work. But running into Rick on Sunday evening didn’t exactly help keep my presence a secret, did it?” David pointed behind him towards the kitchen. “You want a beer?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Peter grinned. “So, what happened? Last thing I heard you were going to give Elliot another chance.”

“Yeah, I did.” David returned with two bottles of beer and an opener, which he handed to Peter. “We went out for dinner on Saturday night and one thing led to another and we ended up in my hotel room.”

“Yes! Way to go.” Peter handed back the bottle opener once he was done, lifted his bottle in a salute and took a few sips.

“Unfortunately it didn’t end well. Elliot’s father traced us to the hotel and burst into the room on Sunday morning. He had some private security goons with him, so it was three against one. Not to mention that at least one of them was armed, so I wasn’t going to risk doing anything stupid and get myself shot.” David had opened his own bottle and drank half of it in one go.

“His father traced you? What an asshole.” Peter frowned. “And what’s that about three against one? What about Elliot?”

“That was the really strange part. As soon as his father had barged into the room, Elliot didn’t move or even say anything. It was almost as if he was frozen. I didn’t get any support from him, so what was I supposed to do? Go against his father on my own? Even if that security guy hadn’t been armed, it would have been a stupid idea. What if Elliot had folded again and left me out in the cold?” The anger and pain came back full force and made it difficult to breathe. Damn, but it had hurt to be abandoned by Elliot like that.

“So you just *left*?” Peter put his half-finished bottle onto the low coffee table and shook his head.

“What else could I do?” David just knew that Peter was about to tell him what he’d been thinking to himself already. “You think I made a mistake, leaving Elliot like that, don’t you?”

“Well, I don’t know. I wasn’t there, but it sounds to me as if Elliot was pretty shocked. His physical reaction sounds a lot more serious than simple surprise. Abandoning him like that may not have been the cleverest thing you’ve ever done.” Leave it to Peter to come up with the understatement of the year.

“I’ve done it again, haven’t I?” David could have kicked himself. “I’ve made the mistake of leaving Elliot to fend for himself for the second time. When will I ever learn?”

“I can see why you left, though. There was a serious physical threat after all.” Peter looked thoughtful. “But it looks to me as if you may have misinterpreted Elliot’s lack of reaction.”

“You’re right. He was clearly more than shocked. After all, it was the second time in our lives that his father had burst in on us like that. I just didn’t realise *how* shocked he was at the time. I’d expected him to be able to stand up to his father. I’d hoped for it ever since Elliot had told me he’d broken his engagement. But it’s not as easy as that, is it?” David put his empty bottle next to Peter’s, then sighed and buried his face in his hands. God, was he ever going to learn to be a better boyfriend and partner? To stick with Elliot until things had truly been solved? He was going to have to fly back to Boston and sort this all out. No way was he turning away from Elliot ever again.

The doorbell rang.

“It’s probably Rick.” Peter grinned. “I did tell him it wasn’t necessary for him to come over, but you know how well he listens. Nothing will stop him charging to the rescue if one of his friends is in trouble.”

David just shook his head and went to open the door, ready to make fun of Rick’s unnecessary concern. Yes, he’d needed a kick in his backside, but Peter was quite capable of doing that all by himself.

But it wasn’t Rick at the door.

“Elliot?” David wanted to pinch himself to make sure he wasn’t dreaming.

Elliot was even paler than usual. He had dark rings under his eyes and his curly hair was a total mess. His face looked drawn and haggard, and his lips trembled.

David had never seen a more beautiful sight.

“David, please...” Elliot took a deep breath and stood up straight, his dark woollen coat suddenly looking large on his frame. “I’m so sorry. I want to explain to you...about what happened. Will you please, please give me a chance?”

“Elliot...” David’s eyes burned with unshed tears as he let the relief of seeing his lover again sink in. Elliot had come all the way back to Riverside. Maybe there was hope. He was unable to speak for a few moments.

“Just a few minutes. Please. I won’t take much of your time, I promise.” Elliot’s eyes were suspiciously bright.

“Of course I’ll listen to you. You can have as much time as you need, then there’s a few things I need to tell you as well. Please, come in.” David stepped aside to let his hopefully soon-to-be-lover into his apartment.

Elliot shook so hard he thought he might break into a million pieces at the slightest provocation. He’d been tired and emotionally drained when he left Boston. Adding the two-day drive to get to Riverside had pushed him beyond exhausted. He’d managed to find Rick’s parents, who’d been so nice to David. Thank God they still lived in the same sprawling property they’d always owned. And they’d known David’s new address, like he’d hoped.

That had been the easy part. Now he was dead on his feet and more scared than he'd ever been in his life, but David's reaction gave him some hope.

Anything other than outright rejection was a major step in the right direction as far as he was concerned. He wasn't sure he could have dealt with David refusing to listen to him. He needed David back in his life so much, he'd even accept them only being friends. But he desperately wanted so much more, now that he knew how much they still loved each other. Thank God that hadn't changed. The warmth in David's eyes as he asked him into his apartment was unmistakable, though. It gave him something to work with.

"Here, let me take your coat." David reached for it and their hands touched. His eyes widened. "God, your hands are so cold. Come here, let me warm them up for you."

"David?"

Elliot watched, speechless with relief, as David took his freezing fingers between his two hands and pulled them to his mouth, blowing warm, moist air over them.

He stepped closer, craving David's body heat. He didn't dare look at him yet. David let go with his left hand to encircle Elliot's shoulders and pulled his hands towards his chest with his right for a tighter embrace. Elliot didn't resist—couldn't have if he'd tried—and let his forehead sink onto David's strong shoulder. With a sigh, David pulled him in completely and they stood there for a few minutes enjoying the closeness.

This was where Elliot wanted to be. Forever.

"I'll be going then, guys." The voice came from behind Elliot but he didn't have the energy to lift his head to check who it was.

"Thanks for coming by, Peter." David hadn't loosened his grip for even one second.

Elliot was glad. If this was the Peter he remembered from high school he should say hello but he couldn't deal with it right now. Anything taking him away from David and the immediate need to explain would be too much.

"Sure, no problem, man. Give me a call when you're ready, will you?" Peter chuckled.

David nodded, the movement making his shoulder move against Elliot's forehead.

The sound of Peter opening and closing the apartment door behind him told Elliot that they were alone. Now the hard part would start. Hopefully David wouldn't let go of him any time soon. Being in his arms like this gave Elliot so much strength. He could easily say what he'd come here to say, if he were only allowed to stay close.

"Let's go into the living room, huh?" David's voice was quiet as he turned Elliot in his arms so that they could walk together.

"Okay." Elliot didn't look up and followed David's lead until they were seated on an over-stuffed sofa. Thank God David hadn't let go of him.

"I want you to know how sorry I am." David took both of Elliot's hands into his slightly larger ones and carefully squeezed them.

"What?" Elliot lifted his head and looked straight into David's shining brown eyes to find them tinged with worry and regret. "I'm at fault. What do you have to apologise for?"

"For leaving you to deal with your father on your own. Again." David sighed. "I've realised that I should have come after you as soon as I was eighteen. I made myself believe that you were completely to blame for not coming back to Riverside. Looking back at it now I know that our long separation is my fault as much as yours. Probably more so because I didn't have a father controlling everything I did."

"I don't blame you for not coming after me. It would have been really difficult for you to find out where we'd moved to." Elliot swallowed the lump in his throat. "I'm just glad you did



find me eventually.”

“I still blame myself.” David looked so sad.

Elliot lifted a hand to cup David’s jaw and caress his stubbled cheek with a thumb.

“Don’t. You couldn’t have known how badly my parents were treating me. How impossible my father made it for me to get in touch with you.” Elliot took a deep breath. David had made it so easy for him but he still needed to apologise, not to mention explain his behaviour. “And I came here to apologise to you.”

“You don’t have to.” David turned his head and kissed the inside of Elliot’s hand.

“But I want to. What happened on Sunday after my father had security open our hotel room door to catch us like he did...it felt too much like what had happened five years ago. I couldn’t cope.” Elliot ducked his head because he couldn’t meet David’s eyes anymore. “I’m sorry that I was so weak.”

“You’re not weak, no way. You wouldn’t have survived the last five years and still be the man you are today if you were weak.” David’s hand slid under Elliot’s chin, lifting it. “I’m curious about what happened in that hotel room, though. Whatever it was that made you so still and quiet must have been pretty serious. You’d never have given in otherwise. I’m just sorry I didn’t recognise that you needed my help on Sunday and walked out on you again.”

“I’m not sure, but I think I had a panic attack. It’s never happened before, but maybe the similarity of the situation with the one five years ago triggered the reaction in me. After my father’s first few words this grey haze took hold of me, and even though I knew people were speaking, I couldn’t make sense of anything. I couldn’t move and my breath came so fast that all I could do was try to control it before I fainted.” Elliot shook himself to dispel the cold dread that seized him from reliving this memory.

“That explains it. I was wondering why you didn’t move, didn’t speak. You didn’t react to anything I said, and that scared me. I should have realised that something was really wrong rather than thinking you just didn’t have the courage to do anything about your situation. It made me so angry I couldn’t think straight.” David kissed Elliot on the cheek and pulled him more closely into his embrace. “I’m sorry for assuming the worst and promise you that it’ll never happen again.”

“Thank you for understanding.” Elliot was so relieved that he let himself melt into David’s embrace. He closed his eyes, enjoying the moment. David’s musky scent was all around him, his strong arms protected him and his heartbeat lulled him into complete relaxation.

“I love you, Elliot.” David stroked the back of his head and held him tightly. “I love you so much, of course I understand.”

So this was what unconditional love felt like. Elliot smiled and let himself drift off. He just wanted to rest for a bit, then he’d show David how grateful he was.

\* \* \* \*

David looked down at the man sleeping peacefully in his arms. Elliot still looked as exhausted as when he’d first arrived. Black rings under his eyes and new lines on his face were testament to what he must have gone through to break away from his parents and find his way home. But at least there was a little colour in his cheeks and a smile played around his lips. He looked happier now than David had seen him since they’d found each other again.

David leant back so he could relax and closed his eyes. Resting like this felt wonderful. They sat there for a long time doing absolutely nothing, and yet David had never been happier in

his life. Many questions still remained, but the most important one had been dealt with successfully. Elliot was going to stay around, and they were going to be a real couple. It was a good start to their new life and all he needed for now.

A little over an hour later Elliot's breathing sped up and his eyes opened.

"Did-did I actually fall asleep on you?" Elliot blinked and tried to suppress a yawn as he sat up.

"Yeah, you did." David chuckled at the horrified expression that crossed Elliot's face. "I figure you needed the rest. You look exhausted."

"It was a long drive, almost two days, but so worth it." Elliot rubbed his face.

David already missed his touch.

"I have no idea what to do next. I'll have to find a place to live, a job, and..." Elliot sounded lost.

"I don't know about you, but I think we've spent enough time apart to last us a lifetime." David took Elliot's hands into his. "I'd very much like it if you moved in with me. The apartment isn't big but I can't stand the thought of you living somewhere else. I hope this isn't too fast for you..."

"Too fast? Are you serious?" Elliot's blue eyes lit up. "You really want me to live with you? There's nothing I would like more. I don't care how big or small the apartment is. As long as I can be with you, I'll go anywhere."

"Good, that's settled then." David sealed the deal by kissing Elliot on the nose. Anything more and he wouldn't be able to pull away again. "I'm thinking that you might have some stuff in your car. Maybe we should take care of that first."

"First?" Elliot's eyes twinkled.

"Yes, first. Once we're done I have plans for you." David took Elliot's left hand and pulled him up with him into a standing position.

"I can live with that." Elliot followed him into the hallway and they put on their coats before braving the cold January air.

With the two of them working together, the car was quickly emptied. Elliot hadn't brought much, so they put everything into the small spare room that David occasionally used as a home office. He didn't really need it anyway, so they could decide where everything went much later.

"Since you've seen most of the apartment already, I don't think you need a complete tour." David smiled when Elliot's eyes brightened.

"I think you're right. In fact, I have a very specific request." Elliot's smile made him look like the imp he could be when in the right mood.

"A specific request, huh?" David barely suppressed his own grin. "And what might that be?"

"I don't believe you've shown me where I'll be sleeping yet." Elliot took his hand.

"Hmm, I do believe that you're referring to the bedroom." David mock-frowned.

"There's only one problem with that."

"Oh, a problem?" Elliot tried to look worried but his twitching lips gave him away.

He was enjoying this as much as David was.

"Yes, a problem. I don't believe you'll be doing much sleeping there." David started walking them towards the bedroom at the back of the apartment.

"I don't see how that's a problem." Elliot turned serious as they entered the room. "As long as I'm here with you, I don't care what we do."

That deserved a kiss. David pulled Elliot with him and toppled both of them onto the bed. Elliot laughed and lay on his back. David moved so that he laid half-over him, one leg between his lover's slightly spread ones and his quickly hardening cock pressed against his hip. God, that felt good.

David lifted his head and pressed his lips against Elliot's. With a sigh his lover opened for him. David used his tongue to caress every surface he could reach. Elliot responded by licking and sucking David's tongue and lips in return.

Just kissing Elliot wasn't enough. David wanted to touch him all over, to feel his warm skin under his fingertips. He pulled back and started taking Elliot's sweater and shirt off. Elliot returned the favour and very soon they were both naked.

David briefly left Elliot to get lube and a condom from the bathroom, pushing them under a pillow as he joined his waiting lover under the sheets. With bodies pressed tightly together, their naked skin rubbing everywhere from chest to groin, they started kissing and caressing each other and didn't stop.

"I want you in me this time." Elliot's pupils were dilated with lust and he was grinding his hard cock against David's thigh in sensuous, slow movements.

"Fuck. That makes me so hot when you say that." David grabbed the lube, opened it and covered his fingers without even looking.

"You want me on my back?" Elliot grinned from ear to ear when David's hips bucked against him. "You like me talking about this stuff, don't you?"

"Oh, God, yes, I do." David didn't lose any time going for Elliot's tiny opening.

"Ahhh, that feels so good." Elliot pressed against David's finger so its tip slid in. "So much better than a dildo."

"A-a dildo?" David almost came at the thought of Elliot playing with himself like that. One day, he was going to ask his lover to show him exactly what he'd done. The mental image that evoked was too sexy for words.

"Yeah, well, what was I going to do?" Elliot had blushed a deep shade of red. "I wasn't about to let another man touch me there."

"I'm glad." David took a deep breath to regain control.

Once he was sure he'd staved off his orgasm for the time being, he carefully prepared Elliot, not wanting to hurt him. He soon realised he'd lose his self-control before ever making it inside. His lover was undulating and moaning underneath him as he inserted two, then three digits and slowly finger fucked him.

"Please. Now. I need you." Elliot panted for air, moving frantically on David's fingers.

Focusing on the task at hand with every bit of will power he had left, David opened the foil packet, slid the condom over his swollen shaft and positioned himself at Elliot's waiting hole. It was hard to wait, but he wanted Elliot to have a say as well.

When Elliot nodded, he pushed inside, carefully watching his lover for any sign of discomfort. But Elliot moaned and moved upwards so that he slid in much faster than he'd planned. Elliot hissed with the sudden penetration but grabbed David's ass cheeks to hold him inside.

"Shit. So good. Just give me a moment." Elliot turned his face up for a kiss.

David bent down to oblige him.

When the kiss deepened and Elliot started to move, David knew it was time. He pulled back slowly, making Elliot moan, and pushed back in just as slowly. Elliot arched his back and met him thrust for thrust as they worked towards fulfilment.

Sweat began to coat their bodies and David couldn't resist a taste. He licked his way along Elliot's neck, following his collarbone to his shoulder and sucked the hot skin until Elliot started squirming. David was totally lost in the moment, the scent and the lustful sounds his lover was making were making his arousal rise even higher.

He knew that he wouldn't be able to hold on much longer when his balls tightened and the tingling at the base of his back started spreading upward. He slammed into Elliot with all he had, the hard, deep thrusts making Elliot pant. Finally his lover threw back his head.

"Fuck!" Elliot spurted hot semen between their bodies, and his channel contracted around David's throbbing cock in a tight squeeze that was irresistible.

"Elliot!" David lost his rhythm and gave in to his own need.

He jerked and shuddered as he came into the condom in the most powerful orgasm he could remember. Shaking with the intensity of his feelings, he clung to Elliot as the only fixed point in his existence.

When he was done, he pulled out and dealt with the condom before collapsing, half-covering Elliot's heated body.

"Love you." Elliot's voice was whisper soft in his ear and the arm coming around his middle, pressing him against his lover's body, felt like heaven.

"I love you, too." David pressed his face against Elliot's neck and breathed in the scent of sweat and sex.

Even though he'd never left Riverside, so he had nothing to compare it with, he'd been pretty sure that the town was his home. He now realised that he'd been wrong. This man, this hot body and delicious scent, the love Elliot returned, that was David's true home. Having finally been reunited with the only man he'd ever loved made him happier than he'd ever thought he would be.

"Never going to leave again." Elliot caressed his back in lazy strokes.

"Never going to let you go again." David smiled and tightened his grip around Elliot's middle. "Don't want to keep you a prisoner or anything, but one separation like this is more than enough for my lifetime."

"I totally agree." Elliot pressed a kiss on to David's temple. "This is the only reunion I ever want to celebrate with you."

\* \* \* \*

## **Riverside, Texas**

*Thursday January 17, 2008*

Elliot woke to sunshine streaming in through the window and a snuffling David in his arms. He smiled as he listened to the contented sounds. David's face was relaxed and he looked happy. His stubble was more pronounced than it had been last night and gave him a roguish appearance.

Elliot was still exhausted from the ordeal of telling his parents the truth followed by driving the almost two thousand miles to Riverside. He'd taken a lot of breaks, but still, two days in a car, all on his own, had taken its toll. Now that he'd slept through the night, he should at least be able to function. He had so much to do, a new life to start. Finding a job was his first priority, now that his living situation was settled.

But what sort of a job could he get? He didn't particularly want to go back to anything

even close to business or advertising. Unfortunately, he wasn't qualified for anything else. Nor did he have any references. And it wasn't like he could ask his father to write him one. Even if he did, the result would hardly be glowing praise. He sighed.

David's snuffling stopped and his eyes opened, the dark brown depths drawing Elliot like a bear to honey. Lost. He could get totally lost in this man.

"Morning, handsome." David blinked a few times. "Why are you sighing as if you're carrying the weight of the world on your back?"

"Morning, gorgeous." Elliot laughed at David's indignation. "Sorry about my sigh waking you up. I didn't mean to do that. I was just trying to get my life in order. Figuring out what I'm going to do for a job isn't exactly easy."

"Huh? Here in bed? When you should be cuddling with me?" David grinned, slid his arms around Elliot's middle and wriggled until they were touching in all the best places.

"Hmm, I see what you mean." Elliot circled his hips and moaned with the resulting friction. His morning wood became harder and his balls tingled. "This does feel like a lot more fun than doing a job search in my head."

"Oh, yeah, much better." David pressed his groin into Elliot's, letting their cocks rub against each other.

Elliot tilted his head so he could kiss his lover. Their tongues caressed each other, slowly sliding and tangling. There was no rush, no urgency. They had the rest of their lives together. His arousal rose slowly, David's hands caressing his back, the top of his ass, his hips and flanks. He returned the careful touches, then they withdrew from the kiss, smiling at each other.

After a long time of grinding and sliding against David, his breath started speeding up and the urgency grew. He touched his forehead to David's and that was how they came, staring into each other's eyes. They stayed still for a long time, enjoying the aftershocks and the closeness.

When the stickiness became too uncomfortable, they got up, showered and dressed. David made a breakfast of pancakes and bacon, before they sat down at the small kitchen table to enjoy their first home-cooked meal together. Elliot was ravenous, because he hadn't eaten anything the previous night. Nor had David.

"God, this is good." Elliot sipped some coffee before returning to the best pancakes he'd ever had.

"Glad you like my cooking." David glanced at Elliot very briefly before returning his attention to this plate.

David was clearly more focused on his food than on their relationship at the moment. That was fine for now, because he had the same priority. They'd get back to the issues a little later. He was sure everything would look a lot easier once his stomach was full. The plates were soon empty and Elliot leant back in his chair, content.

"Now we can work on figuring out your life and what you're going to do with it outside our home." David grinned and reached for his hand. "Will you let me know what you were thinking so hard about?"

"I need a job, right?" Elliot held onto David's hand, needing that connection to support him as he worked his way through his thoughts. "And the job I'm qualified for is not the job I want to do. My father wanted me to be a businessman, but I never did."

"So, what do you want to be?" David tilted his head. "I remember you always talked about being an architect, designing buildings and stuff like that. Is that still what you'd like to do?"

“You remember that?” Elliot cocked an eyebrow.

“Of course I do. It was all you ever talked about. I mean, you never wanted to be a cop or a fire fighter or a race-car driver. You always sketched buildings.” David smiled. “And I bet you’re clever enough to get qualified.”

“I’d really like that.” Elliot frowned. “But it would mean I wouldn’t be able to earn a lot of money for a while. And I’d only do it as long as can stay right here in Riverside with you.”

“Don’t worry about the money. We’ll figure that out.” David leant forward. “In fact, I’m sure there are a few architects here in town that might want part-time help while you work on your degree.”

“That would be great.” Elliot bent forward to look deep into David’s eyes. “Because I meant what I said earlier.”

“What?” David’s impish grin warmed Elliot’s heart. “The bit about never being separated again?”

Elliot nodded

“Oh, I took your word on it, handsome.” David gave him a quick peck on the lips. “This will be the only reunion we ever have.”

Elliot could live with that. He could so live with that.

## **About the Author**

I’m a night owl who starts writing when everyone else in my time zone is asleep. I’ve loved reading all my life and spent most of my childhood with my nose buried in a book. Although I always wanted to be a writer, financial independence came first. Twenty-some years and a successful business career later I took some online writing classes and never looked back.

Living and working in seven countries has taught me that there’s more than one way to get things done. It has instilled tremendous respect for the many different cultures, beliefs, attitudes and preferences that exist on our planet.

I like exploring those differences in my stories, most of which happen to be romances. My characters have a tendency to want to do their own thing, so I often have to rein them back in. The one thing we all agree on is the desire for a happy ending.

I currently live in the United Kingdom, sharing my house with a vast collection of books. I like reading, travelling, spending time with my nieces and listening to classical music. I have a passion for science and learning new languages.

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