



MEN OF RIVERSIDE
REDISCOVERING ADRIAN
SERENA YATES

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Rediscovering Adrian

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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-sizzling*.

Men of Riverside

REDISCOVERING ADRIAN

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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Chapter One

Riverside, Saturday April 26, 2003.

"Adrian?" Peter Adams stared at his best friend whose eyes were luminous in the shadows of the backyard. "What are you doing out here?"

It was too chilly to be sitting on the swings, and anyway, the birthday party was inside the house. Rick was the third of their close group of friends to turn eighteen and he was celebrating in style, having invited everyone in their high school year. They'd had fun in the basement-turned-disco earlier, the whole group dancing as if there was no tomorrow. Peter had lost track of Adrian while he and Rick tried to cheer up David who was the fourth member of their group.

Adrian dropped his gaze and shrugged his shoulders, looking dejected.

"What's going on buddy?" Peter sat on his haunches, resting his arms on his thighs as he tried to get Adrian to look at him again.

Adrian shook his head, his slightly too long brown hair covering his forehead and hiding his dark-copper eyes. Peter fisted his hands in an effort to stop himself from touching Adrian. They were best friends and that was all there was to it. If anyone found out how attracted he was to Adrian, including Adrian, bad things might happen. He didn't want them to get separated like David and Elliot. Granted, those two had been caught kissing, not just touching, but knowing how traditional his mother and Adrian's parents were, Peter wasn't going to risk it.

"Something's wrong, isn't it?" Peter was determined to find out what was going on. He couldn't stand seeing Adrian this depressed.

"Just the usual." Adrian raked his hair before dropping his hand back onto his thigh and looking up. "Don't worry about it. There's nothing you can do about it, anyway."

"The usual?" Peter took a deep breath. "Have they been harassing you about your height again?"

"Just teasing. You know what they're like. I'm not a jock and never will be. Being called a baby, though, only because I'm small and just turned eighteen, got to me." Adrian

shrugged and dropped his head. "I just needed a moment alone. Didn't want to drag you out here."

"You didn't drag me out here. I missed you and wanted to check what was going on with you." Shit, that was way too close to the truth. Why could Peter never switch on his brain before opening his mouth? He'd have to learn someday soon or he'd never become a good PI.

"You missed me?" Adrian looked back up, something like hope in his eyes.

"Yeah, well..." How was he going to get out of this one?

"Oh, you mean..." Adrian looked hurt and Peter couldn't stand it.

"I mean I missed you." Peter was going to get into all kinds of trouble for this, but he couldn't let Adrian believe he was all alone. Adrian was having enough trouble because his father didn't like him or his hobby very much. Baking the most wonderful creations with his mother wasn't "manly" enough for his father. And most of their classmates made fun of Adrian because he was small and wiry, making him look much younger than he actually was.

"You're serious, aren't you?" Adrian sat up straight, making the swing move and his knee brush against Peter's thigh.

"Well, yes, I mean we're best friends, aren't we?" There, that was safe enough. Peter could only hope that Adrian would drop it now.

"Yes, of course we are. But..." Adrian swallowed.

"What?" Peter's heart started beating faster, partly hoping that Adrian was going to return his feelings and partly fearing that he would. "What are you trying to say?"

"I-I don't know." Adrian looked flustered and confused.

Even though Peter felt sorry for him, it was a very good look, sort of adorable. Not that he'd ever say that out loud. He didn't want to make Adrian feel worse than he already was.

It had sounded almost as if Adrian wanted more than friendship. Could it be true? Was Peter not the only one feeling more? Only one way to find out. He took a deep breath for courage and stretched his arm until he was able to touch Adrian's hand. His friend's fingers were cold but curled around Peter's immediately, as if happy to have found a home.

The tingling excitement that travelled from Peter's fingers up his arm made him feel warm all over. They'd touched before while doing homework or working on class projects, but it had never felt like this. It was as if Adrian and he were the only two people in

existence. The rest of the world didn't matter. Peter twined their fingers together, liking the image of their hands so closely linked. It looked right. It even felt right, and touched him deep down inside.

Peter looked up, straight into Adrian's blazing eyes. Was he really going to do this? Was he finally going to find out what it was like to kiss Adrian's plump lips? He'd certainly fantasised about it enough.

Just to make sure they weren't being watched, Peter turned around to check the living room that was adjacent to the large garden terrace. Everything was totally deserted, the party obviously still in full swing in the basement.

When he turned back, Adrian was still staring at him, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Peter slowly leant forward and brushed his lips across Adrian's. They both gasped. The contact was electrifying. He wanted more.

He kissed both corners of Adrian's mouth before pressing their lips together for a closed-mouth kiss that made him tremble. Adrian's lips were soft and warm. His hot breath fanned across Peter's skin, and when the other boy opened his lips to sigh into Peter's mouth, Peter felt his groin tighten in response.

He pulled back for a moment, trying to catch his breath. But Adrian didn't give him a lot of time. Before Peter knew what was happening, Adrian slid his free arm around Peter's shoulders and pulled him closer. Peter went to his knees as he moved between Adrian's spread legs. He slid his left arm around Adrian's middle to keep the swing from moving. Their clasped hands still between them, they were now pressed tightly together. From the feel of things, Adrian was just as hard as Peter and with a mutual sigh, they moved their open mouths together for another kiss.

Hesitant at first, since he'd never done this before, Peter moved his tongue along Adrian's lower lip. The careful caress made Adrian respond with his own tongue and soon they were duelling for the best spots to explore in the other's mouth. Arm tightening around Adrian's responsive body, Peter moved as close to the other boy as possible, wishing they could do more than kiss. The heat between their bodies was incredible. Adrian was just as hard as Peter and within a few moments, he was pushing his hard erection into Adrian's equally hard one, trying to get the fiction he needed.

He wanted the other boy naked, wanted to feel his skin and to explore Adrian's whole body, not just his mouth. It was as if a fire was burning inside him that could only be made bearable by touching Adrian.

It soon got to be too much. The tingling in his balls warned Peter that he was going to come from just this kiss if he didn't stop. He pulled back, trying to catch his breath, as he admired Adrian's swollen lips.

"We can't..." Adrian shook his head. His gaze flickered to the house, then back. "I'm not...we can't do this."

Adrian retreated from their embrace and Peter felt as if someone had pulled the ground out from underneath him as his hopes came crashing down around him.

"Nobody can know about this." Adrian tugged on his hand as well, but Peter wouldn't let him get away.

He was enjoying the skin-to-skin contact way too much. It was the only thing left.

"We'll be careful." Peter doubted it as soon as he said the words.

"It'll never work." Adrian pulled at his hand again and this time Peter didn't stop him. "Have you forgotten about David and Elliot? They'll probably never see each other again now that Elliot's parents have moved the family away. Nobody will even talk about where they went."

"Yeah, but those two were caught kissing." Peter shook his head. "We can be more careful than that."

"It's too risky." Adrian made his stubborn frown, the one he used when there was no reasoning with him. "I mean, my father hates gays. He already watches me like a hawk, trying to make me into more of a man by pushing girls at me. He's going to kick me out just like David's parents did—then what? I'd be on the street without a way to pay for culinary school."

"You're right." Peter looked down at the scuffed grass between his knees, feeling very empty and lonely. "So we just forget this ever happened?"

"Yes. We can't be more than friends." Adrian pushed his long hair back out of his face. His hand was shaking and a small tear rolled down one cheek.

"It's so unfair!" Peter wanted to hit something.

"I know." Adrian sighed. "I wish it was different."

"So do I. Crap."

Peter stood up with an almost superhuman effort, ready to go back inside. It didn't look as if Adrian thought they were going to be able to explore this until possibly after college. That was an eternity. All those years without being able to touch Adrian again. How was he going to survive?

* * * *

"Is that you, Peter?" Nick's voice was low.

"Yeah, sorry I woke you." Peter closed the door of their shared bedroom and started feeling his way towards his bed in the darkness. "Go back to sleep. It's late."

"I can't sleep." Nick switched on his small bedside lamp.

His face was pale under his shaggy dark hair, his eyes large and scared. Was that a bruise on his cheek? Peter's stomach cramped and bile rose in his throat. When would she ever learn?

"I-I'm sorry." Nick covered the bruise with a trembling hand and looked away. "I should have been more careful with the milk."

"Did she hit you again? After she promised not to?" Peter took the three steps to his brother's bed and took him into his arms. "I swear, I'll cut off her spending money this time."

"But that'll make her really angry." Nick slid his thin arms around Peter and held on. "Then she'll hit all of us, like she used to before your eighteenth birthday."

"We'll see about that." Peter didn't understand why his mother had broken the agreement they'd made just two months ago. "I'll have a talk with her in the morning, when she's sober."

Nick nodded but kept clinging to Peter.

"Has she done anything to Helen?" Peter didn't know if he could keep it together if he found out she'd hit the little girl. Shit, Helen was only ten.

"No, I stopped her." Nick started crying.

"That's very brave of you." Peter ground his teeth. He wished he could save Nick from having to go through the same thing he had when he was fifteen.

"Why did dad have to die? It was all okay when he was still alive." Nick's little sobs tore at Peter's heart.

"I don't know, Nick. I wish he'd never gone to work in that stupid factory."

Peter knew there hadn't really been a choice when his dad's previous employer went bankrupt nine years ago. His father wasn't qualified for anything much beyond a menial job, so he was lucky to find employment when he did. The accident had never been properly investigated, so the entire family had struggled for the last eight years.

So far, Peter had been able to earn enough money to help them survive, but it had been hard. Their mother being an alcoholic didn't help. But she'd gone too far now. She'd promised to stop the physical abuse if Peter kept handing over enough money for her to pay for her drinking habit. What might happen when he went to college and wasn't able to check her on a daily basis? He was going to have to find a way to make her behave herself once he moved to Dallas in August.

It looked as if his struggle wasn't over yet.

* * * *

Riverside, Wednesday May 14, 2003.

Adrian Shrader was happy. It was totally ridiculous, but sitting next to Peter in his family's small kitchen doing homework made him feel cheerful.

It had been a month since their realisation at Rick's party. They'd managed to return to being best friends. Well, maybe not completely. The warm thigh rubbing against his leg under the table was not in character.

"Stop that!" Adrian kept his voice low, not wanting to attract attention from Peter's ten-year-old sister who was watching cartoons in the nearby living room.

"What?" Peter glanced at him, obviously trying to look innocent. His bright green eyes were sparkling with mischief.

"You know what!" Adrian tried to stop grinning. These little stolen touches were all they had and he loved them. How was he going to convince Peter they were not a good idea? He snorted. He needed to convince himself, first, that was the real problem. He hadn't done a very good job so far.

"This?" Peter pressed closer.

The intense look in his eyes made Adrian blush.

"Yes, this." Adrian couldn't bring himself to move away. "Your mother could walk in anytime and so could Helen, for that matter."

"You're right." Peter sighed, moved his leg and scooted his chair away. "I'm sorry."

"So am I." The distance made Adrian feel lonely. He almost regretted saying something. "I wish it could be different."

"Yeah." The look Peter gave him was filled with longing.

Adrian reached out to squeeze Peter's hand.

"What the hell is going on here?" The voice came from the kitchen door, right behind him. Peter's mother wasn't even supposed to be back for another ten minutes. "I swear I leave you alone for five minutes to pick up your brother from football practice and I find you what—holding hands? In my kitchen?"

Shit.

Fuck.

Adrian pulled his hand back so quickly he almost fell off his chair. He turned around to stare at the irate woman. Her hazel eyes were riveted on him, red splotches of anger colouring her cheeks.

"I want an answer!" Mrs. Adams took a deep breath before turning around to face Nick who was rooted to the hallway floor, his eyes as big as saucers. "You're going to take your sister upstairs, Nick, and you're going to stay in your rooms until I tell you it's okay to come out."

Nick turned on his heels and stormed into the living room. He grabbed Helen's hand and pulled her upstairs where they both vanished into one of the bedrooms. The door closed with a loud bang then there was silence.

"Well, Adrian, I'm waiting." Mrs. Adams tapped her foot impatiently.

"I was just..." How to explain that he'd been trying to comfort Peter? The woman didn't look as though she'd understand or accept that explanation.

"Just what?" Mrs. Adams shoved an errant curl back behind her ear, her full attention on him. "Let me tell you. You're too close to my son. It's not normal for the two of you to spend so much time together. Peter should have a girlfriend and be taking her out. Instead, he goes to the movies with you. And see what it got him? He hasn't even got a date for the prom, yet, which is next week."

"But I like spending time with Adrian." Peter sat up straight, obviously ready to defend their friendship.

Adrian wasn't sure that was the best approach.

"That's the problem. It's wrong for you to spend all your time with a boy. Not natural. I won't stand for it. Not while you're living under my roof." Mrs. Adams stood in the kitchen door looking like an avenging angel, righteous indignation pouring from every cell in her body.

"You can't tell me who I can or can't spend my time with!" Peter frowned. "Those days are over."

"Oh, but they're not." Mrs. Adams lifted an arm and pointed at Peter. "You have Nick and Helen to think of. I won't have you set a bad example for them. You'll stop seeing Adrian. Start behaving like a man and act your age. Or you can forget seeing Nick and Helen once you're at your fancy college."

"What?" Peter moved forward in his chair. "You can't! You're never even here in the evenings. You're gone most of the night cleaning offices. Who'd watch them?"

"Believe me young man, I'll find a solution. Anything is better than them seeing their older brother act like a fag." Mrs Adams dropped her arm but didn't stop glaring at Peter.

Adrian couldn't stand it anymore. He wasn't going to let Peter risk everything they'd worked so hard for. There was no way that Nick and Helen could be left to their own devices. Not with this woman.

"It's okay, Peter." Adrian was devastated before he'd even said what he knew Mrs. Adams wanted to hear. "We don't have to spend that much time together. If your mother wants you to date, then that's probably what you should do."

"But Adrian..." Peter's eyes were huge.

"No buts, Peter." Adrian's heart hurt at the thought of seeing even less of his friend. He had no choice though. "It's more important for you to take care of Nick and Helen than it is for us to have fun together."

* * * *

Riverside, Saturday May 24, 2003

Adrian glanced at the blonde girl in the ridiculously fluffy gown who he'd taken to the prom. He'd never been on a date with a girl before and he didn't really like her all that much, but it had been the only way he could attend the prom and hopefully see Peter. They'd planned to go to the prom together but the ultimatum Mrs. Adams had given them the other

day had stopped them. Rather than miss the event, they'd decided to both take a girl in the hopes of being able to get rid of them and meet up at some point.

Unfortunately, that plan hadn't worked. It was now almost midnight and Adrian hadn't been able to get rid of his date all evening. It was time to take action.

"Will you please excuse me for a moment? I'll be right back." Adrian was relieved when she nodded and turned to one of her many friends.

Winking at Peter on his way to the men's room, Adrian walked to the back of the hotel's ballroom. He needed to talk to Peter. They'd only seen each other in school for the last week and it wasn't enough. As he opened the door, he was relieved to see Peter right behind him. After a quick check to make sure nobody was around, he turned only to see Peter shake his head and pass him a small piece of paper.

He was too stunned to speak while he watched Peter wash his hands and leave the facility without saying a single word. When he opened the message, there was a plastic keycard inside, the name of a motel about half an hour out of town and a room number. His eyes widened. "As soon as possible" was the only other text on the small piece of paper. He grinned. That sounded a lot better than he'd dared hope for.

The next half hour was a flurry of activity. Returning the girl to her home and managing not to have to kiss her was a bit of a challenge, but he managed. When he finally arrived at the motel, he was nervous enough to be shaking. It took him three tries to get the door to the room open, but when he did, the sight that greeted him made it all worth the wait.

Peter lay on the bed wearing a huge smile. Adrian quickly closed and locked the door behind him before walking towards his friend. They were finally alone and he didn't care how much time they had, he was going to make the most of it. He wanted another kiss like the one they'd shared in Rick's backyard. The thought made his dress slacks feel uncomfortably tight.

"Hey, handsome." Peter opened his arms. "I've missed you."

Adrian nodded, unable to speak past the lump in his throat. He walked up to the bed and lay down next to Peter, sighing when his friend tightened his arms around him and pressed their bodies close together. The feeling of Peter's hard body against his own, heat seeping through two layers of clothes, was incredible. It made him hard within seconds and

when he tried to wriggle himself into a more comfortable position, Peter's equally hard erection pressed against his. It made his arousal rise even further. He moaned.

"So good." Peter whispered. "You feel so good in my arms."

"I've missed you, too." Adrian slid one leg between Peter's and lifted his head. Their mouths were only inches apart.

The first kiss was slow and tender. Adrian took his time licking into Peter's mouth, stroking his tongue and exploring everywhere he could reach. Peter reciprocated and each subsequent kiss was hotter and more urgent than the last. The heat and lack of oxygen became unbearable and Adrian pulled back.

"God, you make me so hot." Adrian lifted his hand and cupped Peter's cheek, loving the feel of the slight stubble.

"Same here." Peter smiled and turned his head to kiss Adrian's palm. It made tingles travel straight from his hand to his cock, increasing the pressure inside his dress slacks, making it almost unbearable.

"Want to get naked with me?" Peter waggled his eyebrows.

"I want to do everything with you." Adrian had thought about it for a long time and he was ready to explore the physical side of their relationship. They finally had the opportunity to try some of the things he'd fantasised about when he jerked off. He always imagined a naked Peter, skin-on-skin contact and a hand other than Adrian's own on his throbbing cock. He was painfully hard now, his erection pressing against the zipper with increasing force.

"We may not have time for *everything*, but I bet we can try some interesting things." Peter pushed off the bed and started opening his shirt.

Adrian did the same, careful to match his friend's speed. It was almost like undressing before a mirror as they managed to keep up with each other until nothing but their underwear was left. Blushing furiously, Adrian followed Peter's lead and took those off as well. His eyes were riveted to his friend's groin and the hard erection that sprang from a nest of crinkly black hair. It matched Peter's abundant chest hair and framed the long, hard cock perfectly. This was even better than in his fantasies.

When he looked up into Peter's eyes, they were blazing with the same lust that was making Adrian harder than he'd ever been. Peter pulled back the sheets and, within seconds, they were both on the bed and in each other's arms. Adrian was on his back with Peter above him, supporting his weight on his elbows. The skin-on-skin contact was electrifying and

Adrian ground his aching cock against Peter's belly until they were both perfectly aligned to rub against each other.

"God, that feels good." Peter lowered his head and kissed Adrian deeply.

Tongues tangling and lower bodies working towards their common goal of finding release, they moved in a lustful dance that soon had them panting into each other's mouths. Adrian had never felt this good. So much better than his own hand. The scent of arousal and light sweat was intoxicating. The friction along his hard cock increased the heat and pressure in his balls until he couldn't hold back.

"Fuck!" Adrian tightened his hold on Peter's ass cheeks and redoubled his efforts. "So close."

"Yeah." Peter grimaced. "Gonna make me come."

That was it. With a last thrust against Peter's lower body, Adrian gave in and let himself come. Jolts of pleasure travelled from his balls to his brain and spurts of hot semen splashed into the narrow space between their bodies.

Seconds later, more hot wetness slicked their trembling movements and gave Adrian the most intense aftershocks of his life. It was as if he couldn't stop coming.

But finally his balls were empty, and he pulled an equally exhausted Peter down onto him. He loved feeling the weight of the other man against his body. This was the way he wanted to spend the rest of his life.

Chapter Two

Houston, Sunday June 8, 2003

Adrian pulled his knees up against his chest and encircled them with his arms. It wasn't cold but trying to be inconspicuous had grown into a habit in the two weeks since he'd left Riverside. He leant back against the alley wall after checking that the old woman with her dog and the harmless drunk nearby were the only other people in sight. They'd become his neighbours, homeless like him, and he relied on them to help keep him safe at night.

Adrian closed his eyes. He still didn't really understand what had gone wrong after the night of the prom. He'd woken up in the middle of the night, all warm and snuggled against Peter's hot body, ready for some more action. Then Peter's cell had rung. The conversation with his mother was short. Peter had gone pale only a few seconds into the call. Then his face had hardened as he'd told his mother that he'd be right home.

His friend's face had been rigid, no emotion showing at all. Adrian had drawn his own conclusions. Peter's mother had obviously told him to come home and he had no intention of fighting her. For a brief moment, Adrian had wondered if Peter regretted what they'd done together. But then he'd realised it didn't really matter because taking care of Nick and Helen was obviously important for Peter.

Adrian couldn't disagree. Those two needed Peter more than Adrian did. He wasn't going to stand in their way. He'd never forgive himself if anything happened to the younger kids, and neither would Peter. Adrian had gotten dressed and was out of the motel room before Peter returned from the bathroom. He wasn't going to stand in the way of his friend making sure that his younger siblings were safe and taken care of.

As he was making his way to his parents' house, he'd realised that he couldn't stay in Riverside. His father was already less than supportive of his plans to become a baker, so it was unlikely that he was going to be allowed to continue living at home. He was sorry he had to leave his younger brother Mark behind, but there was no way he could take him with him. It would be unbearable to live in the same city as Peter without being able to see him. So he'd decided to leave, start a new life as far away from bad memories as possible. He'd been to Houston a couple of times and the city was big enough to hide in.

Adrian sighed, remembering how he'd gone back home, packed a few essentials and taken his trusty backpack to the Greyhound station. The early bus had taken him to his new home city easily enough, but it had been much harder to find a job than he'd thought. He'd lived with the other homeless people for the last two weeks. He'd been lucky to find this fairly protected alleyway with its two somewhat friendly inhabitants.

Tomorrow everything would change. The interview with one of the biggest bakeries in this neighbourhood had gone well, and the owner, a Mr. Emmett, had asked him to come back the next day.

Adrian was going to start a new life and focus on becoming the best baker possible. Leaving Peter hurt, but he'd get over the pain of losing his best friend and one-time lover, given enough time. And if he kept telling himself that, he might actually believe it one of these days.

* * * *

"Well, young man, you have the job if you want it." Mr. Emmett was of average height and build, with a small paunch, probably from sampling his own products. "I liked your idea for a new raisin bread recipe. And the cherry pie you made was absolutely delicious. My wife's favourite from amongst the applicants' efforts by far."

"Thank you, Mr. Emmett." The relief Adrian felt made his knees buckle. "Thank you so much. I promise, you won't regret giving me a chance."

"Yeah, well, you might think differently after the first few early morning shifts. Those are hard work." Mr. Emmett smiled.

"It doesn't matter. I'll work hard." Adrian was more worried about finding somewhere to live. He'd managed to clean up in the municipal swimming pool this morning, but he'd used up his last clean set of clothes and he couldn't keep living on the streets.

"I'm sure you will. You look like a very determined young man." Mr. Emmett narrowed his eyes. "However, I'm a little concerned about your living arrangements."

"My – my living arrangements?" Oh, God, this was too embarrassing.

"Yes, I don't really want you to have to get up even earlier to come in here on time. So, I've been thinking..."

What? He wasn't going to lose his new job before he'd even started it?

"There's a small apartment for rent above the bookstore next door. Would you be interested in that?" Mr. Emmett needn't have asked.

"Yes, thank you, I would be. Except..." Adrian blushed. "It depends on how expensive it is. I don't have any money for a big down payment or anything."

"Doesn't matter. I'll take care of that for now and you can pay me back when you're ready." Mr. Emmett grinned. "My wife actually suggested you pay us back in cherry pies, you know?"

"She did?" This was almost too good to be true. It sounded as if Adrian had an ally in the woman. "Are you sure, Mr. Emmett?"

"She who has the last say is sure." Mr. Emmett winked at him. "That is all either of us need to know."

* * * *

Riverside, Monday June 9, 2003.

"What do you mean—Adrian's gone?" Rick stared at Peter. They were at Rick's parents' house after their weekly game of baseball.

"He's just—gone." Peter followed Rick into the kitchen. His stomach cramped at the memory of returning from the motel's bathroom to find that Adrian had left. In the middle of the night. What had he done to drive his best friend away?

"How do you know?" Rick looked puzzled as he sat down at the kitchen table pulling open his can of soda. "I assume you've checked with his parents?"

"Yes, I have. They told me that he'd left a note telling them not to look for him." Peter had worried for two weeks before deciding to confide in Rick. Maybe he'd overlooked something that Rick could see. Peter was scared that Adrian had rejected him, even if he didn't want to admit it.

"Well, then it looks as if he doesn't want to be found. It's weird, though, the two of you have always been so close. Do you have any idea what prompted him to leave like that?" Rick scratched his head, mussing his light brown hair.

"No, I haven't got a clue. I wish I did. Not being able to talk to him about it is driving me crazy." Peter took a sip from the sickeningly sweet can of soda.

"Do you think it was something you did?" Rick finished his soda, apparently unconcerned about the sugary taste.

"I don't know." Peter didn't really want to think about it. It hurt too much. Adrian had obviously made his decision to leave and there was nothing he could do about it. "You know what? I'm not going to worry about it anymore. I'm going to focus on doing the best summer intern job I can for Rossiter Investigations, then I've got four years of studying ahead of me. My mother is probably right. I need to become a man and focus on what's really important."

"Huh? What would your mother know about being a man?" Rick got up and got another can of soda from the fridge.

"Oh, you know her, always talking about setting a good example for Nick and Helen." He wasn't going to go into any details of why and when she'd said this. He wasn't sure how Rick was going to react to him being gay. He definitely didn't want to lose another friend.

"Oh, that." Rick sat down, opened his second can and guzzled half down in one go. "You know, sometimes I worry that you're not having enough fun. She's left raising Nick and Helen almost completely to you. And now she's making you feel guilty for not providing enough support?"

"It's okay. Anything's better than her taking care of them. One drink and she forgets everything. It's no wonder she keeps losing one cleaning job after another." Peter took a deep breath. "I need a good job after college, so I can pay for Nick's and Helen's college education in a few years."

"Now I'm really worried." Rick finished his soda and plopped the can onto the table. "You're supposed to have fun while you're in college."

"Maybe if everything else in your life is okay. But I've got responsibilities." Peter shrugged. It didn't really matter that Adrian was gone. He missed him and it hurt that he'd just left without saying goodbye. But it was probably for the better. This way Peter could focus on his education instead of being distracted by emotions that looked as if they were unrequited anyway.

How else could Adrian have left after what they'd shared? It had to be because his feelings weren't as deep as Peter's. Yeah, he just needed to keep telling himself that and everything would be all right.

Dallas, Friday August 22, 2003.

"Come in." The deep voice didn't sound inviting, but Peter had no choice.

He needed to talk to Everest College's finance planner, a Mr. Brown, to find a way of paying for his criminal justice degree. Even though his boss at Rossiter Investigations had paid part of the fees, there was still a considerable gap.

"Good morning, Mr. Brown." Peter walked inside and took a seat in the indicated chair opposite what may have been a desk underneath many stacks of paper.

"You're Peter Adams?" Mr. Brown was well into middle age with greying hair and predictable horn-rimmed glasses. He dropped the newspaper he'd been reading and gave his full attention to Peter.

"Yes, Sir." Peter was going to be as polite as possible.

"You're on time. I like that." Mr. Brown sat back in his chair.

"Yes, Sir. This is an important appointment for me." Peter reached into his backpack, pulling out another copy of his completed application forms.

"You don't need to show those to me again." Mr. Brown cracked a smile. "I remember your file. It was quite impressive."

"It was, Sir?" That sounded promising.

"Well, yes. We don't get a lot of applicants for financial aid who've already spent a few summers working in their chosen field. Your determination to become a private investigator is quite apparent." Mr. Brown leaned to his left and started shuffling through one of the many stacks of paper. "I know I've got it here somewhere."

Peter remained quiet, hoping that the man was referring to his approved paperwork. Spending all those summers in the Rossiter Investigation office doing administrative grunt work was hopefully about to pay off.

"Here it is." Mr. Brown held up a manila file folder, a twinkle in his eyes. "It should contain everything you'll need."

"You mean that my application has been approved?" Peter couldn't believe it.

"Sure has." Mr. Brown pulled out a few sheets and a cheque. "You'll need to sign this contract which states the condition of the loan before you drop by the bank to cash your check. A Mrs. Fullerton at the Wells Fargo branch on Mockingbird Lane is expecting you."

"Wow, thank you so much for your help." Peter took the sheaf of papers and put them and the cheque into one of the folders in his backpack.

"No problem, young man. It was a joy to work on your application. I hope you'll become the best criminal justice major this college has ever seen." Mr. Brown held out his hand.

Peter shook it while nodding vigorously. "I'll do my best, Sir."

Peter left the office with a smile on his face. At least this part had been easy, now all he has to do was find housing and figure out where all his classes were going to take place. He chuckled as he made his way to the used motorcycle he'd bought a few weeks ago. Finding his way around the new city would be a good way to practice his investigative skills.

* * * *

Houston, Monday January 7, 2008.

"Will you two knock it off?" Adrian had entered the large kitchen to check if everything was running smoothly. Ever since Mr. Emmett had promoted him a few months ago, he'd been spending more time in the front part of the bakery. Helping with customers was one part of his new job. Supervising the baking was the other important part of learning how to run the business.

The scene that greeted him made him glad that he'd followed his instincts. The two senior apprentices had cornered the newest employee near the sinks on the left. Irving was a scrawny little guy who didn't look as if he was almost nineteen. He pressed himself against the wall as if trying to vanish by melting into it. Frank and Lanny were using their superior height to tower over him.

"If you don't get those loaves of bread into the oven within the next few minutes there'll be hell to pay. You know how upset Mr. Emmett gets when customers are made to wait." Adrian wanted to try defusing the situation by returning everyone's attention to work.

"Why do you care about little Irving here? Is he your special friend or something?" Frank, the older and burlier of the two misfits, had turned away from Irving and glared at Adrian as though it was his fault they were on a schedule.

"It's not about whether he's my special friend or not." Adrian did feel a certain kinship with the younger man, though. He reminded him of himself when he'd first come to

Houston. "This is about decency towards a fellow worker. I'll put in terms you might be able to grasp—Mr. Emmett will dock your pay if the bread is late."

Frank scowled and looked at his accomplice. Lanny was slightly smarter than Frank, but not smart enough to see that they were fighting a losing battle. Both of them had been told to stop the bullying before today. Nothing had worked so far.

"Well?" Adrian hadn't moved closer. The fact that he'd started working out four years ago to build some muscle probably helped back him up. He'd gotten tired of being made fun of, and when a gang of three thugs almost overpowered him outside a bar one evening, he'd decided to learn how to defend himself.

"But he shouldn't even be here." Lanny looked mutinous, clearly not ready to give up. "He's not strong enough to lift the baking trays or do any of the harder work around here. Why should we have to do all heavy lifting?"

"He was hired for a reason." Adrian had long suspected that there was some underlying resentment behind the constant bullying that Irving had endured. "He's got an amazing talent for making cupcakes, petit fours and all of the other small, sweet items that sell so well. So what if he can't help with the large volume baking? You haven't exactly done a good job with any of the pastry and cake making, have you?"

"That's not fair!" Lanny growled. "Pastry making and cake baking is easy."

"And he's good at it." Adrian sighed.

When would these idiots get that through their thick skulls? Irving had been here for several months and the two of them still didn't understand that his skills were valuable.

"If you were as good as he is, I'm sure you'd be spending more time making and decorating cakes. Since you're not, it's only fair that you do a larger share of the bread baking."

"You're just protecting him because you like him." Frank fisted his hands.

Lanny stood beside his friend, trying to make his chubby face look threatening.

Adrian stood his ground and attempted to stare them down. He didn't want to get into a brawl, which would get all of them into deep trouble.

"What the hell is going on here?" Mr. Emmett's voice came from the big double door. "Are you boys out of your mind?"

"He started it." Frank and Lanny spoke almost at the same time as they were pointing at Adrian.

What was this, kindergarten?

"I doubt that very much." Mr. Emmett shook his greying head. "But I don't care who started it, there's work to be done. If everybody isn't back to doing their job in five seconds, there'll be serious consequences."

For a while, everybody focused on work and the silence in the large room was almost relaxing. Mr. Emmett left after making sure they didn't go back to fighting.

Irving tried to help with carrying a heavy baking tray to the oven, but after the fifth or sixth, it must have gotten too much for him. The corner he was holding on to slipped from his hands, and if Adrian hadn't been there to catch the heavy tray, the loaves would have crashed to the floor.

"Thank you." Irving looked flustered, his cheeks red with embarrassment. His eyes shone with gratitude.

"No problem." Adrian hoped Irving didn't get the wrong idea. Not that he wasn't cute, but Adrian wasn't interested in him. He hadn't been interested in anyone for almost five years, ever since he'd left Peter and Riverside behind.

"Thanks you for all your help." Irving stepped closer, glancing at Frank and Lanny in the other corner before speaking. "I'm really glad you stood up for me earlier. I thought they were going to beat me up for sure this time."

"It's not a problem, Irving." Adrian smiled. "I'm glad I was able to help you. I know what it's like. I used to be a lot like you."

"I can't believe that." Irving's eyes widened.

"Oh, but I was. Look at me, I'm still not very tall, am I?" That was something working out hadn't changed.

"But you're very strong." Irving tilted his head, checking out Adrian's muscles.

"I am now. But I didn't use to be." Adrian didn't really want to remember all the times he'd been teased by his classmates or the thugs that had given him a hard time.

"So, what happened?" Irving's eyes were wide.

"I decided that I needed to become a little stronger to avoid people taking advantage of me." That wasn't the full truth, but as much as Adrian was willing to tell a co-worker. "So I started working out."

"Wow, do you think that would work for me?" Irving looked hopeful.

"I'm sure it would. Do you want to come to the gym with me? I usually go after work." It would be nice to have a buddy to go with. And Irving could probably do with someone to show him the ropes.

"Sure, I'd love that!" Irving bounced on the balls of his feet. "Thanks, man."

* * * *

Riverside, Wednesday March 26, 2008.

This case was going to kill him. Peter stared at the file they'd collected on Gianni Mondello, an Italian-American who owned several local restaurants. He was also a suspected Mafia member and had long been accused of sabotaging some of his competitors. One of them had now been charged with fraud. The accused suspected foul play, insisting that he wasn't guilty.

Peter looked up from the stack of papers.

"Sometimes I wish your uncle hadn't gotten you involved in this case." He shook his head.

"I know." Rick had black rings under his eyes. "It's made me wonder why I became a lawyer in the first place. It's driving me nuts. This guy is so slippery, we can't seem to pin anything on him."

"We've had him under surveillance for almost two weeks and still can't find any proof of his involvement in anything illegal." Peter sighed and leant back in his chair. "I think it's time we took a break. You need to go home and spend some time with Mark. Your poor lover is going to feel neglected if you're not careful."

"You're right. It's late and I promised to pick him up from the restaurant he's performing at tonight." Rick rubbed his face. "I don't like that he works there because it's one of Mr. Mondello's places. But you know Mark. He's a great musician but he hasn't got a lot of common sense. He refuses to listen to my warnings."

"He's a lot like his older brother." Peter hadn't been able to forget Adrian even though he'd tried very hard. The fact that he'd just left still hurt.

"I know that Adrian's leaving hurt you, even if you won't admit it. But I still think there was more to it than him regretting what you did together. That explanation just doesn't feel right. He wasn't impulsive, not like his brother Mark is, so there must have been another

reason. You should find out where he is and go talk to him.” Rick yawned, looking apologetic as he quickly covered his mouth with a hand.

“I’m not going to go talk to him. He made his decision and he’s obviously not changed his mind. He knows where I am, so if he wanted to talk, he could have come to see me any time during the past five years.” At least Peter had his pride left. It still hurt, but it had made him stronger. He’d been able to focus on his career and on making sure that Nick and Helen were growing up safely. Nick was about to start college, so it had all been worth it.

“Have you already forgotten David and Elliot?” Rick frowned at him. “It’s only been two months since you helped them get back together, but look at how happy they are now. If you hadn’t gotten them to talk to each other, they’d still both be miserable.”

“That was totally different. Elliot was forced away because his parents moved to Boston without telling anyone where they’d gone. Elliot certainly didn’t want to leave. Adrian clearly did want to get away. He left a note for his parents, for heaven’s sake. He also doesn’t have a father holding him hostage, like Elliot did, so it must have been his choice not to come back. Can we please stop talking about this now?” Peter ground his teeth in an effort to prevent the anger and pain from taking over. There really was no point in dragging all of this back up.

“Okay, if that’s what you want. But I think you’re making a mistake.” Rick started walking past the other offices and towards the glass front door. “Just make sure you don’t spend the night here.”

Peter followed to lock up behind him. “Don’t worry, I’ll just finish up the report for the boss, then I’ll go home as well.”

Peter waved as Rick got into his car and drove off.

He closed and locked the outside door. He was only going to be a few more minutes and he’d leave through the back door that led to the employee car park. He was tired enough to fall asleep on his feet. At least he wasn’t scheduled to do the nightshift, having passed this on to a colleague.

He’d barely sat down at his desk when he heard a loud bang from the direction of the back door. What the hell? Nobody was supposed to be back there at this hour of the evening.

Peter reached towards the top drawer in his desk where he kept his gun but had only just opened it when a man of medium height appeared in the office doorway. He was

dressed completely in black and wore a matching ski mask that covered his face. His eyes were dark brown but that was all the detail Peter was able to take in.

The man lifted his right hand and time seemed to slow down. The gun with the silencer was pointed at his chest.

Fuck.

Gianni Mondello must have decided they were getting too close to one or more of his secrets.

Nick and Helen were going to be on their own.

He was never going to see Adrian again.

The muffled sound of the gun firing happened at the same time as Peter was finally able to move. He jumped up, trying to escape the bullet. Pain in his shoulder made him see stars, then a second hit in his thigh made him double over. He hit his head on the edge of the desk before falling the rest of the way to the floor.

A loud crash came from the front door. He wanted to yell for help but his voice wouldn't work.

Blackness engulfed him as he closed his eyes.

Chapter Three

Houston, Monday April 14, 2008.

"Why don't you go and take a break, Irving?" Adrian was ready for one himself, but he couldn't leave the counter unattended, not with all the money in the register. "You've worked really hard today and deserve some time to sit down and relax."

"What about you?" Irving wiped his brow with a used towel. "You've worked just as hard."

"Don't worry about me." Adrian smiled. "It'll be much easier to handle the customers now that the lunch rush is over. There's only four left in the eating area and not many more are likely to come in the next couple of hours. Anyway, I can't take a break since Mr. Emmett isn't here. And we're not going to let Frank or Lanny man the counter, are we?"

"Do you think Mr. Emmett will be okay?" Irving deposited the towel in the hamper under the counter for tonight's laundry run.

"I sure hope so. His wife said it was only a mild heart attack and he should be back on his feet in another few weeks. He'll have to take things more slowly, though, so I'm sure there'll be some changes here. We might need to hire another person to help run the front part of the store." Adrian wasn't looking forward to finding and learning to work with another person. He was used to Mr. Emmett and how he wanted to run things but who knew what a new person might add to the already volatile mix.

"I hope they're going to be like you." Irving winked. It had only been two weeks since they'd started going to the gym together, but it had already done wonders for Irving's self-confidence. He hadn't started to stand up to Frank and Lanny, yet, but he'd become less shy around Adrian.

"We'll see." Adrian chuckled. "We're going to have to get Mr. Emmett's input before we can start looking at potential candidates. So it may be a while. Now, didn't I tell you to go take a break?"

"Yes, Sir!" Irving mock saluted and vanished into the back room with a sassy smile on his lips.

Yup, definitely more self-confident.

Adrian turned around to check what needed to be done in terms of refilling the counter, cleaning up the eating area once the last remaining customers were gone and restocking the shelves with their pre-packaged takeaway product. He'd just started making his list when the little bell over the entrance door tinkled.

Four men walked in, three of them looking as if they belonged in a gangster movie and not in his bakery. They wore dark suits, dark ties, the requisite dark glasses and leather loafers. The two taller ones were rough looking and moved as if they had too many muscles. Bodyguards for sure. The third man wore what was clearly a more expensive suit, was perfectly groomed and had taken off his dark glasses.

But it was the fourth man who attracted Adrian's attention the most. Only about five-foot-ten to the gangsters' more than six feet height, he had long dark brown hair, hazel eyes and a well-toned body covered by a slightly less expensive suit. He didn't wear glasses and looked straight at Adrian. One of his eyes was slightly swollen as though he'd been hit. He shook his head slightly when Adrian opened his mouth to say something.

What was his younger brother doing in Houston in the company of these scary men? Mark was supposed to be with his lover, Rick, back in Riverside, now that they had finally moved in together. Mark hadn't told him about any concerts—in fact, he hadn't heard from him in over a month, which was highly unusual. Mark quickly shifted his eyes left and right and shook his head again. He looked down at the floor and refused to meet Adrian's eyes again.

Mr. Expensive Suit looked around, scowling at the two couples who were finishing their sandwiches. Finally, he pointed to one of the tables near the back wall. The other three followed him and they quickly took their seats, Mark right next to the obvious boss. The two goons moved their chairs around so they faced the front door. It was like a bad movie, including the impatient wave Boss Guy gave Adrian, obviously expecting service.

Normally people picked up their own food and drinks at the counter, but Adrian didn't feel like explaining this to the gangsters. They probably wouldn't understand and he was more interested in finding out what was going on with Mark than he was in maintaining a routine.

So he picked up a notepad and started walking towards the table. He hadn't seen Mark in the last two years. At the time, Mark had been on tour with his band and they'd met up for

dinner. Contrary to what their parents believed, the brothers had stayed in touch over the years even if actual meetings had been very rare. Something was definitely wrong for Mark to be here, that black and blue eye the most tangible piece of evidence.

"What can I get you gentlemen?" Adrian looked at the Boss Guy, figuring that was safer than looking at his brother.

"Do you serve espresso in this—this place of yours?" Boss Guy sneered as if he didn't expect to find anything of quality here.

"Yes, Sir, we do." Adrian told himself to remain calm and waited for further instructions.

"We'll have four doubles." Boss Guy turned towards Mark and took his smaller hand in his large paw. "And what does my darling want with his espresso today?"

Darling? Really? What about Rick? Had they broken up? What could Mark possibly see in this guy?

"Could I have some lemon cake please?" Mark had flinched when Boss Guy took his hand.

Well, that was strange and didn't make them look like lovers after all. Mark didn't look up and his voice was so soft that Adrian almost didn't catch what he was saying.

"But of course you can, my little angel. You can have anything in this store you want." Boss Guy patted Mark's hand, making the man shiver, and turned back towards Adrian. "You heard him. One slice of lemon cake, and I'll take whatever chocolate cake you're serving."

"Certainly, Sir." Adrian made notes even though it was easy to remember the order. He had a feeling that Boss Guy wouldn't be too impressed if he didn't act like a regular waiter. He turned to the two goons. "And what would you two gentlemen like with your coffee?"

"Nothing!" Boss Guy spat out the word with enough vehemence that Mark tried to draw back, but Boss Guy held him in place. "They're on a permanent diet!"

"Sorry, Sir, I didn't know." Adrian wasn't sure whether to be more shocked about the man telling his employees what to eat or about Mark's reaction to Boss Guy's touches and loud voice. That and the shiner he sported on his face further increased Adrian's suspicions.

"Of course you didn't, you just work here." Boss Guy waived his hand at Adrian dismissively. "Go on, don't stand around doing nothing. Get our orders together, will you? We don't have all day."

Clenching his teeth to avoid telling the man what he thought about his manners, Adrian walked back towards the counter and started preparing the order. He kept watching Mark out of the corner of his eye while he was working. His brother sat very still, probably trying not to attract anyone's attention. He was leaning away from Boss Guy as far as he could, but the man kept pulling him closer to his bigger body.

When Adrian was done with the order, he put everything on a tray and walked back to the little table. When the coffees and the cakes were served, he straightened and was about to leave when Mark's much too timid voice stopped him.

"Do you have a bathroom I could use, please?" Mark didn't look up and his hands were shaking.

"Sure, it's right around the end of the counter, next to the entrance." Adrian lifted his hand to show him but realised there was no point since Mark still hadn't looked up. "I'll show you, if you want?"

"Can't you wait?" Boss Guy's voice was rough and angry.

What the hell? Was he trying to tell Mark when to go to the bathroom? Something was definitely wrong.

"I'm sorry, I can't." Mark hunched his shoulders.

"Oh, all right then." Boss Guy lifted Mark's chin to make him look up. His strong grip left red spots on Mark's light skin. "But I want you to come right back, got it, darling?"

"Of course." Mark nodded and got up when Boss Guy released his chin.

"You, go with him." Boss Guy snapped his fingers at one of the goons. "You know the drill."

The goon nodded, got up and followed Adrian and Mark to the bathroom. Was the goon going to go inside with Mark? Adrian hoped not. He needed to find an opportunity to talk to Mark alone. This might be his only one.

He glanced around the store to make sure nobody needed him. Ideally, he'd get Irving to take over at the counter, but there was no time to call him. When they reached the bathroom door, the goon held up a hand and Mark stopped moving, almost making Adrian walk into him. The goon went inside only to return shortly afterwards.

"No exit, so don't try anything." The goon walked back towards the other guys and sat down.

What had that been about?

Adrian followed Mark inside, closed and locked the door behind them.

"What the fuck is going on here? Are you okay? Are you in some kind of trouble? Do you want me to call the police?" The only reason Adrian stopped was to get some air. He certainly wasn't finished with his questions.

"We don't have much time. The bodyguard will come back if I take too long. He'll probably come back anyway because you came in here with me." Mark turned on the water and started washing his hands. "I can't explain everything right now, but you need to know that something has happened to Peter."

"Peter?" Adrian's head felt as if it was about to explode. First this situation with his brother, and now he was talking about Peter?

"Yes, Peter." Mark turned off the water and grabbed a few paper towels to dry his hands. "I know you have some issues, which drove you away, but I think he needs your help now. So I've come here to ask you to please return to Riverside."

"He needs my help? What for? What happened? Is he okay?" Adrian's heartbeat was a lot faster than normal and he was finding it hard to breathe. He'd thought of Peter every single day since he'd left. Despite everything, he still loved the man. And now he was in some sort of trouble?

"Yes, he definitely needs your help. He got shot and he's been..." Mark stopped when there was loud banging on the bathroom door.

"What are you two doing in there?" The goon's voice was slightly muffled but he sounded as if he was going to break down the door any minute now.

"I'll be right out." Mark dumped the used paper towels and turned towards the door. "Please, he really does need you."

With that, Mark opened the door and was gone.

Adrian sank back against the sink, leaning on it to keep him upright. Peter had been shot? Oh, please, don't let it be true. He hadn't seen him in so long and he'd sworn to stay away to protect Nick and Helen. But they were older now. Surely they'd be okay? The thought of Peter in trouble made him want to rush to his side and help, no matter what.

Mark hadn't been able to explain what was going on with Peter. How badly was he hurt? Was he going to get better soon? Was there going to be any permanent damage? Who was taking care of him now?

Adrian realised that he needed to go and check for himself. If Mark had risked the Boss Guy's anger over this, Peter's situation must be really serious. There was no time to lose. Adrian needed to return to Riverside as soon as possible, no matter what had happened between them.

Fuck. What was he going to do about the bakery?

* * * *

Riverside, Friday April 9, 2008.

There was pain. Intense, debilitating pain. The centre seemed to be in his head. He couldn't move. It was all too much and he let himself fall back into the darkness.

The next time he drifted towards wakefulness the pain was still there, but now there were voices. What were they saying? He couldn't understand a single word. The insistent, regular beeping kept interfering. What were they talking about? He tried to turn his head towards the sound, but he couldn't move. His eyes wouldn't open either, so he gave up. Sleeping was easier.

* * * *

Soft music pulled him out of his deep sleep. The beeping was still there, but it didn't seem so loud. It felt as if he'd been gone a long time. And why did everything hurt so badly? His head was pounding, there was a dull ache in his left shoulder and his left leg felt as if it was about to fall off. His bed was hard and narrow instead of soft and wide. Eyes. He was supposed to open his eyes. With an enormous effort, he got one open only to immediately close it against the blinding light.

"He opened an eye!" The man's voice sounded excited. "I think he's waking up."

Was he being watched?

"I'll get the nurse," said a different male voice.

Both sounded vaguely familiar but he couldn't remember who they belonged to.

He struggled to open his eyes again, careful this time not to do it too quickly. When he succeeded, there were two men at the foot of his bed and a nurse stood to his right. She lifted his arm to take his pulse and nodded as if satisfied when she was done.

"Do you know your name?" She wore her dark hair in a tight bun.

His name? Of course he knew his name. It was...damn, how could he have forgotten his name? He was ready to panic when it suddenly came back to him.

"Peter! My name is Peter." Relief surged through him.

"That's very good. What about a last name?" She walked to the bottom of the bed and picked up a clipboard.

"Uhm." Last name. Everyone had one. "Adams?"

"That's right, Mr. Adams. Here's another question for you. Do you know where you are?" The nurse started making notes.

"Oh, that's easy. I'm in a hospital." Where else would they have beds this uncomfortable and a woman wearing a nurse's uniform?

"Excellent." She finished her notes and put the clipboard back. "I'll just get the doctor for you. Meanwhile, you can talk to your friends."

There was a sense of panic as she left. Peter looked at the two men who'd stayed behind and frowned. He didn't know who they were, but she'd said they were friends.

"Your look tells me you don't know who we are, do you?" The man with the spiky blond hair smiled at him.

"You seem familiar. I just can't quite..." Peter paused and took a deep breath. "Hold on, I do remember you. We went to high school together, didn't we?"

"That was a long time ago." The man laughed. "But I'll take it. Any chance for a name?"

"David! You're David." The information just popped into his head as if it had been waiting for an opportunity to surface. He looked at the second man. "Which means you must be Elliot."

"Yes, I am." Elliott was as dark haired as David was blond. "How did you know? Two minutes ago you looked at me as though I was a total stranger."

"Well, the two of you are a couple, aren't you?" Peter frowned. That hadn't always been true, had it?

"We are now." Elliot smiled at David. "It didn't look good for us for a few years, but ever since you helped David find me, we've been all right."

"Thank God." David took Elliot's hand and they looked at each other like two lovebirds.

A sharp pain in his chest made Peter groan. He remembered helping David find Elliot. It hadn't been very long ago. But that memory also brought back his own loss. Why the hell had Adrian left him? Contrary to common belief that the pain would get less over time, it hurt just as much as that first morning when he'd realised that Adrian was gone from their motel room. Why was this the first real memory that came back to him? Why wasn't this one he could have permanently forgotten?

"Are you all right? You look really pale." David turned to get help.

"It's nothing." Peter had told himself that for years. He was better off forgetting about Adrian. If only he didn't still miss him so much.

An older man in a white coat walked in. His hair was thinning and he wore gold-rimmed glasses, but his eyes twinkled and his smile made him look much younger than his appearance suggested.

"I can see that the nurse was right. You look a lot better, Mr. Adams." The doctor picked up the clipboard and leafed through the sheets of paper. "Good, very good. Your memory seems to be coming back. How is your ability to move?"

"I can't move at all." Was that normal?

"Let's focus on your memory for now. The speed of its recovery is usually an indication of the status of the rest of the body." The doctor looked up from the notes. "I can see that you remember your name and you were able to identify where you are. Do you know what month it is?"

"I'm not sure." Peter shook his head. Was that a bandage? "I think it must be the end of March, but I don't know how long I've been unconscious, so I might be a few days off."

David and Eliot stared at him.

"Okay, let's try something else. Do you know what happened to you to cause you to be in the hospital?" The doctor raised his eyebrows.

Trying to remember made his head hurt worse. There was something about an office—he'd been in the office when it had happened. But what?

"Anything?" The doctor stared at him intently, as if willing him to remember.

"The only thing I remember is being in the office. But I don't see how that could have caused me to be here." He closed his eyes. This headache was going to kill him.

"It's okay. It's not important for now." Suddenly the doctor sounded as if he was talking to a child. "Don't worry about it. It'll come back to you in time. Just get some rest and we'll talk more when you wake up again."

"Hurts." He couldn't even form a coherent sentence anymore, how ridiculous was that?

"The nurse will give you something for the pain. I want you to get some sleep and when you're ready, we'll see how much more of your memory may have come back. It'll give me a better idea of what treatments you may need to set you on the road for rehabilitation, mental as well as physical." There were steps towards the doorway. "Gentlemen."

The doctor was leaving. David and Elliot didn't say a single word, so Peter decided it was probably best to go back to sleep. The whole situation was confusing and he wasn't going to make any progress while his head hurt like hell.

* * * *

Peter drifted in and out of sleep for what must have been a few days. David and Elliot were there most of the time. He saw his mother and his brother, Nick, once or twice and his friend Rick came by a couple of times. Peter had no problem remembering any of them, but he still couldn't recall what had led to his injuries. And nobody would talk to him about it. The doctor had said it was better if he remembered on his own.

He was able to move his arms and legs fairly soon after waking. There were gunshot wounds in his upper thigh and his left shoulder and a thick bandage around the right side of his head. Who the hell had shot him?

He wanted to go home. But the doctor said that they needed to wait and see. His other wounds were manageable, even though he'd need physical therapy. His head injury was the real worry. Apparently he had "diffuse injury to all parts of the brain" and recovery in these cases could be painfully slow. Just his luck.

It was now a week after he'd woken up from his two-week coma and the middle of April. They'd finally taken him off the heart monitor this morning, so he must be getting better. He was going to find out what had happened from Rick this evening. He had a feeling that his lawyer friend knew more than the other guys anyway.

"So, why don't you tell me what happened when I got shot?" Peter didn't even wait until Rick took his seat. He'd decided that catching the other man unawares was his best option.

"You-you remember that you were shot?" Rick sat down heavily, making the cheap little plastic visitor's chair creak in protest.

Peter didn't say anything. Using silence worked with witnesses, it might work with Rick, even though he was a lawyer and should have known better. The initial shock of Peter confronting him would hopefully be enough to get him to talk.

And Rick talked. Peter began to remember the case they'd been working on, trying to prove that Mr. Mondello was involved in illegal activities. When Rick mentioned they had been working late one evening it came back to him, but felt more like a half-forgotten dream than a memory. Rick told him that he'd left the office but had returned because he realised he'd forgotten his cell on Peter's desk.

"When I approached the front door, there was light in your office at the end of the corridor. I decided to knock on the outside door to draw your attention, and that was when the first gunshot sounded. I was petrified. But I knew you needed my help, so I got the tire iron from my car and smashed in the front door just after the second gunshot rang out. I was in time to see you crumple to the floor, hitting your head on the edge of the desk as you went down." Rick's hands were shaking.

"What did you do?" Peter fisted his hands, still not quite able to sit up.

"I was stupid!" Rick laughed. "I yelled at the idiot to drop his gun, holding the tire iron as if it was a gun of my own. I must have confused the guy, since I was coming from the unlit corridor. He panicked. Even though you were down already, he aimed at your head. I jumped him and managed to move his arm enough so the shot grazed the side of your head instead. Then I used the tire iron to make him drop the gun, after which I hit him on the back of the head and he crumpled to the floor."

"You beat him up?" Peter was impressed.

"Yeah. When he stopped moving I called nine-one-one." Rick sighed. "The guy's recovery was quite quick and he's now in prison, but he's not talking. We've no proof as to who sent him."

"Well, *we* both know that it was Mr. Mondello." If Peter ever got hold of that bastard there would be hell to pay.

“Yeah, we do. And this wasn’t the only thing Mondello did. I guess he was fed up with you and I trying to get him arrested, because he took Mark away from me. I was going to pick up Mark from what I thought was a music performance with his band. He’d been doing quite a few of them at all three of Mondello’s restaurants. Instead of finding Mark playing the piano, I found him passionately kissing Mondello. I left and by the time he made it home, I was so mad that I didn’t even let him back into the house. Then I found out that Mark went back to Mondello and they both left for Houston on a *business trip*. My brother Ben, the consummate detective, found that out.” Rick looked dejected.

No wonder. Rick adored Mark. And now Mark was gone as well? What was it with their lovers that they kept vanishing on them?

Chapter Four

Riverside, Thursday April 17, 2008.

Adrian stood and stared at the pale figure in the narrow hospital bed. Peter looked fragile and exhausted. His hair was tousled and the pale green of the hospital gown didn't do anything for his complexion. There seemed to be bandages everywhere, even on his head. This didn't look encouraging at all. At least he was still alive, his chest rising and lowering slowly as he slept.

Adrian hadn't checked into his hotel yet. Not that the two-hour drive between Houston and Riverside was very long, but he wanted to remain close to Peter in case his friend needed him. He hadn't really known what to expect, except that Mark's words from two days ago had kept haunting him.

He hadn't been able to leave immediately because he had to get the bakery situation sorted out. Luckily Mr. Emmett had been very understanding. His recent heart attack had given him a new view of what was important in life. They'd both agreed that it was okay to let Irving run the bakery side of things. Mrs. Emmett and her sister were going to take turns supervising the till and the counter. They'd both worked there in the past and were familiar with how things were done. They were also not the type of women who were going to be intimidated by difficult employees like Frank and Lanny.

That having been settled, nothing had held Adrian in Houston anymore and he'd left midmorning after the early shift. His need to see Peter and to make sure that he was all right had become a physical ache in his belly.

Now that he stood here, right on time for the afternoon visiting hours, he couldn't believe how thin Peter was. His hair was as dark as ever, but much longer than it used to be. His shoulders were wider and, from what he could see, Peter's legs were long and strong. Looked as if he was still running.

Peter's face was relaxed in sleep but he didn't look peaceful. Something was clearly worrying him at a deep level. What had happened? The nurses hadn't told him anything since he wasn't family and not authorised to receive any information. He was going to have

to wait until Peter woke up from his nap. Adrian quietly walked over to the corner and sat in the uncomfortable looking plastic chair.

In the end, it didn't take very long for Peter to wake up. He opened his eyes and looked into Adrian's corner, obviously expecting some visitor to be there. His eyebrows rose and his mouth fell open. Maybe Adrian should have asked someone to warn him about his visit?

It was too late now. Peter had already seen him. Shit, he hoped everything would be all right.

"Adrian?" Peter's voice was a lot deeper than it had been five years ago. "Adrian? Is that really you?"

"Hi, Peter." What a stupid greeting. Was that all he could come up with? Adrian could have kicked himself.

"What are you doing here?" Peter sat up in the bed, moving very slowly and wincing the whole way. "How did you know?"

"I heard that you were in serious trouble. I got really worried, so I came here. From the looks of it, you're not exactly doing well." Adrian wasn't ready to explain the details of how and why he got here. He wanted to focus on Peter and find out what was wrong with his friend.

"Yeah, well, I was working on this case and got shot when I was staying at the office late one evening. Apparently I also hit my head because I've got some sort of brain injury that can't be explained by the grazing shot that hit my right temple. I still have problems with my memory. It's part of why they won't let me out of the hospital without someone to take care of me at home." Peter flinched at that last statement as if he'd said too much.

Adrian breathed a silent sigh of relief at hearing that there was no one in Peter's life. It wasn't a very nice thought, but Adrian didn't think he could have faced the idea of Peter with another man. He knew it was selfish, but he couldn't help himself. Coming here and seeing his friend and one-time lover had made him realise how badly he still wanted Peter. He'd often wondered whether he'd made the right decision when he left to protect Peter's younger siblings. The longer he sat here, the more he was beginning to doubt the wisdom of his choice.

"But that doesn't answer why you're here." Peter leant back into his pillows and glared at Adrian. "I didn't think you even cared."

"That's a low blow and you know it." Adrian was amazed at how much the accusation hurt. "I cared plenty."

"If that's the case, then I really don't understand why you left." Peter shook his head. "This isn't getting us anywhere. I mean, it's nice to see you again and everything, but what is it you want?"

"Do I have to want something?" What had happened to the Peter he remembered? This grown-up version of the man he loved sounded so bitter and suspicious. Had his leaving done that?

"Why else would you be here? You left all those years ago without any kind of explanation and suddenly you're back again?" Peter slumped in his bed, looking even more exhausted than he had before. "I just don't get it."

"There's nothing much to get." Adrian took a deep breath for courage. He hadn't planned on doing this the minute they saw each other again, but it looked as if Peter was going to be stubborn. He deserved an explanation, so he might as well get it now. "I didn't leave you because I wanted to. I thought I had no choice. I still think it was probably the right thing to do even though it hurt like hell."

"You thought it was the right thing to do? How do you figure that? Do you have any idea...never mind, it's too late now." Peter closed his eyes and lay back against the pillows. His hands were shaking.

"Don't say it's too late." Adrian's heart started beating faster. Had he come all this way for nothing? Was he going to be rejected before they'd even started talking? "I think we need to take a step back and start at the beginning if we want to clarify this misunderstanding. So, why do you think I left?"

"I don't know. I have no idea what I said or did that made you go away. It took me a long time to accept that there was nothing I could do about it." Peter wore his stubborn look, clearly trying to make himself believe his own words.

"It wasn't anything specific you said or did that night. God, how could it be? It was the best night of my life." At least Adrian hoped that Peter felt the same way.

"Then—why?" Peter looked desperate and helpless.

Adrian wanted to take the other man into his arms and hug him until the pain went away.

"Don't you understand what it would have done to us to have to live in the same town and never be able to be together? I don't think I could have survived that sort of pain. But that was only part of it." Adrian swallowed, trying to collect his thoughts.

"We would have found a way. We snuck away that evening, didn't we?" At least Peter was looking at him again.

"We might have been able to hide it for a while. But the risk of getting caught was too high. At least, that's what I thought. And getting caught would have meant my parents kicking me out. But I could have found a way to deal with that. The part I couldn't have lived with was you not being able to take care of Nick and Helen anymore. Hell, you were more like their father than their brother most of the time." Adrian blinked to avoid letting the tears at the back of his eyes escape.

"You left to protect *me*?" Peter's eyes grew huge and he sat up, for the first time looking like the old Peter, determined and hopeful.

"Of course I did. What did you think my reason was?" It was hard to imagine that Peter hadn't understood this, but his friend's reaction spoke volumes.

"I-I was afraid that it was because you regretted what we did." Peter closed his eyes for a moment and looked back at Adrian, tears in his eyes.

"No, I never regretted what we did. How could you even think that?" Adrian stepped closer to the bed and took one of Peter's trembling hands between his own. God, his fingers were cold. "Is that why you never tried to find me?"

"I didn't think there was any point in trying to find you. I'd convinced myself that I was better off without you. I'm so sorry. We've wasted so much time." Peter squeezed his hand and lifted it to his mouth, placing a careful kiss on each of his knuckles. Those lips were like magic on his skin and Adrian shivered with delight. Not that this could go anywhere. Peter was in much too fragile condition and they were, after all, in a hospital.

"It's okay. We know better now." The full realisation of what this meant hit Adrian and he had to sit down on the bed for a moment.

"Will you be able to stay for a while?" Peter looked so hopeful it would have been difficult to say no.

Not that Adrian was going to try.

"I can stay as long as you want me to." Adrian smiled at the way Peter's eyes lit up with happiness. There even was a little colour back in his cheeks.

"I know this is a lot to ask, but would you consider staying at my apartment with me? They won't let me out of here unless there's somebody to look after me and make sure that the outpatient rehabilitation runs smoothly. They're still worried about the slow rate of recovery of my arm and leg movement." Peter frowned. "I'm worried too. They keep saying that recovery in these cases is unpredictable, but I think it's taking way too long. I don't like the thought of being partially paralysed for the rest of my life."

"Living at home is definitely going to help you recover. I mean, who gets healthy in a hospital? We've got to get you out of here, and we'll take it from there." Adrian was looking forward to sharing Peter's apartment with him, even if it was mostly to take care of him while he still couldn't do everything himself.

"Thank you so much. I can't tell you what it means to me to have you here with me again." Peter lay back against the pillows, visibly more relaxed than before. His smile had transformed his face, making him look younger again.

"It's entirely mutual. But we should probably think about your mother's reaction to this. She's not going to like the fact that I'm back, is she?" Adrian had forced himself not to dwell on that before, but it was a real problem.

"There's not much she can do about it, is there? I need help to be able to go home, help she can't provide. It's not as if she or I can afford to hire a nurse. So there's a very good reason why you'll be with me."

Peter sounded very sure of himself, but Adrian had his doubts. There was no way it was going to be this easy. But he decided to let it be at the moment. They would have to see what happened.

"Okay, let's give this a chance." Adrian wasn't just thinking about helping Peter back to health. Spending time with him in his own home was hopefully going to give them the opportunity to get to know each other again.

"A chance is all we needed, I guess." Peter's eyes twinkled. "I'm grateful that I'm going to get to see who you have become. I'd have preferred to do it without the drama of getting shot, but I'm not going to complain."

"I agree." Adrian grinned. He was just glad they'd gotten this chance.

* * * *

Riverside, Thursday May 8, 2008.

"Hi, Adrian." Peter was exhausted after an hour of physical therapy. Three weeks ago, he hadn't even been able to do an hour, so there was definitely progress. Much of it was due to Adrian's support and encouragement. He was ready to go home and show Adrian how grateful he was. He'd been hiding some of his recovery because he wanted to surprise his friend. Tonight, he would show him exactly how much he appreciated all his help.

"Hey, Peter. Did you have a good session?" Adrian took the duffel bag with Peter's workout clothes like he had every time he picked Peter up.

"Yep, it's going really well." Peter couldn't quite suppress the grin that wanted out. He was so happy to be almost back to normal. It had been very hard not to show Adrian right away. He purposely slowed down and leaned on his cane much more than necessary with his newfound mobility.

"You look exhausted, though. Has Trent been torturing you again?" Adrian was walking slowly beside him as they made their way to the car.

"You have no idea." Peter pulled a long-suffering face, focusing on trying not to laugh. "I think I'll need an extra long cuddling session tonight. You know, just to make up for all the pain and suffering."

"Any excuse works for you, doesn't it?" Adrian grinned as he put the bag in the trunk of Peter's car before locking it and opening the passenger-side door. "Not that I mind in the least."

"I didn't think you would." Peter got into the car and buckled himself in.

He put his head back on the headrest and closed his eyes. A short rest during the drive home would do him good. He was still weaker than he thought he should be after an hour's exercise, but the improvement since Adrian had moved in, making the outpatient therapy possible, was amazing. There'd been some initial fights with his mother, but since there was a clear reason for Adrian to be in his apartment and there was no other solution, she had finally accepted the situation. For now. Peter was sure there was going to be more resistance once she realised that he was perfectly healthy again. But he was going to cross that bridge when he got to it.

Tonight, his focus was going to be on Adrian. They hadn't done more than kiss and cuddle over the last three weeks. Adrian had insisted that Peter was still recovering and that

they needed to be careful. Adrian was even sleeping in the guest room rather than in Peter's bed. No more. Peter was ready to take the next step.

The surprise of seeing Adrian again had been complete. It had taken him awhile to accept that Adrian was serious, not just about why he'd left five years ago, but about committing to staying around until Peter's recovery was complete.

He'd started to realise that once he was healthy, there was a danger of Adrian leaving again. He had to make his friend, hopefully soon-to-be lover, understand that he wanted him around for the rest of his life. He had no idea how to manage his mother who was still Helen's legal guardian—and would be for the next four years. He was more optimistic than five years ago about his chances of staying in Helen's life should it come down to a fight. Hell, Rick was a lawyer now and knew the situation. He'd probably help.

A soft touch on his shoulder made him open his eyes and realise that they'd made it home. Adrian looked worried, that little frown between his eyes making him look even sexier.

"Are you all right? Do you need help getting out?" Adrian briefly stroked his upper arm before letting go.

Peter wanted to grab his hand and keep it on his body. Those little signs of affection were great, but he wanted so much more now. "Thanks, I'll be fine. Just a bit tired." Peter smiled and got out of the car, grabbing his cane more for backup and show than from need. He couldn't wait to get rid of it and be back to walking on his own.

"I'll make us some dinner and after we can watch a movie or something. Neither of us is working, with you still on sick leave, so we can indulge ourselves a bit, don't you think?" Adrian grabbed the groceries he'd gotten while Peter was at therapy, as well as the duffel bag.

"Absolutely." Peter huffed and puffed up the flight of stairs. He hadn't thought he needed a lift when he moved in, but the last three weeks had made him regret his decision. He'd never been more grateful that he only lived on the second floor.

Dinner was wonderful. Adrian was almost as talented a cook as he was a baker. The best part of having him take care of meals was that there was always some sort of pastry or other baked item for desert. Not to mention the fresh Danishes they usually had for breakfast now. Peter was sure he'd have gained weight if not for the physical therapy sessions. He'd have to replace them with working out at the gym on a regular basis pretty soon.

Peter settled onto the couch while Adrian finished the cleanup. He'd spread one blanket on the cushions for them to lie on and made sure there was another one within easy reach for later. Popcorn and sodas were on the low coffee table. They'd agreed to watch a romantic comedy, nothing too heavy to distract them from what they really wanted to do. He'd already put the movie into the DVD player.

When Adrian came into the living room he smiled, grabbed the remote and settled into his usual space between Peter's legs. Peter slid an arm around his middle and pulled him closer.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?" Adrian was always so careful.

"No, you're right where I want you." Peter slid a little lower on the couch and wiggled until he found a comfortable position.

Adrian leant back against his chest and Peter burrowed his nose into his lover's much too short hair. He slid his other arm around Adrian's middle, keeping one hand on his lower belly and one over his heart. Settled for now, Adrian started the film and they quietly munched their way through the popcorn. When Adrian wanted to get up to make more, Peter stopped him.

"It's not popcorn I want, honey." Peter held his breath. He'd never used an endearment before although it'd been at the tip of his tongue several times.

"Honey?" Adrian turned his head so he could look at Peter's face. He didn't look angry or even surprised.

"Yeah, that's the way I think of you." Peter kissed his wide-eyed friend right on the nose, making him giggle. "Do you mind me calling you that?"

"No." Adrian did a half frown that looked awfully cute on him. "No, I kind of like it. But you only get to call me that if I can use one of my own."

"All right, that seems only fair." Peter liked this playful banter. "So, what do you want to call me?"

"You've always been my darling. You know, in my mind?" Adrian blushed the most adorable shade of pink.

"Oh, yeah?" Peter was delighted. It was good to hear Adrian had thought of him over the years.

"Yeah." Adrian turned his head into Peter's chest, trying to hide his face. "There's never been anyone else for me."

"There hasn't?" Peter was stunned. He hadn't been exactly promiscuous, but he'd always been afraid that Adrian had moved on. The man was just too cute not to be picked up.

"No. Not beyond a quick blow or hand job in a club now and then." Adrian shuddered. "I just couldn't bear the thought of someone else touching me. It always felt wrong, you know? I wanted it to be you."

"That means a lot to me." Peter pulled Adrian around so that he was lying half on top of him. "I didn't do anything much either. At first, I was too busy at university and, when I was looking around for someone, I just couldn't find the right person. I guess that means it was always meant to be you."

Adrian's eyes had gone wide when Peter had made him change position. But he hadn't moved or objected, so Peter assumed it was all right.

Peter slid his right hand up Adrian's back and behind his head. Very slowly, to leave his friend time to retreat if needed, he pulled him down towards his face and touched his lips with his own. Adrian sighed and melted against him, lowering his head of his own accord to seal their lips together.

It was heavenly to feel Adrian's hot lips against his own. Peter ran his tongue along them until Adrian opened for him. Slipping into the hot cavity of Adrian's mouth, Peter explored everywhere he could reach. Adrian tasted like popcorn at first, but the longer they kissed, the more there was of his own sweet flavour. Tongues slipping and sliding, they deepened the kiss until they were both panting for breath.

Peter pulled back reluctantly. "You know what would be nice?" This was it, he was going to go for it and hope for the best.

"No, what?" Adrian had begun to harden against Peter's thigh and his eyes were hooded with lust. He looked gorgeous.

"If we did this with fewer clothes on." Peter stroked Adrian's back in slow, leisurely movements, enjoying the feel of hard muscles through the sweater.

"Oh, is that what the other blanket is for?" Adrian grinned.

"I can't put anything past you, can I?" Peter laughed, his movements making Adrian shake.

"I like the idea." Adrian rose onto his knees and started taking off his sweater.

Peter was quick to follow and within minutes, there was a heap of tangled clothing next to the couch. Adrian moved back towards him straddling one thigh as he leaned close. Peter could feel the heat coming off his body and when their skin touched groin to chest, he moaned with the pleasure of having Adrian back in his arms, obviously up for more. He pulled the second blanket up over them and created a cocoon of soft warmth.

He slid his arms around Adrian's middle as his lover encircled his neck. Soft, long kisses followed as they explored each other's lips and tongues. Peter hardened against Adrian's well-muscled thigh and shifted him slightly so that they were better aligned. He started grinding his groin against Adrian's and moaned at the sliding friction this created. There was enough pre-cum to slick the way and their movements became more frantic as their arousal rose.

Adrian pulled back from the kiss and buried his head between Peter's neck and shoulder, licking and biting the soft skin as he moaned. It drove Peter crazy and his hips bucked up against Adrian's, which increased their need for more.

"Fuck." Peter grabbed onto Adrian's ass cheeks to shift him towards the middle and to press their lower bodies together more closely. "Fuck, that's so hot."

"You..." Adrian licked a line across his collarbone and lightly bit the other side of Peter's neck. "You make me want so badly."

"M-me too!" Peter was going to lose it. His balls were hot and heavy as they rubbed against Adrian's. His skin felt too tight for his body and the tingling at the base of his spine told him he wasn't going to last much longer.

He massaged and kneaded Adrian's muscular ass cheeks, carefully sliding an index finger between them.

"Fuck!" Adrian threw back his head and his hips started stuttering. Hot spurts of wetness splashed between them as Adrian moaned his delight.

The scent pushed Peter over the edge, too. Shaking with the intensity of his emotions as well as the physical release, he let go and came all over his chest and stomach. Little aftershocks coursed through him as Adrian shifted until he'd found a comfortable spot—plastered against Peter, and as close as he could get.

"Missed you." Adrian's voice was soft and sleepy.

"Missed you more." Peter tightened his embrace with one arm and pulled the top blanket back around them with the other.

Adrian giggled. Peter realised that it was the best sound in the world.

Chapter Five

Riverside, Friday May 9, 2008.

Adrian was warm. His back touched a soft surface and a deliciously hard body was against his front. The sleepy scent that surrounded him was Peter's. Was he dreaming? But this wasn't the bed in Peter's guest room that he'd been sleeping in for the last two weeks. Where was he?

Loud banging from somewhere to his left increased his confusion. With an effort, he opened his eyes and it all came back to him. They'd ended up making love on the couch. He pulled back, regretting the lack of clean-up last night as the places where he'd been stuck to Peter separated. His lover started to blink his eyes open and looked more confused than Adrian a few moments ago.

"What is that banging noise?" Peter lifted a hand and rubbed his eyes.

"I think there's someone at the front door." Adrian didn't really want whoever it was to come in. Lifting his head a little, he checked the time on the DVD player's clock. "I wonder who it could be at seven-thirty in the morning."

"Not very civilised of them." Peter got up, moving more slowly and carefully than normal. He stared at the chaotic heap of clothes they'd left at the other end of the couch and shrugged. "I guess it's going to have to be the blanket."

He turned around and pulled the top blanket off Adrian.

"Hey, I need that to stay warm." Adrian wrapped the blanket they'd been lying on around him instead.

"I need it more if I'm going to answer the door." Peter laughed as he wound the top blanket around his middle. "Since it doesn't sound as if they're about to give up, I can only hope they don't shock easily."

Another loud bang sounded and Adrian hoped he could remain invisible. Why hadn't they made it up to the bedroom last night?

Adrian peeked around the corner of the couch, wanting to see who was at the door. When Peter finally opened it, Adrian's shock was total.

"What took you so long? Oh my..." The woman's screeching voice made Adrian withdraw behind the couch for cover. Shit, what was that woman doing here?

"Why are you half naked and wearing a blanket? What's going on?" The woman's voice had risen another octave.

"Good morning to you too, mother." Peter sounded quietly determined and far more relaxed than Adrian felt. The front door closed with a soft thud. "What brings you here so early?"

"What brings me...you've got some nerve!" Peter's mother huffed. "Can't your mother worry about you?"

"I'd be more likely to believe you if you'd taken more of an interest in the last three weeks since I left the hospital. Since you haven't, I must assume something else is going on." How did Peter stay so calm?

"Well, I've never. You refused to come back home to let me take care of you and now you accuse me of not taking an interest?" Peter's mother sighed. "What did I do wrong to deserve this sort of treatment?"

"Would you like me to make a list?" Peter was starting to sound more like the new man Adrian had started to glimpse – the one who fought back.

"I don't have to stand here and let you insult me! I've asked you a question, which you still haven't answered. Why are you half naked and wearing a blanket? Is this the sort of behaviour of a recently wounded man?" Heels clicking on the floor came closer. "There's something else is going on here, isn't there?"

Oh, shit, she was going to discover him. Adrian considered hiding under the couch but a quick look confirmed that there wasn't enough space. Maybe he could cover himself with the blanket and play dead?

"Mother, I won't have you search my apartment like this." Peter's heavier steps followed his mother's until they reached the soft carpet of the living room.

"Well, excuse me for caring, but I'm pretty certain that something very suspicious is going on here. You're supposed to be recovering and instead you're walking around half dressed. If you don't take care of yourself, it's my right as your mother to do it for you." Her voice was now directly to Adrian's left. She sounded close enough to touch the couch.

"I don't think it matters how I walk around in my own apartment. As a matter of fact, I'm fine and I'd like you to leave. There's nothing you can do for me that I can't do myself." Peter's voice was just as close.

"Well, if you're fine, you can finally get rid of what's his name and return to a life that's more in line with the kind of example you would want to set for Nick and Helen." Peter's mother put a hand on the back of the couch, inches within Adrian's face.

It was the only warning he had. Seconds after her ragged fingernails scratched the couch, her head followed, framed with curly, greying hair. Dark green eyes glowing in anger stared at him as though he was something that had just crawled out from under a rock, which was probably exactly what she thought of him.

"I knew it!" The woman walked around the couch pointing at him, her lips drawn in an expression of disgust. "I suspected that the two of you were going at it behind my back all along. Now I have proof."

She whirled around and pointed her accusatory finger at Peter.

"You ignored my warnings. I'm telling you again, I won't let you set a bad example to Nick and Helen. You'll either shape up and throw this – this man out of your home or you'll never see Nick and Helen again." The woman was shaking, her cheeks reddened in anger.

This was it. This was where Peter would stand up for him and tell his mother that he no longer accepted her running his life. But Peter didn't look at his mother when he spoke. He stared straight into Adrian's eyes.

"I'm sorry Adrian, but can you give us a few minutes?" Peter didn't even look as though he was sorry.

Adrian's world just collapsed. The nightmare from five years ago was about to repeat itself. Peter was going to choose his family over Adrian.

Adrian was too numb to say anything. The pain was so sharp he almost doubled over with it. Tears burned at the back of his eyes, but he refused to let them flow. He was going to make it through this without showing Peter how much he'd hurt him – again. And he definitely wasn't willing to show Peter's mother how vulnerable and weak he really was. He sat up, careful not to dislodge the blanket and wrapped it more tightly around himself. He got up and without another word, walked upstairs, hoping his resolve not to cry would last until he'd made it into the guest room.

Peter was so angry at his mother for trying to dominate his life again that he didn't even know where to start. The only thing abundantly clear to him was that he didn't want Adrian to see them yelling at each other. He was also sure that Adrian's presence would make his mother's reaction more violent, and he could do without that.

"Who or what do you think gives you the right to tell me what to do with my life?" Peter fisted his hands to stop them from shaking.

"I'm your mother!" She glared at him. "That alone gives me every right. But since you also seem to be unable to live your life like a real man, it is my duty to help you find your way back to how things should be. Not to mention that I need to protect Nick and Helen from your immoral influence."

"The fact that you are my mother stopped being relevant when you proved that you were unable to take care of us financially or in any other way. That was when I was fifteen and hasn't changed." Peter took a deep breath to try to calm down. "I didn't have a choice back then because you could have ruined Nick's and Helen's lives and I wasn't going to let that happen. But I do have a choice now."

"That's not true. You have no choice." His mother was screaming, a sure sign that she was about to lose it.

"But I do." Peter purposely sat down, making himself look relaxed, even if he was nervous about this.

"What choice would that be?" His mother remained standing as if she could intimidate him like this.

"I choose not to accept your idea of how I should lead my life. I love Adrian, have always loved him, and will never give him up again. I made a mistake five years ago when I gave in to your threats. I'm not sure how I could have avoided it and still kept Nick and Helen safe, but I do know that I should have tried harder. I'll never forgive myself." Peter swallowed, taking a few seconds to collect himself.

"What you're doing isn't right." His mother was screeching again.

"That's no longer for you to say." Peter didn't feel half as calm as he sounded, but since his mother seemed to be getting more and more upset, he must be getting through to her.

"If you do this you'll no longer be my son. And I'll make sure that Nick never sees you again and that Helen is kept away from your influence as well." Her hands were definitely shaking now.

"You know what, mother? I don't actually care if you think of me as your son or not." Peter cocked his head. "I've only realised that just now, but if you can't accept me for who I am, then there is no point in us pretending to be mother and son."

That was the most freeing thought he'd had in years. He'd heard many people say that you couldn't choose your family, but that wasn't actually true except on a biological level.

"But-but-that's not natural." His mother's eyes were wide and shocked.

"No, mother, what's not natural is you rejecting me based on who I am. What you should do, if you were a good mother, is love me unconditionally. But you can't seem to do that, so we should agree to leave it be." Peter sat back in the easy chair beginning to feel truly relaxed. "And as for me never seeing Nick and Helen again, that, too, is total nonsense. Nick is nineteen and can do whatever he wants. And since you're not the one financing his college education, you don't have anything on him."

"Which leaves Helen!" His mother looked triumphant. "At least I can save her."

"I won't let you ruin her life. She's fourteen years old, so legally you are currently her guardian." Peter wasn't going to let that stop him though.

"What do you mean—legally?" His mother shook her fist at him. "I'm her mother. I know what's best for her. There's nothing you can do to change that."

"Yes, there is. If you don't back down on this, I'll go to court and challenge your ability to be a fit parent." God, he hoped he wouldn't have to do that. It wouldn't be good for anyone.

"You can't do that!" His mother sat down on the couch, needing some support.

"Yes, I *can* do that. And I *will*." Peter steepled his hands. "The fact that you're an alcoholic combined with your inability to provide for her financially will go a long way towards the court considering other options."

"You wouldn't do that to your own mother, would you?" His mother shifted her eyes from side to side as if worried someone would see her.

"As we've established at the beginning of this conversation, you no longer consider me to be your son. So I don't see the problem." That really summed up the whole mess for Peter. Realising this finally set him free to do what he should have done much earlier. He was going to get Helen away from his mother's influence. There was no need for her to suffer through what Nick had had to go through because Peter hadn't been ready to act.

No more. Things were going to change.

Adrian had barely made it into the guest room when he lost it. He collapsed on the bed, curled up, and let the tears flow. How was he going to recover from this?

He couldn't let Peter reject him again. He'd avoided that five years ago and he was going to avoid it again. Decision made, he wiped his eyes and sat up. It was a good thing he hadn't quit his job at the bakery.

He took a quick shower to get rid of the traces of last night's activity and got dressed. Repacking his duffle bag didn't take very long. He was set to go, having opened the guest room door, when the front door closed. He squared his shoulders and walked the short distance to the living room, ready to confront Peter.

"That went better..." Peter stopped, staring at Adrian's duffle. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm getting out of your hair." Adrian gripped the handles more tightly. God, how he wished he didn't have go.

"Why would you do that?" Peter looked honestly puzzled.

"Why do you think?" Was it really that hard to understand?

"You're going to do this to me again? Running away without us talking about anything?" Peter frowned. "We really do need to work on our communication skills."

"I don't know what other choice I have." Adrian sighed, his hopes for a quick escape destroyed. He didn't see how communication was going to lessen the pain.

"You really don't get it, do you?" Peter ran a shaking hand through his hair and sat down on one of the chairs.

"What's there to get? It all looks pretty clear from where I'm standing. Your mother caught us together, threatened you with never seeing Helen again and that's the end of the story." Adrian put the duffle bag next to him on the couch as he took a seat. This was going to take a while.

"No, that's not the end of the story. Not this time." Peter leant forward, putting his underarms on his thighs. "This time it has a different ending. I just wish you'd stay around for it."

The flicker of hope made Adriane's knees weak. "Okay, I'll take the bait. How does the story end this time?" Adrian held his breath. It had been bad before, but if his hopes were going to be destroyed now, it was going to be even more painful.

"Okay, let's start at the beginning. Why do you think I asked for some time alone with my mother?" Peter's eyebrows rose.

"That was pretty obvious. You didn't want me to see her win."

"No!" Peter shook his head. "I simply didn't want her to get more upset by your presence. I knew she was going to react even worse if you stayed in the room. If I was going to set her straight, once and for all, it was going to be much easier without the person she blames for me being gay present."

"That—that's a pretty good reason." Adrian could have kicked himself. He should've seen that. His only excuse was how emotional he'd been and how similar the situation had felt to the one five years ago in the kitchen.

"Glad you agree." Peter's lips twitched. "Now, as for your next point, my mother did indeed threaten me with never seeing Helen again."

"I knew it!" Adrian wasn't happy about being right.

"Only this time that wasn't a relevant threat." Peter smiled.

"It wasn't?" Adrian was about to implode from the tension. "It's always worked before, and Helen isn't eighteen yet, is she?"

"No, Helen is only fifteen, so legally my mother has a right to stop me from seeing her if she can prove I'm a bad influence." Peter smiled.

"How is it that the threat didn't work this time?" Adrian moved to the edge of the couch.

"I basically told my mother that I wasn't going to accept her being responsible for Helen anymore. She can't earn enough money to pay for Helen to go to school. Not because her jobs pay that poorly, but because she keeps using the money to buy alcohol." Peter rubbed his face with both hands before going on. "I gave her a choice between letting Helen live with me and going to court to settle who was the better guardian for her. Making her understand that they were unlikely to let an alcoholic be in charge when there was a better choice was the hardest thing I've ever done. Do you know what the really weird thing was?"

"No. Tell me." Adrian was still reeling with the impact of Peter being ready to go to court over this. Boy, something had certainly changed from five years ago.

"She wasn't even concerned about the fact that she might never get to see Helen again if she lost the court case. She got angry about people finding out that she has a drinking problem. But then she just laughed and said that if I was willing to take care of Helen she

wasn't going to fight me for it." Peter blinked a few times. "It's as if Helen doesn't even matter to her."

Adrian tried to swallow around the sudden lump in his throat. Even though Peter had been fighting his mother over this for many years, accepting how callous the woman was about her own children was hard. Adrian's heart hurt for his lover. Before he could change his mind, he got up, walked over to where Peter sat and knelt between his legs so he could embrace him.

"I'm sorry, darling." Adrian wished he knew what else to say to make Peter feel better. "I'm sorry for everything."

"It's not your fault." Peter sank into his embrace, holding on tightly as he put his forehead onto Adrian's shoulder.

"Maybe not all of it. But the part where I was going to leave again, without thinking how that would affect you, that's the part I'm very sorry about." Adrian took a deep breath. "And even though it's not my fault and there's nothing I can do about it, I'm also sorry about what you're going through. Nobody should have to deal with a mother like that."

Adrian couldn't help wonder what it meant for his relationship with Peter. How was a teenager living with them going to impact their lives?

Peter was speechless. Adrian had been so accepting of everything, far more than Peter had hoped for. And they hadn't even gotten to the part where Peter was going to ask Adrian to stick around. Would he even want to?

"So you're not running?" Peter lifted his head so he could see his lover's reaction.

"No, I'm not running." Adrian pulled back and sat on his haunches, keeping his hands on Peter's thighs. "I might be walking if you kick me out, but I won't be running."

"Why would I kick you out?" Peter cocked his head. "Oh, you think because of Helen, right?"

"Well, I'm not sure whether you'll be comfortable having me around now that you need to put your sister first." Adrian looked scared.

"Look, I think we need to get something clarified once and for all." It was time to put it all on the line. "I want you in my life. I don't want you to leave again. Whether or not Helen lives with us is a different decision."

"But where else would Helen live? She can't very well move into Nick's dorm with him, can she?" Adrian frowned his cute little doubtful frown.

"There are many possibilities for where Helen will end up living. I'm not sure she'd even want to stay with me. I mean, I'm going to be at work all day so who would look after her when she comes home from school?" Peter took Adrian's hands in his. "I think she needs a family, someone who knows how to take care of children and someone she trusts. I just want to make sure that she ends up somewhere she'll like. She's suffered enough."

"But how are you..." Adrian's eyes went wide when Peter covered his mouth with a hand.

"Shhh, not now. We'll figure it out." Peter wanted to just forget everything for a while and focus on having Adrian back with him. Make sure he was going to stay. The threat of him running away again had made it very clear to Peter that he didn't want a life without his lover in it. He'd suffered through five years of that, which was more than enough.

Adrian nodded, wide-eyed but not protesting.

"So, are you going to answer my other question?" Peter slowly withdrew his hand from Adrian's mouth, making sure to brush across the man's ample lips with his thumb.

"Which question?" Adrian looked very distracted, trying to follow Peter's thumb with his wet tongue. God, that looked sexy.

"The one about you staying here, sharing my life with me." Peter cupped Adrian's stubbled cheek in his hand, focusing on his lover's copper eyes.

"Does that mean you want me to move in?" Why did Adrian still look so insecure? Didn't the man know that Peter loved him?

Shit! He'd never even told Adrian how he felt about him. Yes, they'd admitted that they'd missed each other, but that wasn't the same as saying they still loved each other. Did Adrian even still love him? Only one way to find out.

"Yes, that does mean that I want you to move in. Please, I'd like nothing more. We've spend enough time apart, don't you think it's time for us to be together?" Peter wanted to say more but Adrian was faster.

"Why? Why do you think that after all this time we're still right for each other? A lot has happened in the last five years. We're not the same people. Aren't you afraid of making a big mistake?" Adrian's eyes were huge and his hands had gone cold.

"You're right." Peter started stroking Adrian's hands with his thumbs, trying to warm them up. "We're not the same people. But that's okay, because those people made some awful mistakes. I hope we won't make the same ones again."

"No, please, let's make new ones." Adrian laughed and the tension between them dissolved.

"Do you want to know why I think we're still right for each other?" Peter took both of Adrian's hands in his and held them close to his chest.

Adrian nodded.

"It's because I love you." Peter smiled at Adrian's elated look. "I'm willing to give this a try because I love you more than anyone else in my life. I want to make this relationship work. I never want to spend another day without you if we can possibly help it. So yes, please move in with me."

"Oh, Peter!" A small tear ran down Adrian's cheek. "I love you, too. I've never stopped loving you and there's nothing I want more than to move in with you and see where this relationship can go."

The relief these words caused was overwhelming. Peter kissed the tear away and pulled Adrian back into his arms, hugging him tightly to his body. Adrian's scent filled his nostrils and he closed his eyes to focus on slowing down his breathing.

When he was in better control, he pulled back enough to be able to kiss Adrian. Their mouths melded together as they breathed each other's air before Peter opened up and started stroking Adrian's lips until the other man opened up for him. Their tongues tangled, chasing back and forth until the need to do more became too much. Peter lifted his head.

"I think we should take this upstairs. The couch was nice, but I'd like to do this right and I'd much prefer my – our bed for that." Peter grinned when Adrian blinked a few times before answering.

His pupils were dilated, his breath was faster than normal and his wet lips were begging to be kissed again.

"I like that." Adrian grinned and got up, pulling Peter with him.

"The idea of the bed?" Peter got up and followed Adrian upstairs. He walked slightly more slowly than he wanted but it was great to be walking without a cane.

"That, too." Adrian chuckled as he passed the guest room and walked towards the master bedroom at the end of the short hallway. "No, what I meant was the idea of calling it *our bed*. That sounds so right."

Finished speaking, the other man turned around once he'd reached the bed. His eyes widened as he took in Peter's appearance.

"You – where's your cane?" Adrian took a step towards him.

"Don't need it anymore." Peter grinned to hide the fact that he was quite exhausted from the short walk upstairs.

"That's great!" Adrian closed the rest of the distance and opened his arms. "Yet another reason for us to celebrate!"

Chapter Six

Riverside, Saturday May 10, 2008.

"Rick is back from his business trip today, isn't he?" Adrian sipped his coffee while watching Peter devour his omelette.

"Yeah, he should be." Peter stopped eating. "Why, do you need to talk to him?"

"Yeah, I do." Adrian swallowed, even the last vestiges of his appetite gone. "It's something I should have told him when I first got here. There was just too much going on at the time and I completely forgot."

"So it's important?" Peter pushed back his plate and started working on his mug of coffee.

"It is. It's been bugging me ever since I realised Rick would be gone for three weeks instead of only a few days." He hoped they wouldn't be too late. "It's about how I found out that you were in trouble."

"You never did give me any details." Peter relaxed back into his chair. "I've been curious about it but I must admit there was too much other stuff going on for me to get back to it. So, spill."

"I'd rather do it when Rick's here." Adrian squirmed in his seat, not at all comfortable with having left this for so long.

"Why? Is he involved?" Peter narrowed his eyes. "That must mean it has something to do with Mark, doesn't it?"

"I should have known better than to try to hide something from my private investigator boyfriend." Adrian laughed. He was going to have to deal with Rick separately. "Yes, it has something to do with Mark. He was the one who told me you'd been shot."

"Huh? How did you find Mark? Or did he find you? And does it mean that you know where he is? Why didn't you say anything?" Peter looked as if he was about to shake the answers out of Adrian if he didn't respond fast enough.

"Whoa, hold on, that's enough questions." Adrian shrugged. "The truth is, I don't really know. Mark walked into my bakery one day but he had some very strange men with him. Looked a lot like gangsters from a bad movie. I remember wondering why he was with

them but everything happened so fast that we didn't really get a chance to talk. The gangsters seemed very intent on him not talking to anyone. He was clearly afraid of them because he didn't want me to let them know I was his brother."

"That's very strange. It sounds as if Mark's in trouble." Peter put his empty coffee mug onto the table. "Rick told me that Mark had gone with Mr. Mondello, a suspected criminal, after he'd caught them kissing. I couldn't believe it because Mark and Rick were so in love. It just didn't make sense."

"Mark definitely didn't look like he was in love with the guy he was with." Adrian felt even worse about not talking to anyone before. "He looked like he was really scared. Oh God, I hope he's okay. We've got to go and help him."

"Don't worry about it. We'll figure something out. Rick will know what to do and if he doesn't, his older brother Ben is sure to come up with an idea. He's a detective and can probably use his connections to find out exactly what's been going on in Houston." Peter smiled and took Adrian's hand. "Everything will be fine, you'll see."

* * * *

They made it to Rick's house and he invited them in for coffee, apologising about the mess. He'd only just made it back from the airport thanks to a delayed flight and a missed connection. There wasn't even that much of a mess. An unsorted stack of mail in the hallway and a couple of suitcases waiting to be carried up the stairs didn't constitute a mess. Adrian took a seat on the couch next to Peter.

Once coffee had been served and Adrian had told Rick his story, Rick went white as a sheet and didn't say anything for a long time. His hands shook and he was obviously trying to control his rage. Adrian was waiting for the man to hit him. After all, it was his fault that three weeks had now passed since he'd first learned about Mark's predicament.

"Shit! This is all my fault." Rick buried his face in his hands and moaned as though he was in physical pain. "I should have known something was wrong. But when I saw Mark kiss that slimy bastard, I completely lost it."

"I don't blame you. Seeing the man you love kiss another man must be pretty traumatic." Peter shook his head.

"But it was so far out of his normal way of behaving, it should have made me suspect that something was off." Rick dry-washed his face and looked back up. "After all, I love Mark, he said that he loves me and I can't help but think that I should've trusted him more."

"Yeah, well, I didn't do so good either." The longer Adrian thought about the whole situation, the less comfortable he felt. "He's my little brother. I knew something was wrong and still managed to forget about him for way too long."

"All right guys, I think you've beat yourself up enough now. Mark won't be rescued by us sitting here regretting the past. I think it's time we start talking about a plan. We need to figure out how to get him out of trouble." Peter looked from him to Rick and back.

"You're right." Rick nodded. "I think we need to tell Ben about this as well. His resources and connections in the police force will speed things up."

The ringing of the doorbell made all of them flinch.

"Who could that possibly be?" Rick got up to get the door. "Man, I'm hardly back and this is turning into Central Station. All I wanted was a quiet afternoon to unpack and go through my mail."

Luckily it was only Rick's parents coming by to check on their youngest son. They were elated to find out that Peter was doing so well and that he was together with Adrian again. Of course, that brought up Helen's situation. Rick's parents had always been very supportive of all of his friends, gay or straight, and in this situation proved to be no exception.

"You know, I always thought that she didn't deserve to be a mother. Not the way she's been carrying on." Rick's mother looked angry. "I don't know what you want to do, Peter, but I'd suggest getting Helen away from your mother as soon as possible."

"I agree, Mrs. Dealy." Peter sighed. "I'm just not sure that Adrian and I can offer her the home she needs. And I don't want to move her in with us only to decide that something else would work better a few weeks later. I think Helen has enough to deal with as it is."

"Well, in that case—what about her staying with us?" Rick's mother beamed at her husband when he rolled his eyes. "Anna and Tommy, our current two foster children, would love to have another sister."

"You know, I think it all started when we took in David after his parents kicked him out when he turned eighteen." Rick's father grinned and squeezed his wife's hand. "Ever since then, we haven't felt right unless the house was full of a few extra children."

"Oh, admit it. You like it as much as I do." Rick's mother smiled at her husband. "It'll be good to have another girl around. Of course we'll only agree to it if she wants to stay with us."

"I think it would be wonderful if she could stay with you. How soon would you be ready to meet her?" Peter rubbed his temple. "Not that it's urgent, but I think it would be best if she made the move as quickly as possible. My mother sounded pretty upset yesterday and I don't know what she'll do if we leave it for too long."

"We're ready as soon as we get a chance to talk to Tommy and Anna." Rick's mother looked apologetic. "I just think they deserve a little bit of warning."

"Sure, no problem. I'll need to talk to Helen as well." Peter looked relieved. "I can't thank you enough for helping us out like this."

Adrian listened quietly as they made all the necessary arrangements. It was good to see Peter a little more relaxed. Finding a solution for Helen had clearly been on his lover's mind. He had carried the responsibility for so long that he probably hadn't even realised how much it weighed on him. Adrian grinned. This called for a celebration and he knew just the thing.

* * * *

Riverside, Sunday May 12, 2008.

"Where are you taking me?" Peter tried to sound annoyed but his smile gave him away.

Adrian had been very secretive ever since he'd told Peter that he had plans for them. Apparently the man wanted to celebrate the resolution of all their problems. He'd even blindfolded Peter so he couldn't see where they were going.

"Told you, it's a secret." Adrian drove quietly for a few minutes, leaving Peter to his own thoughts.

"You do know that this is driving me nuts, don't you?" Peter nervously shifted in his seat.

"Sure!" Adrian chuckled as he stopped the car, probably for a traffic light because it didn't move for several minutes.

"So, you're trying to torture me?" Peter didn't really think so but his only option was needling Adrian into divulging his plans.

"Oh no. You're not going to get me to talk. This surprise is going to be too much fun and I'm not letting you ruin it." Adrian started humming under his breath.

He was obviously enjoying himself immensely and Peter decided to give in and let him have his fun. He'd find a way of getting payback later.

Not knowing where they were going really was driving Peter nuts. It wasn't to a restaurant since Adrian had made them dinner at home before they'd left. They weren't dressed up enough for their destination to be a club. At least he didn't hope so. Adrian had told him to go for comfortable clothes.

When the car finally stopped, Peter was ready to tear off the blindfold to find out where they were. Adrian's hand on his stopped him in his tracks. He dropped it back onto his thigh, not knowing where else to put it.

"No, darling, not yet." Adrian placed an envelope in Peter's hand, closing his fingers around it so he wouldn't drop it. "Give me five minutes, then remove the blindfold and open the envelope. Your instructions are inside."

"What the hell?" Peter almost lost it, ready to pull down the blindfold straight away. "I never knew you were into playing games."

"This isn't a game." Adrian giggled. "Actually, you're right. Maybe it does look like it from where you're sitting. That isn't what I intended when I set this up, but we can always make it one if you want."

"Huh? You're speaking in riddles, man." He just wanted this over with.

"Patience, all will be revealed in five minutes." Adrian pressed a quick kiss on his cheek, just below the blindfold. "I promise, you won't regret it."

With that, the driver's side door opened. Peter felt the car lift as Adrian got out. The sound of the door clicking shut told him he was alone. The only reason he didn't immediately get out was that he trusted Adrian and wasn't going to ruin his surprise. He sat back in the seat and started counting, since that was the only way for him to keep track of the time.

After what he thought was surely five minutes, he tore off the blindfold and blinked a couple of times. Adrian had parked the car underneath a streetlight so it was easy for him to see the envelope that was addressed to him.

He took a quick look around to try to see if he could figure out where he was. But there weren't any street signs and he didn't recognise any of the buildings. It didn't look as if he

was in Riverside anymore, though. He'd have to open the envelope to find out what was going on.

When he did, there was a plastic keycard inside, a piece of paper with the name of a motel and a room number. His eyes widened. "As soon as possible" was the only other text.

Peter threw back his head and laughed. Adrian had outdone himself. This was going to be a memorable celebration indeed.

Peter walked along the somewhat dilapidated corridor of the cheap motel he'd chosen for their encounter five years ago. He was amazed the place was still around and had changed relatively little in all this time—still rundown but in a homey sort of way. When he finally arrived at the door to the room Adrian had indicated, he was far more nervous than he'd thought possible. He imagined Adrian had had similar feelings last time. It took him two tries to get the door open and he was laughing at his own lack of coordination by the time he finally managed to get inside.

The sight that greeted him made him hard in seconds. Adrian lay on the bed wearing nothing but a huge smile. He was on his side, turned towards the door, his well-toned body on display. His head was supported on a hand, eyes shining with lust. His hairless chest and flat abdomen were asking to be kissed and licked all over. His cock was already at attention, rising from a newly shaved groin.

Peter couldn't believe his eyes. Adrian had done that for him? It looked so sexy. He quickly closed and locked the door behind him. He was naked by the time he stood next to the double bed, not willing to remain dressed even for historical accuracy's sake.

"Hi, gorgeous." Adrian grinned from ear to ear, clearly not minding the difference versus their previous encounter. He opened his arms. "I've missed you."

Peter was speechless with the emotion of this moment. He lay down next to Adrian, sighing when his lover tightened his arms around him and pressed their bodies as closely together as possible. They'd taken showers together, given each other hand and blow jobs, and shared a bed together over the last three weeks. But this was different. He was finally healed enough to take their physical relationship to the next level. The lube and condoms on the nightstand let him know what Adrian was planning. He couldn't agree more.

The feeling of Adrian's body pressed against his own, skin-to-skin along their entire lengths, made him so hard that he couldn't stay still anymore. He started a slow grinding motion that made them both moan.

"So good." Adrian smiled and kissed his forehead, then his eyelids, both cheeks and his lips. "You still feel so incredibly good in my arms."

Peter slid his hand behind Adrian's neck, pushed him over onto his back and moved a thigh between Adrian's legs to give both of them something to grind against. As aroused as he was, he wanted to explore his lover's body. Nipping Adrian's plump lips, then sucking them inside his mouth to lick and caress, he kept up the slow grinding movement with his hips. When Adrian opened his mouth, Peter pushed his tongue inside and matched the rhythm of his kiss with that of their lower bodies.

The heat between them was indescribable. A thin layer of sweat soon covered both of them and the scent of Adrian's musk drove Peter crazy with desire.

He lifted his head and licked a line along Adrian's jaw, down his neck, until he reached the pulse point at its base. His lips felt Adrian's heartbeat as his tongue tasted the salty sweat. Adrian's soft whimpers spurred him on. He licked and kissed his way across Adrian's pecs until he reached a nipple. Nibbling and licking it until it pebbled made more amazing sounds come from Adrian.

"God, that feels so good." Adrian's voice had gone husky and his hands slid to the back of Peter's head to hold him in place.

When the first nipple was stiff and nicely wet, Peter moved to the other and gave it the same attention. Feeling Adrian writhe underneath him made him realise it was time to move on. He kissed his way down Adrian's abdomen, around the copiously leaking cock and moved between his lover's legs. He stroked his inner thighs, which made Adrian spread them even farther.

The sight of his lover's totally naked groin mesmerised Peter. Being able to see his cock and balls like this made him even harder than he'd already been.

"You like it?" Adrian's voice sounded almost hesitant.

Peter tore his gaze away from the enticing sight to meet his lover's eyes.

"More than like, honey." Peter shifted a hand to cup the heavy balls and lifted them, making Adrian's hard cock twitch. "You look even more gorgeous like this, all smooth and just waiting to be licked and nibbled on."

He gave the handful of balls a careful squeeze, making Adrian's back arch.

"Makes you look bigger as well." A black leather cock ring might be a nice addition, contrasting with Adrian's pale skin. Peter grinned. He knew just where to get one, too.

"Fuck!" Adrian's hips thrust up, as his balls pulled away from his groin.

Peter was afraid he'd hurt Adrian and loosened his grip.

"'s perfect." Adrian panted and pushed up again, increasing the tension. "So perfect."

"Yeah?" Peter thought he'd come right then he was so turned on.

He carefully squeezed again while pulling the soft sac away from Adrian's body. His lover hissed a barely understandable *more*, and he complied. Adrian's cock dripped pre-cum and he had to lean down to get a taste. He licked around the swollen head, lapping up the drops. The tangy flavour exploded on his tongue and he moaned, sucking to try to get more.

He slid down Adrian's cock, taking him as deeply as he could before pulling back and off. He nibbled his way down the hard shaft and sucked at the base, making Adrian whimper. When he started licking the clean-shaven balls Adrian stiffened.

"I'm gonna..." Adrian's head was pressed back into the pillow, eyes squeezed shut and his hands fisted the sheets next to his body.

"Not yet." Peter reluctantly stopped his ministrations and sat up. "I want to be inside you when we come."

"Hurry!" Adrian's pupils were dilated and his breath came in little puffs.

Peter nodded and got the bottle of lube. Thinking better of it, he slid on a condom first. He wasn't sure he'd be able to remember later, his cock was already painfully hard. He took a few deep breaths to regain some sort of control before he moved on.

Adrian pulled his thighs up and out in a very clear offer. The small pink opening looked very tempting and Peter couldn't resist. He bent down and gave it a little kiss. The intense scent made him dizzy and he swore he was going to do more exploring next time. Now he was too close himself to be playing around much longer.

He slid his lube-covered finger along Adrian's crack, teasing but never entering the spasming hole.

"Please, Peter." Adrian kept pushing back, trying to get his finger inside. "Please, don't make me wait."

Peter carefully pushed the tip of his index finger inside.

"Yes! More!" Adrian spread his legs farther apart, offering him everything.

Peter responded by pushing his finger in all the way. The heat and tightness were incredible. Sliding slowly in and out with the one finger, he soon added more lube and a

second digit, making Adrian moan even louder. By the time he'd managed to work a third finger inside, Adrian was almost sobbing with his need.

Not willing to delay any longer, Peter pulled his fingers out. Adrian looked up at him, the longing and trust clear in his dark-copper eyes. Peter had to pause for a moment to try to collect himself.

"You sure this is okay?" Peter moved so that his painfully hard cock pointed straight at Adrian's opening.

"More than okay." Adrian dropped his hips a little to increase the contact between his opening and Peter's throbbing cock. The invitation to proceed couldn't have been any clearer.

Peter nodded and started pushing in. Adrian's eyes widened and for a moment Peter was afraid he'd hurt his lover. But Adrian nodded for him to go on and he kept pushing until he was all the way inside. The heat and tightness almost did him in.

"Feels so good." Peter lowered his head and kissed Adrian.

"Yeah, it does." Adrian looked up at him with such love in his eyes it made Peter never want to leave. "But I bet it would feel even better if you started moving."

Peter laughed, the tension somewhat reduced for a moment. At least now he had some hope he wouldn't come after only a handful of thrusts.

"Come on, I won't break." Adrian grinned at him.

He started a circular movement with his hips that made Peter hiss with the sudden increase in arousal. And he'd thought it couldn't get any more intense.

"Shit, that feels good." He bent forward, slid his hands under Adrian's shoulders and held on. "Do that again."

"What? This?" Adrian repeated the movement with a definite twinkle in his eyes.

"I think you could make me come like this, without me ever getting a chance to move." Peter groaned when Adrian didn't stop.

"Huh-uh, not today." Adrian smiled and stopped what he was doing, much to Peter's regret. "Today I want you to fuck me into the mattress."

"Fuck." Peter trembled with his effort not to start pounding right away.

"Yes, please." Adrian's cheeky grin did it.

Peter started pulling back. The friction was amazing. Adrian's eyes widened. When he pushed back in, he thought he was going to come within the next five seconds. But he was determined to hold on.

Slowly moving in and out, he set up a rhythm that should enable him to last for a while. Adrian responded by gripping his upper arms and meeting him thrust for thrust. As close as two humans could get, they stared into each other's eyes as they drove towards completion.

"Love you." Peter had never felt the need to say those words as strongly as he did at that moment.

"Love you, too." Adrian's breath hitched and his hands tightened on Peter's arms. "Close."

Too aroused for words, Peter nodded and sped up. His balls slapped against Adrian's skin every time he bottomed out. Adrian's panting little moans drove him higher and higher, his tight channel clenching around Peter's cock driving him crazy with lust.

"Faster. More." Adrian's encouragement was a desperate plea for more.

Peter let go all control. Pistoning in and out of Adrian's clenching hole, he hoped he could hold on until Adrian had come. Adrian pressed his head back into the pillow and screamed his release as ropey strings of cum decorated his chest and abdomen.

Peter pushed in one last time and the tingling in his balls exploded into an all-over explosion of pleasure that made him howl. He filled the condom in spasms of pleasure that send jolts along his spine and almost made his brain shut down.

Adrian's arms were there to catch him when he finally collapsed on top of him. He clung to the other man as he tried to regain his breath. The scent of sweat and cum was overwhelming and he buried his head between Adrian's neck and shoulder.

After a while, he realised he had to deal with the condom and he reluctantly pulled out. He grabbed the washcloth that sat next to the bottle of lube and dealt with the cleanup while he was at it.

That done, he crawled back into the bed with Adrian, pulled up the covers and snuggled close.

"That was the best celebration ever." Peter giggled. "I can't believe you actually came up with this idea, but I'm certainly glad you did."

"I'm glad you liked it." Adrian gave him a slow, lingering kiss. "I thought it was pretty spectacular."

“Better even than the first time, wasn’t it?” Another improvement like this and the next time might actually kill him.

“It was certainly different. But I’m not sure about better. I’ll never forget that first time I got naked with you.” Adrian swallowed. “That memory kept me sane for a very long time.”

“And now we have another special memory to celebrate our reunion.” Peter smiled. “Doesn’t mean that I’d want another reunion just so we can create another memory.”

“Same here.” Adrian yawned and put his head on Peter shoulder as he closed his eyes. “It’s not that I don’t like reunions, but I’ve had my fill. This is going to be our last one ever.”

Peter couldn’t have agreed more.

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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