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Understanding Mark

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

Men of Riverside

UNDERSTANDING MARK

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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ABBA: Polar Music International AB

Chapter One

Riverside, Texas

Friday, July 6, 2007

Rick Dealy needed a break. His muscles were stiff from sitting still all morning, his eyes hurt from staring at the computer screen, and his stomach was rumbling because he'd overslept and hadn't had time for breakfast. This whole thing of having a job was nice for the bank account balance, but he didn't enjoy the side effects. He'd never been this uncomfortable when he was still a student, even though he'd worked harder than most of his peers.

He looked up from his cluttered desk in the office Uncle Kaden had assigned him when he'd started working for the law firm of Dealy, Nichols & Warden almost a week ago. The clock indicated it was only lunchtime but he was already exhausted. Working twelve hour days to make a good first impression might be helpful to get a promotion. Unfortunately, it wasn't doing anything for his stress level or general health.

"Go have some lunch, son." Uncle Kaden had quietly appeared in his office door. He never seemed to make any sounds, just appeared in people's offices or in meeting rooms without warning. "I'm impressed with your work ethic, but I don't want you to kill yourself the first week here. My brother would never forgive me."

"I just want to make sure I do a good job." Rick stretched, his muscles screaming and joints popping. If he was this stiff after a few hours, he had to find the time to start going to the gym again.

"You don't need to convince me." Uncle Kaden grinned. "Over the past four years, you were the most dedicated intern we had. I can see that you'll be one of our most diligent college graduates, too."

"I'll do my best." He grinned back.

"I want you to take at least an hour off for lunch." Uncle Kaden lifted his right index finger. "And no tagging it on at the end of the day. It's Friday, so if anything, you should be going home early. And no taking work home for the weekend, either."

Rick nodded. It was good advice. The weekend might be a good time to check out a couple of gyms, maybe find out how Peter Adams was doing. He'd been one of his three closest friends since high school and had obtained his criminal justice degree from a specialised college in Dallas at the same time as Rick had graduated from Riverside College. It had been good to reconnect with him when he returned.

Peter had joined Rossiter Investigations as a PI in June. It was great to have his friend back, just to hang out with. Thinking about it now, Peter might be in a similar situation and could become a valuable ally in Rick's battle to stay fit.

Rick followed his uncle as far as the elevators. He waved goodbye when he entered and pressed the button for the ground floor. Once he'd bought a sandwich at the deli around the corner, he made his way to the little plaza with the fountain two blocks farther east. It was a beautiful day, if a little hot, and the cast iron benches near the fountain had the advantage of being under some old trees producing shade.

As he approached, he could hear a violin playing one of his favourite Mozart concertos. He smiled, realising that it had been much too long since his last live music performance. Another thing he needed to fix now that he had a job and was starting a new phase of his life. He followed the sound, curious as to who was the source.

The young man sitting on the wide stone border of the fountain, cradling his violin and playing with closed eyes, was stunning. His shoulder length dark brown hair fell in loose waves, framing his firm features. His sensuous lips were turned up in a small smile, an intriguing contrast to the frown of concentration on his forehead. His body looked toned and was clad in well-worn but clean jeans and a white T-shirt.

The realisation of who this was hit Rick like a ton of bricks.

"Mark Shrader?" What was his friend Adrian's younger brother doing here? The last time he'd seen Mark was when his band of fifteen-year old wannabe rock stars had played at Rick's high school prom just over four years ago. Mark had always followed Adrian, Peter, David and Rick around, much to their annoyance. Rick had never admitted that he'd found

the kid kind of cute, in a younger brother sort of way. At least not out loud, and certainly not to his friends. Seeing him like this, all grown up, was a pleasant shock.

Mark was most definitely no longer a boy, but an extremely attractive man. From what he'd heard just now, he was also a very talented musician.

Mark opened his eyes, the hazel irises appearing almost green in the bright sunlight breaking through the leaves of the trees. He didn't stop playing, but a dazzling smile lit up his gorgeous face.

"Stay?" Mark mouthed and his eyes darted to the bench not ten feet from the spot he'd claimed to give his impromptu concert.

Rick nodded before obediently making his way over to the indicated seat. He sat down and relaxed, not losing sight of Mark for a second while he finished the piece with a flourish.

"Hello, Rick." Mark lowered his violin, collected the money people had thrown into the open case with quick, efficient movements and stuffed it into his jeans pocket.

"Hello, Mark." Rick's mouth had gone dry. He had no idea what to say. *Pathetic.*

"I'm so happy to see you." Mark bit his lower lip as his cheeks went dark pink. He looked away and busied himself with putting the violin into its case, closing it when he was done.

"It's great to see you too." Rick was pleased that Mark seemed to be as flustered as he felt, putting them on more equal footing. "I'm sorry we sort of lost touch when I left for college."

"It happens." Mark shrugged, but he'd stopped smiling.

"Yeah, but I feel bad about it. With Adrian leaving at the same time, it couldn't have been easy for you." Rick would never forget Peter's devastation when their mutual friend had run away the morning after their high school prom. He'd always suspected there was more going on between Peter and Adrian, but they'd never said and he'd never asked.

"No, it wasn't easy." Regret flared up in Mark's eyes but was gone as quickly as it had appeared. "But that was four years ago and a lot has happened since then."

"It sure has." Rick couldn't get over how grown up and gorgeous Mark looked. "Would you like to join me for lunch? I only have one sandwich, but I'd be happy to share, if you want."

"I'd love to join you. And you won't have to share your sandwich, just your bench. I brought my own food." Mark picked up the backpack that was leaning against the fountain's rim.

"Even better." Rick grinned. "I'm kind of hungry."

"Are they working you hard?" Mark indicated Rick's suit before getting up to collect his violin case and joining Rick on the bench. He put the case underneath it and added the backpack once he'd pulled out a lunchbox. "I'm assuming you have a job or you wouldn't be dressed like that in this heat."

"You should be a detective." Rick laughed, liking that Mark sat right next to him, not at the other end of the bench. He looked to be about five foot ten to his own six two. *Just the right height for dancing and cuddling.*

Mark couldn't believe his luck. It had only taken a few days of camping out in the area around Rick's new workplace during lunchtime before he finally ran into his long-term crush. It made him feel like a stalker, but how else was he going to get Rick's attention? They weren't exactly members of the same social circle. Other than his older brother having been a classmate of Rick's before he left Riverside, there wasn't any connection between them. That was about to change, if Mark had a say.

"Nah, I couldn't be a detective. I'd be useless at it. Too many details to keep track of. And I could never give up music, just love it too much." Mark had thought that Rick loved it almost as much as he did, but once Rick started college, he'd stopped attending Mark's concerts.

"Yeah, I remember that about you." Rick looked thoughtful for a moment. "In fact, listening to you playing just now, I don't think that's changed very much. Are you a street musician full-time or is this a hobby?"

"No, it's not a hobby. I like playing for people during lunch hour. They're all stressed and serious when they leave their offices. By the time they've listened to some Mozart or Gilbert & Sullivan or even ABBA, they're usually more relaxed and smiling." He shrugged. "I make good money as well."

"So, what do you do the rest of the day?" Rick started unwrapping his sandwich and Mark opened his lunchbox, taking out his own.

"Most of my gigs are at night." He liked working nights, always had, but it was hard on his social life. "I've got a few restaurants I play for on a regular basis and there's the occasional wedding or party my band gets hired for."

"Would that be the same guys you played with in high school?" Rick's eyebrows rose as he started to eat.

"Yeah, pretty much. We mostly play classic and soft rock, and we added someone who plays the trumpet." Mark didn't really want to talk about his music.

Rick was so good looking that he made Mark hard with just one of his smiles. He'd filled out nicely since their last encounter. His hair was still dark brown, but cut much shorter. His dark blue eyes sparkled when he looked at Mark and his face had a rugged beauty that Mark found hard to resist. It looked like Rick had grown to a little over six feet and his shoulders had broadened proportionately. Well muscled arms, a flat stomach and thickly muscled thighs completed a picture Mark couldn't resist. Not that he wanted to try. All of that male beauty didn't take into account Rick's deliciously tight ass, which he'd only glimpsed briefly while he'd had his back turned as he walked to the bench they now shared.

He'd fallen in love with Rick during his first year at Riverside High. He'd followed him around as much as possible under the guise of staying with his older brother Adrian. He'd probably annoyed the group of older guys, but Mark had been too smitten to care. He was still smitten, that hadn't changed. But this time around he was old enough to go for something more serious, and he'd promised himself that he'd leave no stone unturned until he was in a real, long-term relationship with Rick.

"Hey, you still with me?" Rick looked worried.

"Sorry." Mark felt himself blush. God, how embarrassing was that.

"No problem, just looked like you were fading a little." Rick put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "I wouldn't want you to suffer heat stroke or anything."

"Thanks." That hand on his shoulder wasn't moving. The warmth coming from it made his stomach flutter and gave him hope. Rick moved it away, looking reluctant to do so. "I'm fine, really. So, what were you saying?"

"I was just wondering whether it'd be okay if, you know, I came to see you play sometime?" It was Rick's turn to blush and it made him look even better. The contrast

between the rugged first impression and that small vulnerability increased Mark's attraction further.

"Sure. I would love that." God, would he ever. "I mean, we wouldn't have time to chat or anything, but I'd love for you to see what I'm up to now. Come listen to some live music."

"Great!" Rick pulled out his wallet and took a business card from it. He wrote something on the back and handed it over. "Here's my home phone number and my address, in case you need to get in touch with me."

"Thank you." He took the card, his first real link with Rick after four long years without him. He wanted to kiss it. No, actually he wanted to kiss Rick. But it was probably a bit soon for that. No use in scaring him away.

"Would you like to go out for a coffee sometime? You know, just to talk and maybe to decide where I should come see you play?" Rick looked hesitant.

"I was about to ask you the same thing." Mark grinned when Rick's eyebrows went up. "What about tomorrow afternoon, or have you got anything planned?"

"No, tomorrow afternoon would be good. It'll be great to have something to get me out of the apartment. I've just moved in last week and it's still a bit of a mess. I don't really feel like spending the weekend being all domestic." Rick winked.

Mark literally bit his tongue to stop himself from commenting. He wouldn't have minded getting all domestic with Rick. Or whatever else they could come up with.

* * * *

In fact, as it turned out, their coffee date was a major success. After two hours of non-stop talking, mostly about music, he'd received enough heated glances from Rick to have the courage to ask if he would like some help with setting up his apartment. It almost sounded innocuous enough to be an offer any friend would make. The smouldering look and enthusiasm with which Rick accepted the offer was a lot more than friendly, though.

Mark's stomach fluttered as they made their way up the stairs to the second floor. Rick opened the apartment door and stepped back to let Mark enter first. As he purposely passed Rick close enough to brush his chest with a shoulder, Rick moaned, pushed him inside and closed the door with a bang.

Before Mark knew what was happening, he found himself with his back against the door, all of Rick's handsome body pressed up against his own. Rick pushed a hard thigh between his legs and Mark whimpered as it encountered his quickly hardening cock. Rick's face was mere millimetres from his own, his dark blue eyes flashing with arousal and his hot breath caressing Mark's lips.

"If you don't want this, tell me now." Rick slid a hand behind Mark's neck, making him shiver with anticipation.

"Please..." How was he supposed to speak? All he wanted was to find out what it was like to be kissed by Rick. He slid his arms around Rick's middle in the tightest embrace he could manage. "Yes!"

Desire flared in Rick's eyes, then his lips were on Mark's, slipping and sliding from side to side, making him groan with the need for firmer contact. He ground his erection against Rick's thigh. Rick responded by pushing his own hard length against Mark's hip and lower stomach.

Finally Rick pressed his open mouth tightly to Mark's and slid his tongue along his lips. Mark didn't need a second invitation. He opened up and welcomed Rick inside. The feeling of touching as intimately as this was overwhelming. Mark closed his eyes and let Rick touch and explore everywhere he could reach. The kiss was all consuming, everything he had dreamed of and more.

God, Mark was so responsive to his touch. Rick had been hard during most of their date and grinding his cock against Mark as they kissed only increased the urgency of his arousal. Mark tasted like coffee and mints, and his tongue was darting in and out of Rick's mouth in a delightfully teasing motion. Rick moaned aloud as he drew back to look into hazel eyes darkened with lust. He doubted he'd even be able to make it to his bedroom.

"You are so sexy." Rick caressed Mark's nape in small circles. The skin under his fingertips was soft and warm. He never wanted to stop touching Mark. Not there or anywhere else. "I don't think I can resist you."

"Why would you want to?" Mark's eyebrows rose as he pushed his erection against Rick's thigh, making both of them moan.

"This is only our first date." Rick buried his face in Mark's neck and took a deep breath, smelling the mix of spicy cologne and sweat that was all Mark. That scent touched Rick deep down. He'd never be able to forget it.

"I won't tell if you won't." Mark's mischievous comment made him laugh, and he relaxed a little.

"That's an offer I won't turn down." Rick grinned and disentangled their upper bodies enough so he stood a chance of switching his big brain back on. He needed to think about his next step, not fall into a situation without considering the consequences of hitting on one of his best friends' younger brother.

"Look, I don't want to make you do anything you're not ready for. But I've dreamed about being with you like this for quite a while, so don't feel like you've got to hold back on my account." Mark blushed.

"You've dreamed about us?" He'd had a few fantasies last night, but what Mark said didn't sound like it had happened only recently.

"Yeah, well." Mark frowned. "This is embarrassing."

"What is?" Rick grinned. Mark looked so adorable when he was flustered.

"The fact that I've had a crush on you for forever." Mark looked down and tried to pull away.

"Is that why you kept following me and my friends around in high school?" It didn't explain Rick's sudden sexual attraction to Mark, but at least it meant that one of them wasn't just acting on an impulse. Not that this was a bad thing. He intended to find out if what he felt was more than a whim. He needed Mark with him for that, so he tightened his embrace so Mark couldn't run away.

"Yeah." Mark looked at him from under his long lashes. "I've ruined it now, haven't I?"

"No, I'm glad you told me." Rick kissed Mark's forehead. "I always suspected there was more behind your adoration. I never thought about you that way, though. You were way too young back then."

"And now?" Mark's head came up.

"Now it's an entirely different matter." Rick took Mark's hand. "If you really want this, I'm more than ready to see where it takes us."

"Yes!" Mark lifted his arms and embraced him so tightly he couldn't breathe for a moment. "Yes, please."

"Come on then, the bedroom isn't far and pretty much the only box-free room in the apartment." Rick grinned and started pulling them in the right direction.

"I don't care about your boxes." Mark followed him, teasing him by touching his back and ass as much as possible. "I just want to get naked with you."

A jolt of arousal hit Rick and his cock tried to push its way out of his pants, clearly liking the idea of a naked Mark as much as his imagination did. When they finally stood next to the bed, Rick took Mark into his arms and kissed him deeply. Their bodies melded together and all he could feel was Mark's mouth on his, his soon-to-be-lover's hot breath on his face as they came up for air between kisses. Their erections rubbed against each other, feeling hot even through too many layers of fabric. Rick wasn't going to last much longer.

Mark was in heaven. He was in Rick's arms, in Rick's bedroom and about to get naked with his dream lover. He'd never done anything more than kiss with other men, given and received a few hand jobs and he couldn't wait to find out if his dreams about the other things lovers did together matched reality.

"Naked." Rick pulled back. He was breathing heavily and his irises were dilated. "Didn't we agree we'd do this naked?"

Mark nodded and slid his hands down Rick's sides to pull the T-shirt from his pants. His hands encountered hot skin and he lost himself in caressing Rick's strong back as he pushed the shirt farther up his body.

"Love your hands." Rick closed his eyes for a moment, leaning back into Mark's touch, giving him time to explore.

"Love your skin." Mark pulled the shirt up all the way and removed it with Rick bending a little to help.

Once the top was off, the ice was broken and they both rushed to get rid of the rest of their clothes as fast as possible. Mark took in the sight of the handsome man, wanting to commit every detail to memory, but was tumbled onto the bed long before he'd looked his fill. Though having Rick's body weigh him down as he placed hot kisses all over his face and neck was not a bad alternative.

“Good.” Mark spread his legs to make room for Rick. He groaned in delight when Rick’s hard erection met his, skin on skin. The lack of a fabric barrier was a distinct advantage. The silky softness of Rick’s skin combined with the steely hardness underneath was arousing as hell.

“Hot.” Rick slid an arm under Mark’s shoulders, as the other cupped his buttocks for better control.

Groin to groin, they started moving against each other in slow, sensuous circles. Adding a kiss that was clearly out to rob him of his ability to think, Rick was obviously determined to make him come in record time.

The friction on his cock was so good, Rick’s hands on his skin and his hot breath in his ear so arousing, and Mark didn’t care if he came too soon. His only regret was that it would then be over, but the tingling along his spine was a clear signal there wasn’t much he could do to stop it.

“Gonna!” Mark panted and pushed up against Rick’s weight, loving that his lover was just as into it as he was.

“Come for me.” Rick lifted his head and gazed into Mark’s eyes.

Mark lost it. With a last push against the hard muscles of the body above him, he let go and came as his body jerked helplessly against the greater weight. Hot semen splashed up between their bellies as ecstasy raced up his spine.

Rick’s eyes widened, his nostrils flared and with a final thrust, his lover grunted and added his own heat to the sticky mess.

As soon as he was done he rolled them to their sides and pulled Mark tightly against his body. Mark buried his face in Rick’s chest and pulled in the scent of their lovemaking.

“Good, baby?” Rick caressed his nape again.

God, the man’s hand on his sensitive skin was making his cock twitch. He’d never known there was a direct line between his nape and his cock. The spot was racing up the top ten areas of being touched with amazing speed.

“Better than good.” Mark kissed his lover’s lips and smiled. This was way better than any of his dreams. The wait, although extremely frustrating at times, had been well worth it if this was the result.

* * * *

Riverside, Texas

Saturday, September 29, 2007

"We need to get going, lover!" Rick yelled in the general direction of the bathroom, hoping Mark would hear him.

What was keeping him? Rick went back to pacing back and forth in his living room. This was the first time he'd see Mark play in a public performance. He couldn't believe it had taken them this long to find a date that worked for both of them. They'd started dating a little over two months ago, but the majority of their few evenings together were spent at home.

He looked forward to his first live music event in years. He really had missed it. And this wasn't just any performance either. This was Mark they were talking about.

"Come on, what's taking you so long." Rick grinned. Waiting for Mark to emerge from the bathroom, trying to hurry him up like this, made him feel like part of an old married couple. Having Mark stay with him for most of the weekends like they'd started to do was not only comfortable, he was having a lot more fun than he'd had the last four years. He'd started going places again, whether it was to see a movie or to go indoor skiing, Mark always had some exciting idea up his sleeve.

"I'm coming, I'm coming." A door banged against a wall, followed by a socked Mark racing past him into the hallway, where they kept their shoes. "Geez, you make me feel like we're already late."

"*You* were the one who told me to make sure you were on time for this wedding gig. I'm just doing my job." Rick tried to look innocent but had to grin at the irritated look Mark managed to give him while slipping into his loafers. Man, his lover cleaned up nicely. Charcoal dress pants with a light grey blazer, a light blue dress shirt and a dark blue tie made him look good enough to lick all over.

"I know. Sorry. I get a bit stressed before a big performance." Mark got up and grabbed his wallet and keys from the little table, pushing them into his pockets. "A lot of important people will be at this wedding, you know? We might get some follow up engagements if we're lucky."

"Luck has nothing to do with it, I'm sure. I've heard you play. You'll do fine." Rick put a hand on Mark's shoulder to calm him down. "Come here."

Mark slid into his arms with a sigh, all the tension leaving his lover's muscles as he leaned his head against Rick's chest. He slid a hand up Mark's back and cupped the back of his head. Tilting his own, he bent forward and kissed Mark's lips. His lover opened to him with a moan, and Rick plunged his tongue inside the tempting heat. Mark met him stroke for stroke, caress for caress, until they were both panting for breath.

"And that's a promise." Rick had pulled back, admiring the slightly dazed look his lover now wore. "For after the party."

"God, I don't know if I can wait that long." Mark pushed his groin against Rick's quickly hardening cock. "You've made me hard."

"Same here, baby. But we really do have to go." He placed a last small peck on the slightly swollen lips, loving that he'd made them look so well loved, and pulled back. "You've got all the stuff you'll need, right?"

"Yeah. Eddy took it over in his dad's truck this afternoon. All I have to bring is my violin, right here, and the music sheets in the bag by the door." Mark took a deep breath and winked as he grabbed his things. "We really should leave, you know?"

"Brat!" Rick grinned and swatted his lover's pert ass on the way out.

They found the wedding venue without a hitch. The Pheasant Inn was right next to the river in a quiet area close to downtown. Best known for its excellent lodging, the attached restaurant was good enough to draw a large crowd. Today it was closed to the public, but Rick and Mark got in without a problem once they explained to the owner who they were.

The preparations were almost done, flowers and festive decorations everywhere. The band had set up at the edge of a large waterfront terrace, leaving most of its surface available for dancing. Mark quickly joined them and they were starting to play by the time the first guests arrived. Rick picked a seat with a good view of the band and settled back to listen to his lover play.

Mark was entirely focused on his music, and that absorbed, far-away look only made Rick want him more. His talent was obvious, as he led piece after piece. The sounds he coaxed from his instrument went from haunting to happy, touching everything in between. The fact that Mark was also by far the most attractive man present made Rick proud to have

him as his boyfriend. Watching his lover play like that made him realise he wanted to see more of Mark. Spending the weekends together was fine, but he'd begun to miss the younger man during the week.

He frowned. Was it too early to ask him to move in? Mark wasn't happy living with his parents. They didn't like him being a musician. It wasn't manly enough for their tastes. No wonder Mark hadn't come out to them and didn't want to until he'd found somewhere affordable to live.

Rick didn't want Mark to live somewhere else, though. No, Rick wanted Mark living with him because of the joy his lover had added to his life. He didn't know how he'd survived before he'd found him. He still worked hard, but it was easier to leave the office in the evenings knowing that he had plans with Mark. Having his lover waiting for him at home, on his evenings without a gig, would be an extra incentive for him to leave the office.

Since sharing his life with Mark in that way was what he really wanted, why shouldn't he ask his lover to move in with him? Rick's birthday was only two weeks from now—it might be a good surprise to ask him then.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Mark's voice woke him from his reverie. He looked up into hazel eyes that were sparkling with happiness.

"Nah, they're not worth that much. Your amazing music just got me thinking." He got up. "Can I get you something to drink while you're on your break? You must be thirsty."

"Parched is more like it." Mark smiled and followed him to the bar area. "A juice or water will be fine."

"Got it, no alcohol." Rick got them both a non-alcoholic cocktail and an extra bottle of water for Mark. "Here, take that with you when you go back. Can't have you dehydrated. I have plans for later, you know?"

"I sure hope so." Mark looked around, gaze lingering on a few local businessmen whom Rick recognised from Uncle Kaden's parties.

"Go on, you go and mingle, drum up some more business." Rick grinned when Mark looked guilty. "That's what the breaks are for at these functions, aren't they?"

"You don't mind?" Mark gave his hand a surreptitious squeeze. "I'll make it up to you."

“No, of course I don’t mind. I think you’re doing an excellent job with your music, but I know that it doesn’t sell itself.” He laughed, intrigued by Mark’s promise. “As for the making it up to me, I look forward to whatever you have planned.”

Chapter Two

Riverside, Texas

Thursday, October 11, 2007

"Are you ready for this test?" Mark could have kicked himself. What was he thinking, talking to a stranger?

The student standing next to him, chewing bubblegum and making it pop every few seconds like she was being paid for each mini-explosion, was in his music theory class. He'd seen her a couple of times, but that was all. If he was nervous enough to talk to someone he barely knew, he was in trouble. He should have never let Rick talk him into going to the local college.

"No, I'm never ready for any tests." The girl cocked an eyebrow, watching the classroom door that was going to open any time now, once the previous group was done. "Are you?"

"No." Mark shrugged. "I can't believe they're making us take it barely a month after classes started."

"I guess they want to make sure they don't waste precious resources on students who aren't interested or qualified." The girl grinned, revealing a set of stunningly white teeth and a set of dimples. If he were into girls, he probably would have found her cute.

"I guess." He frowned. That probably made sense, with everyone cutting budgets. Music theory wasn't exactly the most popular class, so it would be easy to cut without too many students getting upset.

"So, why are you here?" The girl kept glancing at the classroom door.

"My –" Shit, he'd better not be so open about having a boyfriend. You never knew how people were going to react, and he didn't want any trouble. "A friend suggested I take the class, so I can earn some money teaching once I'm done. He thought it was a good idea for me to have a regular source of income."

"Why? What do you do?" The girl turned her head towards him, giving him her full attention for the first time.

"I play in a band. We do weddings and stuff. Sometimes I play on the street or in a park at lunchtime." He grinned. "Works real well, 'cause people pay me for cheering them up. It's a bit cold in winter, though, so my friend's right—it'll be good to have a bit of extra income."

"You want to teach kids?" The girl popped another of her bubbles. The sweet scent of the gum was almost nauseating, it was so strong.

"Sure, I like working with kids." He'd also like to have more money so he could finally move into his own apartment.

The situation with his parents was getting downright scary. Having to tell them where and when he went was idiotic at his age. Every time he refused, just to make that point, there were major yelling fits from his father. His mother just cried, asking him to understand that ever since Adrian left, they'd been scared for his safety. As if his brother had been kidnapped or something. The truth was, he'd been as fed up with their parents' meddling as Mark was beginning to be. Well, that was part of the truth, at least. The other part was something his parents would understand even less.

"Really? I just think they're horrid little brats." The girl raised both eyebrows this time and turned away from him. Apparently he wasn't worthy of her attention since he didn't agree with her.

Never mind. He had his life to sort out while he waited, at least as far as he could go in his head. What he really wanted was to move in with Rick. He'd waited what seemed like forever for his former crush to notice him. Now that he had, Mark was still over the moon that they were finally together.

Everything seemed to be going so well. He was more than ready to take the next step, make more of a commitment. He sighed. Rick was probably not there yet. It was only their three-month anniversary on Saturday, after all. He'd just have to be patient and wait until the love of his life was ready too.

* * * *

Riverside, Texas**Sunday, October 14, 2007**

Rick watched his sleeping lover and smiled. Mark had cuddled up to him, covering half his body, head on his chest. They'd celebrated their three-month anniversary with an extravagant dinner at one of the top restaurants in Riverside last night. Today it was Mark's twentieth birthday and Rick was finally going to ask his lover to move into his apartment. He couldn't wait.

"Rick?" Mark's voice was rough with sleep.

"Morning, baby." Rick stroked up and down Mark's back with a flat hand, enjoying the feeling of all that smooth skin over the strong muscles. Mark stretched into the touches like a cat that wanted to make sure it was petted exactly the way it wanted. "Happy birthday."

"Thank you." Mark raised his head and blinked at him, looking confused and more adorable than words could express. His long hair was tousled and Rick slid a hand into it to pull down his lover's head for a proper birthday kiss.

Mark opened to him immediately. He slid his tongue inside Mark's mouth, enjoying the playful reply that teased him to do more. Kissing Mark was always an adventure, and invariably got him harder than a rock within seconds. He'd intended to make this kiss slow and tender, but it morphed into hot and passionate before he knew it. Mark moaned and started grinding his hardening cock against Rick's thigh. It was more than morning wood poking him, and his cock hardened further in response.

"Hmmm." Mark pulled back. "Love your kisses."

"How would you like to have more of them – whenever you want them?" He couldn't have asked for a better opening.

"Is that a trick question?" Mark mock-frowned, then gave in and smiled. "If it is, I'll probably fail the test. Because my answer is yes, please."

"How could that lead to failing the test? If this were a test. Which it isn't." Rick grinned and brought up his other arm to encircle Mark's middle. "I just wanted to make sure that you'd like your birthday present."

"My birthday present?" Mark chuckled. "It sounds very promising if it involves more of your kisses."

"Oh yes. More kisses, more touching, more everything." Rick grinned. "Getting to know you over the last three months was great. I've never had so much fun on dates as I have with you. I love spending time with you and I want more. I know it's hard between my job and your evening gigs, but just meeting you for dates and having the occasional stay overnight isn't enough for me anymore. I would really like it if you moved in with me."

"Really?" Mark's eyes widened.

"Really!" Rick held his breath. God, he hoped they were on the same page here. He was desperate for more time with his lover.

"That's the best birthday present ever." Mark's smile lit up the whole room.

"Is that a yes?" Rick's heart started beating again.

"Yes, that's a yes." Mark started peppering his face with kisses, accompanying each yes with another touch of his hot lips. "Yes. Yes. Yes."

He moaned and slid his hand down towards his lover's ass. Mark's response was immediate. He hitched his top leg up, spreading himself open in expectation of Rick's touch. Rick slid two fingers down between the muscled buttocks, caressing the soft skin of the crease, moving lightly across the opening. He stroked the sensitive spot behind Mark's balls until the tips of his fingers met the back of Mark's sac. He pushed a little farther, putting careful pressure on the tight orbs until Mark whimpered with the pleasure of it.

"Please." Mark lifted his head, eyes bright with need.

"I'll give you what you need." Rick moved his fingers back to the little hole that was quivering for his touch. He applied slight pressure, but didn't push in for now.

"Right there." Mark arched his back, trying to force his finger to go in.

"Shhh. Not without lube. Don't want to hurt you." Rick didn't want to move away to get the lube though, so he started stroking the wrinkled skin, knowing this would make Mark want penetration even more.

"Fuck!" Mark was panting, his pupils dilated with lust. "Forget the lube. Please. Just one finger won't hurt me. I want to feel it. Feel you."

Shit, that was sexy. Rick put his index finger against the opening and waited. He wasn't going to push in, not sure how much Mark could take, but he wasn't going to pull back anymore. Mark moved right onto his finger, hissing when the tip pushed in.

"Ungh." Mark's eyes widened as his hips jerked. He gripped Rick's shoulder with one hand, holding on tightly.

"You okay?" Rick was about to withdraw his finger, afraid it had been too much.

"Yeah." Mark pushed back farther until he reached the first knuckle. "So good."

Mark's hard erection against his thigh was leaking pre cum, making everything nice and slippery for his cock to start sliding against him. It was more than enough confirmation that his lover was truly into this.

"Let me?" Mark started moving, fucking himself on Rick's finger as his stiff length slid against Rick's thigh.

That was one of the hottest things he'd ever seen. He nodded, his own arousal so strong that the little bit of friction he got from Mark's abdomen touching his cock each time his lover moved forward was enough to bring him to the edge.

Mark's lips crashed down on his mouth. The kiss was scorching, the movements of Mark's tongue imitating what Rick's finger did to his ass. Mark started rocking back farther, pushing the finger in as far as it would go. Rick was sweating with the effort of holding back his orgasm, but he wanted to see Mark come apart first. At this rate he wasn't going to be able to hold on much longer, though, so he curled his finger to find Mark's prostate and pushed against it. The effect was immediate.

Mark lifted his head and howled as he came. His entire body shook with the power of his release as he shot ream after ream of semen against Rick's hip and thigh. The combination of seeing the ecstasy on Mark's face, the sensation of his clenching hole around Rick's finger and the scent of his cum was almost too much.

Rick took a few deep breaths, struggling for control. He wanted to be inside Mark when he came. He just wasn't sure he was going to make it at this rate. Mark was so sexy, and always so into their lovemaking, that it was hard to hold back, not to get swept up in the emotions.

His lover's grip on his shoulder loosened as he started to come down from his high. Rick smiled at him, the shift of focus to Mark's happiness helping to distract him from his need.

"God, that was hot." Mark buried his head next to Rick's face and chuckled. "It was also embarrassingly fast."

"No problem." He gritted his teeth with the effort not to come. "I'm sure you'll manage another one for me?"

"Shit, yes." Mark looked up, a wicked gleam in his eyes. "There's nothing like starting the day with you inside me, fucking me into the mattress."

"Fuck!" Where was the lube when he needed it? Not to mention the condoms? They were so going to get tested as soon as possible, at least then they could get rid of the damned rubbers. He'd rather feel Mark against his skin anyway. God, the thought alone almost made him come.

Mark stretched and opened the nightstand drawer. The situation and what they needed was pretty clear, and his lover looked like he was just as ready for more as Rick felt. Mark's grin turned triumphant when he came back with a battered bottle of lube and a foil package in his hand.

"Turn round, so I can get you ready while you put the condom on me." He'd rarely seen Mark move this quickly this early in the morning. Maybe he'd found the cure for his lover's dislike of this part of the day? A cure he wouldn't mind administering on a very regular basis.

With his legs spread to straddle Rick's chest, Mark's tempting ass was right where he wanted it—within reach for his lube slick fingers. He slid the first one in easily. Between Mark's current position and the earlier invasion, it wasn't long before he was pumping his finger in and out the tight opening. Judging by Mark's moans he was doing it right, so he followed up with a second finger.

"Shit, that's so good." Mark started fucking himself on the slick digits, forgetting all about the task he'd been assigned.

Rick slid in another finger and started scissoring them. Mark arched his back and kept coming back for more. His lover's cock was leaking enough pre cum to leave a wet trail on Rick's abdomen.

"Condom, baby?" He was so excited, he wasn't sure he'd be able to hold out much longer. "Careful, I'm already so close..."

"Okay, I got you." Mark rolled down the condom without much fanfare, but even that barely-there touch made him hiss as his arousal spiked.

"On your back, baby, please, I need to be inside you." He closed his eyes to help him with trying to hold back.

"Come on, I'm ready." Mark had rolled over, was on his back and held his thighs up and back, his glistening hole clearly on display.

With a ragged moan he moved between his lover's legs and lined himself up with the small opening. Mark's eyes were full of trust and that was the most powerful aphrodisiac he could think of. He leant down and placed his lips on Mark's mouth for a deep, passionate kiss.

As he was kissing his lover, the realisation of how much he loved this man hit him and he gasped. Slowly pushing inside, his gaze never left Mark's eyes. He needed to know he wasn't hurting the man who had come to mean so much to him in the last three months. Mark looked back at him and smiled, wiggling his ass when Rick had finally bottomed out.

"Go for it." Mark's smile was mischievous, but there were deeper emotions in his eyes too as he slid an arm around Rick's neck to pull him in closer.

Rick started moving his hips, carefully thrusting at first, but then with increasing power and depth as Mark kept encouraging him. The feeling of being inside Mark's tight channel, the trust in his lover's eyes and the soft gasps he made every time Rick hit his prostate were too much. He lifted his hand to enclose Mark's cock, and Mark screamed as spurts of white semen shot all the way up to his chin.

The scent of his lover's release finally proved too much for Rick. He pushed in one final time as deeply as he could go, and relaxed. He convulsed with the power of his orgasm as his cock spurted its reply. He dropped his head into the warm, slightly sweaty space between Mark's neck and shoulder and let his breathing return to normal. Mark brought his arms up around him and held him tightly.

Finally, he lifted his head to look into his lover's eyes.

"I love you, Mark." Rick kissed him for good measure.

"You –" Mark's eyes widened and a glorious smile spread across his face. "I love you too, Rick. A lot."

"Good." Rick grinned as he pulled out carefully, dealt with the condom and cleaned them up with one of the small towels within easy reach. "Glad we agree."

"We do." Mark cuddled into his arms and licked a path from behind his ear, along his jaw and up to his mouth. Mark looked into his eyes and smiled. "And just so you know? That was the best birthday present ever!"

The kiss that followed was deep and passionate. The slow sliding of their tongues, the tender caresses of hands on skin wherever they could both reach wasn't intended to arouse — they were both too exhausted for another round. It did make him feel safe and secure in what he was starting to build with Mark. Having finally said the words was a big relief.

* * * *

Riverside, Texas

Saturday, February 9, 2008

Mark was excited about his first gig at *Bella Italia*, one of three Riverside restaurants owned by his newest employer, Tony Mondello. He was an Italian-American and admittedly looked a little like a mafia boss in his invariably well tailored dark suits, dark ties and expensive leather loafers. At least he tended to take off his dark glasses when he was inside.

The two rough-looking musclemen who were usually with him, probably bodyguards, had never taken them off in Mark's presence. Not that he was keen to see their eyes. Their immovable faces were enough for him to deal with. Lack of emotions in a fellow human being always made him feel uncomfortable. As if they were somehow not quite trustworthy.

The exact opposite of his bodyguards, Mr. Mondello was very touchy-feely. He'd insisted that Mark use his first name. Mark had thought that to be a bit strange at first, but he'd shrugged it off. After all, everyone knew that Italians were passionate and friendly. And all potential misgivings aside, the money that Tony paid him, combined with the number of restaurants he owned in Riverside alone, was too good to refuse. So he'd accepted, even though he had to work on all his weekend nights now.

Rick hadn't been very happy about that, but what could he do? He needed to earn a living. He wasn't going to start mooching off Rick, even though his lover's salary was a multiple of his own earnings. His music theory classes at the local college were going well. He hoped that next year, once the course was finished, he'd be able to supplement his

income by teaching music to anyone who would pay him for it. It had been Rick's idea and he really liked it, but it was going to take some time before he'd make money from it. Meanwhile, he wasn't going to give up a great opportunity like playing at three restaurants on a regular basis. He couldn't afford to, whether the owner was a bit of a creep or not.

The restaurant had already been quite busy when he arrived at seven p.m., so it looked like he was going to have a good crowd. Most of the tables were small and occupied by couples dressed up for the occasion. Candles and flowers decorated the tables, and crystal wine glasses made the place look festive.

Tony had told him that live music was always a good way to attract customers. Apparently, he'd started providing live music on weekends in his restaurants in Houston and it had been such a success that he wanted to do the same in Riverside and other locations.

He'd offered to have Mark play at the Houston restaurants as well, and Mark had been sorely tempted to say yes. It would have been a great way to see his older brother Adrian, at least occasionally. Nobody knew they were still in touch. Adrian didn't want to be found since he'd run away to protect his lover, Peter, from having to admit that he was gay. Mark thought that was crazy, but he wasn't going to go against his brother's wishes.

He sighed as he got ready to get started in what was going to be his corner of the restaurant for the evening. He'd ended up turning down the offer to play in Houston because he didn't want to spend even more time away from Rick. The lack of time together wasn't something he liked. He wished there was something he could do about it that didn't involve him giving up earning good money.

But as soon as he started playing he forgot not just his surroundings, but all of his problems as well. He let the music flow through him, taking possession of his heart and soul as it always did. This was his safe space, where nothing could touch him.

There was a lot of applause when he took a break after an hour and Tony came over to shake his hand.

"That was absolutely amazing, *mio amore*. You deserve at least a drink or two as a reward." Tony manoeuvred him over to the bar.

Huh? Didn't that mean *my love*? Mark's hackles rose, he didn't want to be anywhere close to being Tony's anything, definitely not his love. But he didn't want to embarrass Tony

in public, seeing as the man was in charge of his paycheque, so he decided to bring it up later.

"Just look at all those happy people. Our wine orders went up to almost twice their usual level and there are more people staying for dessert as well. That is *molto eccellente!*" Tony grinned and was about to pour him a glass of white wine when Mark put up his hand.

"Sorry, Tony, but no alcohol for me, please. I need to be able to drive home later." He just wanted some water.

"Come? Are you sure?" Tony frowned but put down the wine bottle. "I could have my chauffeur drive you home. I'd come with you to make sure you're safe."

"That's very kind of you, but I've got my car here. No problem." That was all he needed, Tony dropping him off and finding out he lived with a man. "Could I just have some water, please?"

"Bene, we'll let it go for now." Tony waived at the barman, ordering a bottle of mineral water.

When he'd finished his drink it was time to go back to work. He did two more sets, both as well-received and successful as the first. When he was done for the evening, he was exhausted but very happy with the tips he'd received on top of the generous fee Tony was paying him.

Tony was already waiting for him at the bar, another bottle of water at the ready.

"That was *brillante!*" Tony applauded as Mark sat down, too tired to care about Tony's arm around his shoulders. His new boss was just being grateful. "In fact tonight was so far above my expectations that I want to make you a proposition."

"Oh?" Mark just wanted to go home and fall into Rick's arms.

"I know that you said you didn't want to play more nights, but since next week Thursday is Valentine's Day I was hoping you might be able to make an exception. It's one of our busiest nights and if we have you playing live music, I'm sure we could double or triple the profit." Tony grinned. "I offer you a percentage of the extra takings to make up for your trouble."

Mark choked on his water, coughing and spluttering so much that Tony had to slap him on the back several times before he recovered.

"Are you all right?" Tony raised his eyebrows. "Is the offer so bad?"

"Sorry about that. The water just went down the wrong way. I'm fine now." Except that the offer was almost too good to refuse. But he couldn't work when Rick had promised to take him out.

"So? What about my offer?" Tony winked. "It's very good, *non?*"

"It's excellent." Mark forced himself to smile. "I'm very grateful that you're being so generous. But I can't."

"Why?" Dark clouds couldn't have looked more threatening than Tony's facial expression. Thunderous was the word that came to mind.

"I'm sorry, but I have a previous commitment." Mark almost cringed at the growing anger on Tony's face.

"What previous commitment?" Tony frowned. "You're not playing for a competitor, are you?"

"No, of course not." God, the creep looked like he was about to hit him. "It's personal. I have a date."

"You have a date?" Tony didn't seem to be happier with that than with the prospect of Mark working at another restaurant. "That isn't possible."

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that my personal life isn't up for discussion." Something was definitely wrong with this man.

"I...well...I'm very disappointed." Tony raked his short black hair. He looked more angry than disappointed, but that was probably his Italian heritage coming through again. "We'll have to talk about that very soon."

Talk about it? What was there to talk about? What the hell was Tony trying to imply here?

* * * *

Riverside, Texas

Friday, March 28, 2008

Rick rubbed his burning eyes, trying to wipe away the exhaustion. He'd been working harder than usual for the last few weeks, helping Uncle Kaden with a big case. He was too

ambitious to admit that it was getting too much for him. The time invested was exhausting him. The situation was complicated, and the evidence they needed to find didn't seem to be within their grasp, no matter how hard they tried.

What worried him even more was that he hardly even saw Mark anymore. Somehow, his job always took precedence. He knew this wasn't sustainable in the long run, but he had no idea what to do to improve the situation. It wasn't as if he could quit his job since he did depend on the money, after all. And spending less time doing it would only lead to him doing a bad job, and that just wasn't something he was willing to contemplate.

The current case involved one of the firm's biggest new clients, the owner of a small, exclusive French restaurant and a number of clothing boutiques. He'd been accused of sabotaging some of his restaurant competitors. He'd sworn that he was innocent, suspecting Tony Mondello, the Italian American who owned the restaurant across the street, was envious of his success and was out to ruin his reputation. Uncle Kaden had believed him and agreed to take him as a client. Mr. Mondello was a suspected member of the mafia and had been a thorn in the side of many Riverside businesspeople since he'd branched out from his base in Houston.

They'd needed someone to help them with twenty four-seven surveillance and Rick had suggested Peter's company, Rossiter Investigations. They'd done a good job, but he'd spent a lot of extra time at Peter's office to coordinate their efforts.

It was Wednesday night, the only evening Mark was at home this week. He'd promised he'd spend it with him, and yet again he was stuck here. He hated that. It was going to have to stop.

"Sometimes I wish your uncle hadn't got you involved in this case." Peter looked up from the file he'd been staring at, his friend's eyes as lined with exhaustion as Rick's felt.

"I know." Rick sighed. "It's made me wonder why I've become 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."

"I know! It's late and I promised to pick him up from the restaurant he's performing at tonight so we can spend some time together." 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 rarely spoke about Adrian, who'd been one of their closest friends at Riverside High. Adrian's leaving had hurt Peter, even if the stubborn man wouldn't admit it. Rick didn't understand why Peter hadn't tried to find out where Adrian was. Hadn't they just been through the long overdue reunion between their friend David and his boyhood lover, Elliot?

After a final reminder for Peter not to spend the night in his office, Rick got into his car, ready to pick up Mark and forget about his worries for a few hours. He wanted to hear his lover's voice, so he reached for his cell—except it wasn't in his pocket. *Shit*. He must have left it on Peter's desk. He didn't want to be without it so he had no choice but to turn back. Luckily he'd only driven a few blocks, so it would be fast.

He got out of the car and approached the glass front door. Good, the light at the end of the dark corridor was on, so Peter was probably still there. He lifted his hand to knock and draw Peter's attention when there was a gunshot.

Fuck!

That had come from inside of the office. Peter probably needed help. Without thinking about it, he ran back to his car, grabbed the tire iron and was about to smash the front door when there was another shot.

Double fuck!

He swung his arms back and hit the glass as hard as he could. Luckily it crumpled immediately. He'd have to talk to Peter's boss about getting that upgraded to security glass. But for now, he was damned relieved he'd been able to get in so quickly. From the sound of it, Peter's life might depend on him being able to help.

Rick ran down the corridor. A man of medium height, dressed in black and wearing a matching ski mask, stood just inside the doorway. A gun in his right hand pointed at Peter. As Peter crumpled to the floor, hitting his head on the edge of the desk as he went down, Rick started yelling.

“Hey, drop your gun right now.” Rick’s only hope was that the guy would think his tire iron was a gun. The corridor was unlit, so there was a chance that his eyes wouldn’t adjust fast enough to notice the difference.

The guy turned his head around for a moment. The black ski mask covered his face, except for his dark brown eyes which were widened in shock. To Rick’s horror, rather than drop his gun, he shrugged and turned back towards Peter, aiming at his friend’s head.

Enough was enough. Rick surged forward, running into the man to try and move his arm away from his current target. It was enough for the shot to miss, grazing the side of Peter’s head and crashing into the floor.

Before the guy could recover, Rick lifted the tire iron like a club, hitting the shooter’s arm until he dropped the gun. He lifted it farther and aimed at the man’s head, making him crumple to the floor.

The man stopped moving.

Shit.

He’d better call nine-one-one.

Chapter Three

Riverside, Texas

Friday, March 28, 2008

Rick was on his way to pick Mark up from *Bella Italia*. It had turned out to be his biggest venue and he'd played there with his entire band since January. There was even a dance floor now. Mark's band mates being there to look out for his lover had reassured Rick a little. He didn't trust Mr. Mondello as far as he could throw him. He hated the fact that Mark was working for this gangster.

Peter was still in a coma. The assassin had recovered quickly but, unsurprisingly, wasn't talking. He was safely locked away in prison but they still didn't have any proof as to who sent him. Rick knew it was Mr. Mondello, but there was nothing he could do without some sort of evidence.

He really looked forward to spending some time with Mark. He'd hated not being able to pick him up on Wednesday night, but due to the shooting he hadn't been able to leave Peter's office until after the police had taken all their statements. He'd called Mark to let him know he wouldn't be able to be there. Even though his lover had said he understood, Rick had heard the disappointment in his voice. He'd sounded as disillusioned as Rick had felt lately. They just hadn't had enough time together and something needed to change.

By the time he'd made it home Mark was fast asleep. He'd left early the next morning, unwilling to wake Mark who'd looked exhausted. They'd both been too tired for anything but sleep on Thursday night. Friday was a working night for Mark, so it would be very late by the time they'd see each other, but that was fast becoming less relevant. It was the weekend anyway, so they were going to make it a date.

He was ready to apologise and make it up to Mark, realising that out of the two of them, he was probably more to blame. It was his work on this case that had kept him in his or Peter's office later than usual over the last few weeks. Mark had worked his normal number of evening gigs, but Rick felt it was his fault that he hadn't been there for Mark on

the few evenings he hadn't had a performance. Mark deserved more attention than he'd been getting.

That was all going to change tonight.

When Rick entered the restaurant there was no music. Mark was probably on a break or maybe he'd already finished. Rick shook his head as he made his way to the bar. Wishful thinking wouldn't get his lover into his arms more quickly than sitting down to have a drink while waiting for him.

A few weeks before, Mr. Mondello had added a piano to this restaurant and Rick had discovered how talented Mark was on this instrument as well as all the others he played more regularly. He loved listening to Mark, so he was ready to settle in and enjoy his lover's musical talents from a distance before bringing him home for some serious cuddling and hopefully even more. If they weren't both too tired, this could become a great evening. He'd make sure of it.

He was close enough to one end of the bar to be able to grip the counter for support when he saw Mark at the other end. His lover was in the arms of Tony Mondello, his lean body pressed against the crook's as they kissed deeply.

Rick blinked, hoping what he'd seen was a mistake.

They were standing sideways, though, so he was able to clearly see Mark's profile. There was no mistake. Tony had one hand in Mark's long hair, gripping it tightly to hold him for his kiss. The other hand was on Mark's ass, pressing their groins together. They were practically making love right there, the way they were grinding into each other.

The blood drained from Rick's face and he stopped breathing. It felt as though his heart stopped beating. He was sure that someone had pulled the ground out from under him, making him fall into the depths of despair. His Mark was in the arms of that gangster, obviously enjoying himself far more than he had in Rick's arms recently. He was kissing another man with the same passion that was meant to be reserved for him.

The pain was indescribable. It felt like his heart had been ripped out of his body. But it hadn't. When it started beating again it was fast enough for him to think that it was about to jump from his chest. His breath came in ragged gasps as he pulled himself together, let go of the counter, and took a stumbling step back.

He wanted to bash Mr. Mondello's face in then grind the bastard into dust. But Mark was so clearly enjoying himself that there would be no point. Beating Mr. Mondello into a pulp wouldn't bring Mark back to him. *Fuck*. He had to get away from here before he turned violent. There was nothing he could do. Mark was clearly lost to him.

He took another step back and forced himself to turn around. He needed to get out of the restaurant as quickly as possible. Seeing Mark like that with another man was unbearable.

He went to his car in a daze and drove home on autopilot. Locking and bolting the apartment door was an automatic action. It was the first thing that brought him back to himself. Using the deadbolts like that would make it impossible for Mark to get in. If his lover wanted to come home.

At that moment Rick realised that he couldn't get himself to care if he saw Mark that night or not. The pain was still too fresh. He needed some time on his own. When he finally sat down on the sofa in his living room he was totally numb.

He rested his elbows on his knees and covered his face with his hands, letting himself sink into despair.

After a while the anger started. How could Mark do this to him? They'd talked about what Rick saw as Tony's inappropriate advances. Mark had downplayed them as an Italian's natural behaviour. He just wouldn't accept that there was more behind Tony's friendliness than his attempt at being a good employer. Or had Mark known all along and just hadn't wanted to admit it? Had he been trying to deceive Rick? Testing the waters with that bastard before burning his bridges?

The anger grew until it became a physical pain in Rick's belly, replacing the empty hollowness in his heart. He had no idea how long he'd been sitting there when he heard the key being inserted into the lock. It turned, but the door didn't open.

After a while the key was inserted again but the result was no different from the first time.

There was a hesitant knock.

He fisted his hands and held on. He couldn't let Mark back inside. Not yet. If he did that right now, he was likely to strangle him for his betrayal. *Better to cool off first and try to feel your way out of this mess after a good night's sleep.*

There was another knock, this one more forceful.

Rick put his hands over his ears, not wanting to hear. Mark would get the message after a while. He could always stay at a friend's place or go to a hotel.

When the banging on the door finally stopped, Rick felt lonelier than he ever had in his life. Had he made a mistake? He jumped up, unbolted and unlocked the door as quickly as he could and pulled it open with enough force for it to bang against the wall.

Mark was gone.

* * * *

Highway 59, Texas

Monday, March 31, 2008

Mark had never been so miserable in his life. He sat in Tony's limo as it was speeding towards Houston. The bigger man had finally fallen asleep, freeing Mark from listening to his inane babbling. His snoring was much more bearable, leaving Mark alone with his bleak thoughts. One arm around his shoulders, his blackmailer held him tightly even though he no longer had anywhere to go.

Once he was certain that the bastard was really asleep, he carefully moved out from under the arm that held him imprisoned and scooted into the farthest corner of the well cushioned leather seat. He pulled his legs up with him and encircled them with his arms, putting his head on his knees. If only he could make himself small enough to completely vanish.

How had all of this happened? Why hadn't he seen it coming? Rick had warned him that Tony was interested in him often enough. He just hadn't wanted to see it, hadn't been willing to give up his opportunity to earn good money by working for Tony. Three restaurants and regular gigs was nothing to sneer at.

Thinking back, he realised that it had all started when he'd refused to play for Tony on Valentine's Day. Not too long after that Tony had confronted him, demanding he break it off with Rick so the two of them could be together. He'd demanded that Tony tell him how he'd

found out and Tony had only replied that he had his sources. The bastard must have had Mark followed to find out who he lived with.

More than that, he'd been shocked to find that Tony was gay and seemed to have no issue with admitting it. He'd tried to explain that their being together wasn't going to happen because he wasn't going to break up with Rick and he certainly wasn't going to cheat on him.

He thought it had all blown over. That had been his biggest mistake. Last Friday Tony had revealed his truly evil nature when he told Mark that his patience had run out and he was going to get rid of Rick once and for all. If Mark didn't help him by making it appear that they were already involved, Tony was going to have Rick shot, just like he'd already had Peter attacked.

Mark had been stunned how ready Tony was to commit violence. He couldn't bear the thought of losing Rick, so he gave in. What else could he have done? Tony had already proven that he didn't shy away from violence to get what he wanted or to pay people back for some imagined infraction.

Tony knew that Rick usually picked him up after work, so he set everything up for Rick to see them. He'd almost gagged when Tony had pressed his lips to his mouth. His grip on Mark's entire body was so powerful that he hadn't been able to escape. He could only imagine what his struggling must have looked like to Rick.

When Tony had triumphantly told him that his ex-lover had left, something had broken inside Mark. Before he could think about the possible consequences of his behaviour, he'd made one last desperate attempt to escape his future as the unwilling 'boyfriend' of a mafia boss.

He'd risked everything when he went after Rick. He'd managed to grab a taxi outside the restaurant and had made it to what he'd thought of as their apartment. When he found the door bolted from the inside he was shocked.

How could Rick lock him out of what he'd begun to think of as their joint home? He must have been so angry that rational thought and even common sense had gone out the window. After a good five minutes of banging on the door without result, Mark realised that he had lost. He'd be best off staying with his friend Eddy from the band, hoping that Tony wouldn't find him there. He was going to come back home the next day to try and see if Rick had regained his senses.

Coming out of the apartment building and seeing a furious Tony stand next to his limo, obviously waiting for him, had almost been more of a shock than Tony's admission that he'd been the one to have Peter shot. Tony had dragged him into the car and had taken Mark to his home.

The punishment had been horrendous. Mark knew what a beating was like, his father had often spanked both Adrian and him when they were younger. But that had been almost harmless compared to the brutal treatment Tony gave him. The cruel man hadn't stopped until Mark's voice was hoarse from screaming.

It had taken until Monday for him to be able to sit without fainting from the pain. The bruises all over his body had moved Tony to tears and he had apologised profusely, promising that it would never happen again. Their new life in Houston was going to be very different.

Mark hadn't believed him. He'd wanted to run again but he'd been under constant guard ever since and there'd been no hope of escape. Now that he sat in a car racing down the highway there was no point in trying to get away. Jumping out of a moving vehicle would only get himself killed.

No, he'd have to wait for a better opportunity. Maybe he could find a way to enlist someone else's help. Not the bodyguards, but surely there'd be other people around. He could try and get on Tony's good side, so that he'd have a little more freedom. The thought alone made him gag, so he immediately binned that idea.

Or he could try and somehow influence Tony to take him to Adrian's bakery, which was also in Houston. He needed to tell Adrian about Peter's shooting anyway since he was sure that Adrian would want to know, despite everything. If he was clever enough he'd be able to let it be known that he needed help at the same time.

He could only hope that Rick would be willing to take him back once he found out the truth about what had happened last Friday night. He couldn't bear the thought that the man he'd secretly loved for so many years would reject Mark once he knew what had really happened. Mark would do everything in his power to make sure that they'd get back together again. The alternative was too horrible to contemplate.

* * * *

Houston, Texas**Monday, April 14, 2008**

Mark's life had been hell over the last two weeks. The reality of living with Tony was far worse than he had feared. It was pure torture.

Tony was constantly badgering him to become intimate. So far, he'd steadfastly refused and since the gangster seemed intent on having a real 'affair' with Mark, Tony hadn't done anything more than put an arm around him when they went out. The thought of betraying Rick by doing anything more than tolerating even that minimal contact was literally making Mark ill. Combined with the pain of missing his lover, it had made him stop eating more than the bare minimum to keep from fainting, and he'd lost a lot of weight.

Even Tony had noticed something was wrong and had offered to take Mark anywhere he wanted if he promised not to run away. That was the opening Mark had looked for, and he'd suggested his favourite bakery. He'd been careful to explain that he knew the place from his previous trips to Houston with his band. If Tony found out that his brother worked there, Adrian's life would probably be in danger. At the very least it would give his blackmailer additional material with which to threaten Mark.

The tinkling of the little bell over the entrance when they walked into the bakery sounded almost like home. It reminded him of happier times when he'd come here just to see his brother. Adrian's eyes widened when he noticed them, but Mark quickly shook his head. He didn't want Tony to become suspicious.

Mark looked down at the floor and refused to meet Adrian's eyes, hoping that would be enough to convince his brother to remain silent. He'd have to wait for an opportunity to speak to him alone.

They sat down at one of the corner tables and Tony gave Adrian their orders. Mark was too nervous to pay much attention to anything, but once Adrian returned with their food, Mark knew that it was now or never. Tony would be distracted by the food and the bodyguards were too stupid to realise what was going on anyway.

Asking to use the bathroom was not likely to get him into too much trouble, and thank God Tony agreed without a major argument. One of the bodyguards checked for a second

exit, then waved him ahead. 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?" Adrian stopped to take a breath.

"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." He turned on the water and started washing his hands to try and mask their shaking. "I can't explain everything right now, but you need to know that something has happened to Peter."

"Peter?" Adrian went white as a sheet.

"Yes, Peter." He turned off the water and grabbed a few paper towels. "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 looked like he was about to keel over.

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

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

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

He opened the door. Not that he wanted to go back, but he didn't need to make Tony any angrier than he probably already was.

* * * *

Riverside, Texas

Saturday, May 10, 2008

Rick sat in the taxi, on his way back from Riverside airport to his apartment. The business trip had seemed long enough to gain some distance when he left, but it had gone much too quickly. He'd been such a mess when he'd found out about Mark cheating on him.

Rick still felt lost and rejected. Despite everything he missed Mark. He regularly woke up in the middle of the night to reach for his lover. The shock of finding the other half of their bed empty and cold made him sick every time.

He'd been unable to focus on work. When Uncle Kaden had suggested an extended business trip to Vancouver he'd jumped at the chance, hoping to gain some distance and new perspective.

Now it was four weeks later, and he still missed Mark.

Once the cab driver had been paid, Rick dragged his two suitcases in and locked the door behind him. Thank God he'd finally made it. His first flight had been delayed due to mist, making him miss his connection. It was early afternoon instead of mid-morning, he'd been up longer than he cared to remember, and all he wanted to do was go to bed and take a nap. Unpacking could wait.

But it wasn't meant to be.

He'd barely sat down on the couch to consider if he was going to have his nap here or try and make it into his bed when the doorbell rang. Who the hell could that be?

When he opened his door, Adrian and Peter grinned at him. He'd heard about Adrian coming back from wherever he'd been, but it was still a shock to see him again after all those years. He was still short, but he must have been working out because where he'd been slim before he now showed a wiry strength that was quite attractive. To Rick's relief, Peter looked a lot better than he had last time in the hospital, right after coming out of the coma.

He invited them in for a coffee, the only thing left after having been away for four weeks. Once they'd all sat down, Adrian told Rick about his encounter with Mark. He described Tony and the goons who were usually with him, and mentioned how scared Mark had looked.

"Shit! This is my fault." Rick buried his face in his hands. He'd left Mark in this gangster's hands for almost six weeks. God knew how much his lover had been made to suffer. "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 unlike him, it should have made me suspect that something was off." Rick rubbed 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." Adrian wriggled in his seat and looked very uncomfortable. "He's my little brother and I knew something was wrong and I 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 Adrian to him and back.

"You're right." He was going to ask his brother Ben to help. A detective would know how to do this.

* * * *

Riverside, Texas

Sunday, May 11, 2008

Rick hadn't slept very well after finding out that Mark hadn't cheated on him. The worry of what had happened to his lover had kept him awake. Plus, for the first time in six weeks he had some hope that it might be possible to get Mark back. He'd set up a meeting with Ben, who had immediately agreed to meet him at the gym.

After the workout they made their way to the Jacuzzi.

"So, what was it that you needed to talk to me about so urgently?" Ben slowly lowered his massive six foot five body into the hot water, displacing so much of it that the pool flowed over when he settled in.

"Do you remember the big case I was working on before I left for Vancouver?" Rick followed suit and let the hot water soothe his muscles. Working out with his brother brought out more of a competitive streak than he'd ever admit, which meant he was more sore than usual.

"Sure, the whole police force was abuzz with it for a while. I remember it involved some allegations against an innocent businessman, didn't it?" Ben closed his eyes and sighed when he leant back.

"You have a good memory." Not that he was surprised.

"I *am* a detective, you know?" Ben blinked at him, his green-blue eyes twinkling with amusement. "I may work in homicide, but that doesn't mean I ignore other people's cases."

"I know. Just teasing." Rick chuckled and proceeded to refresh Ben's memory about the rest of the case. He ended with his suspicions about what they now thought had *actually* happened to Mark, based on what Adrian had told him yesterday.

"So you think that this Tony somehow got Mark to make it look like he was cheating on you? Why?" Ben had sat up, paying close attention.

"I don't know. I suspect that he threatened someone who Mark thought he could protect by doing what that bastard wanted." Rick swallowed. The memory of having ignored Mark when he'd come back to their apartment hurt deeply. "Why? I had long suspected that Tony was interested in Mark for more than his musical talents. I thought he was being too touchy-feely around Mark, but Mark told me it was just the cultural difference between Italians and Americans. That he was just being friendly."

"Okay, so let me get this straight. Tony threatens Mark into coming with him as his boyfriend. He's been holding him hostage since then but you only recently realised that might be the case." Ben frowned. "Have you thought about the possibility that Mark got away from Tony in the meantime, since he obviously didn't treat him well? He may just not want to come back to you."

"Yes, I have thought about it." That had been quite a painful realisation. "But even if that's the case, and for Mark's sake I almost hope it is, I need to know for sure. I can't bear the thought of him still being under Tony's control. If he is, we need to everything possible to get him away."

"Okay, I can see that." Ben nodded. "I can make some enquiries with friends from the police academy who work in Houston now. They should be able to check up on this Tony Mondello, especially if he's a well-known businessman. If Mark is still around, he'd probably be playing in one or several of Tony's restaurants, right?"

Rick nodded, unable to speak through the sudden lump in his throat.

"That gives the guys quite a lot to go on." Ben reached over and slapped Rick's shoulder. "Don't worry little brother, we'll find out what's going on with Mark."

* * * *

Riverside, Texas

Tuesday, May 13, 2008

Rick made it to his and Ben's favourite Irish pub with only seconds to spare. His brother was a stickler about punctuality but a new case had kept Rick at the office until it was almost too late. He stormed into the pub, checking the tables, sure that Ben would have picked one of the ones against the back wall.

"I almost thought you wouldn't make it." Ben grinned and waived for their waiter's attention.

"I wouldn't dare." Rick sat down, knowing exactly what he wanted already.

When they'd given the waiter their orders he took a deep breath and sat back. It was a good thing he was meeting his brother tonight, otherwise he would have sat in some bar getting drunk. It was Mark and his ten-month anniversary today and he missed his lover so intensely that at times the pain made him dizzy.

"Hey, it's all right, little brother." Ben took his hand briefly and squeezed it. "We'll find him for you."

Rick nodded and wiped his eyes. He didn't want anyone to see his tears. Ben pretended to be very interested in his drink. They might tease each other a lot, but deep down there was a lot of love between them. He cleared his throat.

"Does that mean you have some news for me?" Rick took a sip from his beer.

"Yes, they called me today. Tony is in Houston and all of his restaurants have had live music at some point in the last month. We haven't confirmed that the person who's working for him is Mark." Ben smiled. "They said there'd be a major event in one of his biggest restaurants tonight and they'd try and confirm his identity based on the photo I emailed them."

"Oh, God." Rick's heartbeat sped up. "So we'll know by tomorrow?"

"No." Ben shook his head and pulled his cell from his pocket, putting it on the table between them. "They promised they'd call me as soon as they confirm the musician's identity one way or another."

"You're the best." He didn't know whether he should feel relieved or even more scared. In a very short time he'd be much closer to knowing what was going on.

"I know!" Ben sat up straight, looking even more imposing when showing off his full height and impossibly broad shoulders.

"No false modesty there, huh?" Rick chuckled and leant back so their waiter was able to place their food onto the table.

"Will that be all?" The waiter looked harried. It was a busy night.

"No, thanks, we're fine for now." Ben winked at the boy, making him smile.

Rick raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything. His brother seemed to have that effect on both men and women. Ben had never given him any indication to think he wasn't straight, but none of the few women Ben had gone out with over the years seemed to last longer than a couple of dates. It was probably Ben's stressful job, but moments like this made Rick wonder.

They'd managed to eat almost half their dinner, talking about family and common friends, when the cell finally rang.

Rick froze.

Ben calmly picked it up, flipped it open and held it to his ear.

"Detective Dealy... I see... You're sure?" Ben closed his eyes and nodded. "Okay... Thanks, Nick, I owe you one."

Rick was ready to strangle his brother to get some information.

"That was Nick." Ben closed the cell and returned it to his pocket.

"I gathered that." Rick moaned.

"You need to be ready for this, Rick." Ben sighed. "They said that it was Mark playing the violin at the *Primavera* restaurant."

"That's wonderful news. At least we know where he is." Why would that make Ben look so worried?

"Yes, we do. Nick also said that Mark wasn't looking well." Ben took his hand and squeezed it briefly. "Apparently there were two men who looked like bodyguards watching

him closely. He was very pale, didn't make eye contact with anyone and didn't look happy to be there."

"That doesn't sound like the Mark I know." Rick's heart sank. Not only was Mark still with Tony, it sounded as if he was having a very hard time of it. "We have to go help him."

"I agree." Ben nodded and withdrew his hand. "But we need to be careful. This Tony is dangerous and powerful. He won't let Mark go without a fight."

"So what do we do?" Rick was ready to jump into his car and go, even though his brain was telling him to be rational about this.

"I think you should take some leave for the rest of this week, and we'll drive to Houston. Nick will help us locate Tony's house, and he'll find out about Tony's general movements. We'll need to find a way to let Mark know that help is available. Nick says it would be best if you're around to reassure Mark that he'll be safe if he decides to accept our help." Ben looked at him expectantly.

"I think I can do that." He hated to leave work just when they'd just started a new case, but making sure that Mark was safe was far more important than his career.

Chapter Four

Houston, Texas

Tuesday, May 13, 2008

Mark was playing at the *Primavera* that night, one of his favourite places in Houston. He would have liked it even more if he hadn't been here under duress, but he took his enjoyment where he could these days. Tony hadn't got around to adding a piano yet, although he was constantly talking about it. Mark loved that he was able to play the violin for once. He was doing his best to do the violin interpretations of 1970s pop music justice, but he was having a very hard time.

Ever since Tony had kidnapped him, he'd not been able to enjoy his music like he'd used to. Even though Tony did his best to make what he called their relationship seem as normal as possible, Mark knew better. The bastard was either a great actor or a master at deluding himself if he believed he could ever get Mark to care for him, never mind love him. It. Was. Not. Going. To. Happen.

The reason why he was having a particularly bad time tonight wasn't because Tony had beaten him due to some imagined misdeed. For once, his physical suffering wasn't what caused him to feel so awful. This pain was in his heart and soul. It was his and Rick's ten-month anniversary, or it would have been if they'd still been together. He wanted to be with the only man he'd ever loved with everything he had, but it didn't look like his wish was going to be fulfilled anytime soon, if ever.

It was the second monthly anniversary they'd missed and it hurt. Maybe Adrian hadn't gone to Riverside, hadn't told anyone, or he'd told them and they hadn't believed him. He didn't want to think about the possibility that Tony had found out Adrian was his brother and stopped him.

He wished that he didn't have to play pop music. What he really wanted to play was Tchaikovsky's violin concerto. The exquisite emotions and the haunting beauty of that piece would have been a much more accurate reflection of his feelings. Unfortunately, since Tony

wanted happy customers who spent a lot of money because they liked the music, that wasn't an option.

Since he couldn't play what he really wanted and he needed something to distract his mind from thinking about Rick, he decided to let his eyes wander to see if anyone interesting was having dinner.

Most of the couples were what you expected in a restaurant like this. A mixture of happy couples having romantic dinners, and smaller and larger groups of serious looking business people. There were also two men who didn't fall into any of the above categories. They didn't look like normal restaurant visitors. They wore suits and their table manners were okay, but Mark couldn't figure out why they were here. They didn't talk to each other very much, they weren't interested in the food, and worst of all they were trying to hide the fact that they were staring at him a lot. They were very careful about not being too obvious, but he'd noticed anyway. He'd become very sensitive to potential sources of danger.

What was up with them?

He glanced over at the two bodyguards. They were staring at him as well, clearly suspicious. Mark had no idea what they thought he could have possibly done. He also knew that they didn't care. Whatever they came up with would feed Tony's paranoia, and Mark would get punished for it.

* * * *

Houston, Texas

Wednesday, May 14, 2008

"Wake up." Tony's voice was right next to Mark's ear.

"Humph." What was Tony doing in his bedroom?

"Come on, wake up." A hand shaking his shoulder was added to the much too loud voice. It made his head hurt.

"What time is it?" It didn't feel like he'd got any sleep at all. It was surely still the middle of the night.

"It's time to go." Tony kept shaking him.

To avoid further pain and possibly worse if he didn't move fast enough for Tony's liking, he forced himself to open his eyes and to sit up. It wasn't the middle of the night. The sun shone into the window, indicating that it must be mid-morning. This was almost stranger than Tony coming into his room to shake him awake.

"Time to go?" It always took him a while to wake up but he was sure they didn't have any appointments this morning. Tony wasn't one for surprises, so what had changed and where did he want him to go?

"Yes, we're leaving." Tony's mouth was a thin, straight line.

That sounded rather final.

"I let you sleep as long as possible, but now it's time for you to get dressed and into the car." Tony was strangely considerate at the oddest times.

"Where are we going?" He got up and walked towards his bathroom. He wasn't leaving without a shower and brushing his teeth.

"It's no longer safe here." Tony was about to follow him into the bathroom.

"Why not?" He stopped in the doorway. He wasn't having Tony in the bathroom with him. "I really need a shower first. Can we please discuss this over breakfast?"

"Breakfast?" Tony shook his head. "There's no time for that."

"Please?" Usually Tony couldn't resist when he begged him for something. This time was no different.

When he was done and made it downstairs, he'd barely sat down with his coffee and some cereal when Tony started on the questions again.

"Do you remember those two men from last night? The ones Bruno and Vico said were staring at you but trying not to be obvious about it?" Tony fisted his hands.

"Yes." Mark sipped his coffee, relieved when the hot drink hit his stomach and started to transform him into a human being.

"I had them followed. Guess where they went to work this morning?" Tony looked at him as if he already knew and didn't want to tell him.

He shrugged and started eating, keeping a wary eye on Tony. Sometimes the man's facial expressions were more of a clue as to what he wanted than his words.

"They went to the police station." The vein in Tony's temple looked like it was about to burst. "They're detectives."

"What?" Had Adrian managed to get word out that he was in trouble? But why had they sent the police? They should have known that would only make Tony suspicious. "But why would detectives be interested in me?"

"You tell me!" Tony sat back in his chair and crossed his arms.

"I have no idea." His brain was still half asleep and wouldn't let him come up with one either.

He wished they were interested in him because they were trying to find out how to get him away from Tony. But he was pretty sure that that wasn't the case. They would have made a move last night, wouldn't they? They wouldn't have left him with Tony for another night if Adrian had convinced them that he was in danger. Maybe Adrian wasn't behind this after all. But then who was?

"No surprise there!" Tony looked disgusted. "So, you have no idea, my men can't seem to find anything out and I think that something very fishy is going on. So I've decided that we'll move. Get away from here and regroup. That'll give us time to come up with a strategy."

"Get away from here? But I thought this was your home?" Shit, if they left without a trace nobody would know where to find him. At least while they were in Houston there was a chance if Adrian managed to tell them to go looking for him.

"You are very *divertente*, darling." Tony managed a credible imitation of a smile, but the lines around his eyes gave him away. He was anything but amused. "I have many homes all across the country. We will simply move to another one."

"Move to another one." He was no longer hungry. Being found and rescued was quickly becoming less and less likely. He might have to try and run again, even if he wasn't sure if he'd survive being caught a third time.

"Yes." Tony grinned. "I think you'll like San Antonio. It's a lot smaller than Houston, quiet. I don't have any restaurants there so I won't even be tempted to let you play your music in public."

He managed to finish his coffee before Tony got restless. Resisting would have been pointless so he quietly followed his kidnapper to the limo and got in the back.

How was Rick, or anyone else for that matter, going to find him now?

* * * *

Houston, Texas

Thursday, May 15, 2008

"Excuse me? What did you just say?" Rick doubted he'd misheard, but he had to make sure. If it was true, they'd come all the way to Houston for nothing. Worse than that, they'd have to figure out where Mark had been taken next. And since that might be anywhere in the country, it would be close to impossible to find him. At least fast enough for Rick's liking.

"I said that I'm sorry to tell you this, but Mark is no longer in Houston." Nick was a short but impressively muscled detective with dark red hair. He sat behind a desk that had seen better days, ever-present paperwork strewn across its surface.

"Oh God, we're too late." Rick sank back in the cheap plastic chair and covered his face with his hands. "I knew we shouldn't have waited until this morning."

"I can assure you that it wouldn't have made a difference." Nick didn't even look apologetic. "They left early yesterday."

"You didn't just let them leave, did you?" Ben hadn't lost his professional calm, but his eyes were burning with anger.

"Of course not!" Nick pointed a finger at Ben. "You'd have never let me live that one down."

"Nope, I wouldn't have. That favour I owe you for finding them would have also been null and void." Ben grinned.

"What? You didn't let them leave after all? But you said they were gone!" Rick was trying to hold onto his sanity but the pain of having missed Mark was interfering with that.

"What I said was that they left." Nick spoke slowly, maybe hoping that would make it easier for Rick to understand what was going on. "What I haven't told you yet, and what Ben has correctly guessed, is that we followed them."

"You did?" Hope was making him light-headed. He couldn't take much more of these rollercoaster emotions without serious damage to his sanity.

"Well, Ben had made it very clear to me that this was very important to him, or rather to his little brother." Nick grinned when Rick glared at Ben. "There were some other facts

that supported the need to keep an eye on Tony Mondello. The allegations that he's blackmailing competitors, using unsavoury business practices, and is possibly involved in several cases of fraud are serious. The report from the two officers who observed Mark at *Primavera* made it clear that he wasn't doing well physically."

"Oh God, this sounds much worse than I imagined." Rick rubbed his temples, trying to dispel the oncoming headache.

"I would have to agree that it doesn't sound good for Mark." Nick nodded. "But that report confirmed your suspicions about Mark having been kidnapped. At the very least he's probably been made to stay with Mr. Mondello against his will. This allowed me to have him followed for further observation."

"So you know where he is?" He was ready to jump up and get back into the car.

"Yes, we do." Nick pulled a piece of paper from the chaotic mess on his desk. "They went to another of Tony's many residences. This one is in San Antonio and well camouflaged in a wooded lot. We suspect that he's trying to go into hiding for a while."

"That only makes sense if he thinks he's being followed." Ben frowned.

"It is possible that he's become suspicious. On the other hand, he's been quite visible in public lately and he may just wish to take a break." Nick shrugged. "Either way, we know where he is. We're in touch with the local chief of police and he's promised backup as long as it only involves freeing Mark. He isn't ready to move on any other allegations without a lot more proof that Mr. Mondello is involved in something illegal businesswise."

"That isn't our biggest concern here anyway. It's Mark we need to think about first. His life may be in danger if we can't get him out of Mr. Mondello's sphere of influence." Ben held out his hand for the piece of paper. "I assume this has the address as well as any necessary names and phone numbers of local contacts on it?"

"Yep, sure does." Nick handed the sheet to Ben and looked at Rick. "I hope you can sort this out. Tony Mondello seems to be a mean fucker and I wouldn't want anyone under his control. Good luck in getting Mark back."

Well, if that wasn't a nice surprise. Ben had told him that he hadn't been explicit about Rick's relationship with Mark or why it was so important to him that they get him back. Obviously Nick had drawn his own conclusions and was fine with what he'd found. Rick

smiled. Even though he still didn't have Mark back, he was beginning to feel a lot better about his chances to eventually succeed.

"Thanks, Nick, your support means a lot." He got up, Ben following suit, they all shook hands and he was soon back in the car with Ben, on their way to San Antonio.

Four hours later they'd reached the outskirts of the city and were starving. Ben had driven straight through and they both needed a break before facing the chief of police. They found a rest area and pulled into the parking lot. Fast food was better than nothing, and Rick was almost ready to commit murder for a coffee.

"How are we going to get Mark away from that asshole?" He'd been trying to come up with an idea all morning.

"I've been thinking about that." Ben took a large bite out of his hamburger and started chewing.

"So have I, except I'm still not sure what's best." He made inroads on his all-day breakfast, the eggs a little too dry but the bacon was nice and crispy.

"I think we need to find a way to get Tony and Mark out of the house." Ben took a long drink of his soda. "For one thing we don't have the manpower to attack the house itself. For another I don't think it would be a good idea anyway because it's too risky. Tony would use Mark as a hostage for sure."

Rick nodded. He didn't want to think about what that man could do to his lover if he was threatened.

"There's also some added safety for us if we can get Tony in a public place. He'll be less likely to do something stupid." Ben was almost done with his first hamburger. His brother ate like a horse and Rick had no idea where he put it. He was as trim and physically fit as he'd been ten years ago at his high school prom.

"It would probably be easiest if we surprised them while Mark was playing at one of Tony's restaurants, right?" Rick finished the second half of his coffee and held up his hand to signal for a refill. "But if Tony really has gone into hiding, he might not check up on his restaurants in person."

"That makes sense. Unfortunately Tony doesn't seem to own any restaurants in San Antonio." Ben devoured his second burger as if he hadn't had anything to eat all day. "Apparently the business community is really close-knit and he's had trouble finding a place.

If San Antonio were bigger he might have been more interested and pushed his way in anyway, but since it isn't, he seems to have left it alone so far."

"Well, if he doesn't own any restaurants here, we'll just have to find a way to interest him in going out for dinner." Rick was pretty sure that the gangster would prefer that to ordering take-out, unless he employed a cook or had someone else around who was able to prepare meals for him.

"If he really has gone into hiding, it would have to be a really compelling reason for him to come out again." Ben was done with his food and wiped his mouth before finishing his soda. "No idea how to do it yet, but it's probably one of the few ways we can get him into a public place."

"Okay, so what do you think about the following?" Rick had finished his food and leant back in his chair, nursing his second cup of coffee. "We find out who owns one of the bigger restaurants that isn't doing very well at the moment. We pretend to be that person and give Tony a call to let him know that we've heard he might be interested in buying a restaurant in San Antonio. I suspect that Tony will be informed enough to be aware of the current business situation. And even if he isn't, it would be easy for him to check out the story."

Ben stared at him, mouth open and eyes wide.

"What? You don't like my idea?" He thought it was rather smart.

"Um, no, I'm floored." Ben closed his mouth, grinned, and reached across the table to slap him on the shoulder. "I guess you're a lawyer for a reason. That's a very clever plan!"

"Good." Rick finished his coffee. "Let's get going then."

* * * *

San Antonio, Texas

Thursday, May 14, 2008

"I've changed my mind, we're going out." Tony was in full overlord mode when he emerged from his office where he'd spent most of the afternoon. He stood tall and looked around to survey his territory. What he was looking for, Mark had no idea.

He'd been watching TV in the living room for lack of something more interesting to do. He was too exhausted to play his violin or do anything more straining like read a book. He'd rather enjoyed the quiet time without Tony's constant presence. He hated that it never lasted for very long. He needed time for himself, and he wasn't getting it. Hell, he needed time away from his tormentor, if nothing else.

But the bastard wasn't going to give that to him.

"Do we have to?" Mark had looked forward to staying in and getting some sleep, but apparently that wasn't to be. He was so fed up with his life not being his own that he briefly considered resisting Tony's order.

"Don't even try to argue yourself out of it." Tony frowned. "I need to meet someone for dinner to discuss an important business opportunity. You're not staying here on your own. I'm not letting you out of my sight again. It isn't safe."

"Okay." He shrugged and got up so he could go change into one of the hated dark suits that Tony required he wear in public.

He made his way upstairs, closely followed by Tony. He was so tempted to try and argue this time. Tony saying that he wasn't safe here was so obviously an excuse, it almost made him laugh. The guards both inside and outside the house made it perfectly safe. Maybe Tony didn't trust them any longer? It would be yet another sign that Tony was totally losing it. Paranoia towards strangers was one thing, but not trusting the people he had hand selected was taking it to the next level.

Whatever he thought was logical or not didn't matter though. Tony's current mood made any type of resistance a very stupid idea, and he wasn't willing to risk yet another beating.

Once he'd changed into the suit, donning a dress shirt, cufflinks and a tie to boot, they got into the limo and drove to the restaurant. Once there, they followed the hostess to a table in the back corner.

There were about twenty tables in total and only five of those were taken. That was very odd. The place should have been a lot busier around this time of the evening. Tony surveyed it and his lip curled in disdain. Whoever they were meeting didn't seem to be here yet and Tony clearly wasn't impressed. He scowled into his drink and made the four guards

change position several times until he finally told two each to take a table. One close to the door and the other close to theirs. Was he expecting an attack?

When the fifth guard, who'd been waiting outside, showed the guy Tony was expecting to meet to their table, Mark was glad that he was already sitting down. It took everything he had not to show his utter shock at who was shaking Tony's hand.

Someone must have listened to his prayers. If this wasn't a case of mistaken identity, the guy who'd come to see Tony was Rick's older brother Ben, the detective.

"I'm sorry?" Mark shook his head, trying to return to reality. He'd probably stared at Ben far too long already. If he wasn't careful Tony would assume that he was interested in the stranger and go off into one of his rages. But even if Tony didn't lose his temper, he might notice that something was up. Seeing as Ben was trying to remain unrecognised, that would probably be a bad thing.

"I was just introducing you, darling. This is Mr. Linus Cadwell." Tony narrowed his eyes. Shit. It looked as though the bastard was suspicious already. "He's a local businessman and the owner of this restaurant. He'll be joining us for dinner to discuss a proposal he's brought to my attention just this afternoon."

"Of course." Mark got up and held his hand out for Ben to shake. He didn't move a muscle, playing his role of total stranger perfectly. "Hello. It's nice to meet you Mr. Cadwell. I'm sorry that I seemed a little absent, but I've got a bad headache. I promise to be more alert from now on."

"It's nice to meet you as well, Mr. Shrader." Ben shook his hand and smiled politely. "I'm sure the wonderful food and excellent wine we serve here will help you dispel your headache in no time."

"I would hope that both food and wine are wonderful." Tony laughed too loudly and sat down, holding the chair next to him out for Mark. He was very good at pretending to be a caring lover when he wanted. "After all, this is your restaurant. I would hope that you're not trying to sell me an establishment which serves anything that isn't up to par."

"Oh, it's worth the price I'll be asking, if we get to that point." Ben aka Linus leant back in his chair, looking around the dining area as if surveying his property. "Of course, whether I go through with the sale will depend entirely on the details we may or may not be able to work out tonight."

"We can certainly make a start." Tony pretended to peruse the wine list, but he was far more focused on Ben, watching him closely from under his eyelashes. "I'll give you fair warning though, Mr. Cadwell. I make up my mind very quickly. And once I've made a decision there is little or nothing that can stop me from executing it."

"I hear you, Mr. Mondello." Ben nodded and waived for the waiter to approach their table. "It's the sign of a good businessman to stick with a decision once he's made it. I have no problem with that as long as we reach a mutually satisfactory agreement for us to execute."

The waiter took Ben's order for a martini and left.

Mark was still in shock. He'd followed the entire conversation while trying to understand what was really going on underneath. Ben's presence couldn't be a coincidence, he was sure of that. The fact he was pretending to be a local businessman and that he'd acted as if he didn't know Mark proved he was here undercover. He must have either known Mark was here or he'd come in connection with another case and was an even better actor than Mark thought.

Mark absently gave the waiter his food order when he returned with Ben's drink and asked what they wanted to eat. Tony and Ben had started discussing the economy, both national and local, and since he didn't have anything to add, he focused on trying to figure out what Ben's intentions were. Since he must have known that Mark was here—why else would he be here?—he must have come to help. Mark wanted to be ready when Ben made his move, so he watched him carefully.

"So you expect the local economy to recover in the next six to twelve months?" Tony's eyebrows rose. "Why in God's name would you sell a restaurant that's doing fairly well, or so you say, even under these trying circumstances? Wouldn't it make a lot more sense to hold on for another year or so and then take advantage of the upswing to make the restaurant even more successful?"

"That all depends on the depths of your pockets, doesn't it?" Ben leant back to give the waiter room to put their plates on the table. "I'll be honest with you, Mr. Mondello. I've had a few setbacks in other areas of my business interests and my available funds are depleted. I need cash more than I need to keep this restaurant, even knowing that the upswing is going to happen in the near future."

"Fair enough." Tony frowned. "However, I would have thought it would be easy to get a loan from a bank, considering the collateral you can offer."

"That wouldn't be my preferred solution." Ben started eating.

"Something doesn't add up here." Tony's frown deepened and he put down his fork. "You seem far too eager to sell this restaurant compared to only six months ago when I last checked into your affairs."

"You've been checking into my affairs before today?" Ben looked a lot more shocked than he should have. Business people checked out the competition on a regular basis, didn't they? So Ben was probably concerned about his cover slipping. His background check of the real owner would have gone only so far in giving him information.

"Of course I have." Tony snorted, his frown still firmly in place. "What do you take me for – a rank beginner?"

"Certainly not. Your reputation as an excellent businessman precedes you." Ben pretended not to notice the sudden tension, but Mark could see the worry in his eyes. This wasn't going as planned.

"I see." Tony leant back and his hand moved towards his gun.

Shit!

Ben didn't seem concerned and continued to eat.

"I think something is fishy about this whole situation." Tony lifted his jacket to show Ben the gun. "Why don't you start telling me what's really going on here."

"Okay, if that's what you want." Ben put down his fork and sat back in his chair.

Why wasn't he more worried?

"What's going on here is that we have you figured out, Mr. Mondello. We'd like to handle this in as quiet and civilised a manner as possible, so we'll give you a choice." Ben held up his first finger. "One, you can let Mark go peacefully and we won't arrest you today."

"We? Who's we?" Tony looked around but the only people paying attention were the four guards, clearly waiting for a signal. "And why would I let Mark go? He's never told me that he wants to leave in all of the time that he's been with me. So I can't see any reason for you to arrest me whatsoever."

"That's a lie!" He could no longer contain himself and almost jumped up from his seat with the intensity of his need to make it clear that he hadn't wanted to stay with his tormentor. "I do want to leave. I was even desperate enough to try and run away once but the punishment you inflicted on me was so bad that I've been afraid to try again until I'm in better physical shape."

"Shut up!" Tony glared at him and lifted his right arm to hit him before glancing at Ben and thinking better of it. "You need to stay out of this. You have no idea what's best for you. You know how confused you can get. This discussion doesn't concern you."

"It certainly does concern me. And I'm most certainly not confused. I never have been and never will be when it's about you." All the anger he'd held back for weeks suddenly rose to the surface. He was no longer alone. He was going to face Tony with some semblance of hope not to be pounded into oblivion for speaking up. "I'm no longer going to shut up whenever you threaten me. I never wanted to be with you in the first place and I've told you so often enough. I still want to leave and as soon as I can do so without fearing for my life, I most certainly will!"

"Or you can fight the decision and we will arrest you for kidnapping, assault, attempted rape and any other charges Mark cares to bring against you." Ben held up his second finger as if Tony's and Mark's exchange hadn't taken place.

It was enough to distract Tony for a moment. He stared at Ben, clearly shocked at the detective's audacity.

"Didn't you hear a single thing I've just said?" Tony's hand twitched. The bastard was about to pull his gun on Ben. "I will not let Mark go because he doesn't want to leave. And you can't arrest me because I wasn't foolish enough to come here unprotected."

Everything started to happen at once.

Tony pulled out his gun and pointed it at Ben while yelling at the guards to come to their table to restrain him.

The guards jumped up but were held back by the patrons at the other five occupied tables who rose as one, pulled their own guns, held up their badges for everyone to see and proceeded to handcuff and arrest the guards instead.

A further group of three men entered the restaurant and made their way towards them. Mark almost passed out from joy and relief. He'd recognise the man who led the charge anywhere.

Rick was here.

His Rick had come to save him after all.

Chapter Five

Rick only had eyes for Mark as he finally walked into the restaurant.

Waiting outside for the signal from one of the waiters that it was okay to come in had been hell. Intellectually he knew he couldn't go inside too early. They'd discussed the plan in detail and Rick understood how it needed to work. Ben had made it very clear that Rick might endanger their plan of making Tony Mondello feel safe if he lost patience, and Rick had agreed. They needed to try to catch the gangster and his goons unaware because they couldn't risk anyone pulling a gun. Something Tony Mondello or one of his minions were very likely to do if given the opportunity. So, they'd need to make absolutely sure there was no opportunity.

Emotionally, Rick just wanted to be close to Mark again. He'd missed his lover so much. When Adrian had told him what had really happened, he'd realised that the whole mess was his fault. The guilt of not having let Mark back into their joint apartment had almost killed him. He'd asked himself what he'd been thinking that day, over and over again. Finally, he'd realised the real problem was he'd let his damned gut rule his actions. If he'd switched on his brain for even a second he would have noticed that what he was doing, locking Mark out like that, was wrong on more than one level.

Today was the first time in almost two months that he'd seen Mark. All he could think of as he approached was his need to apologise. He had to find a way of making Mark understand how sorry he was. That this was never going to happen again. He'd do anything so they could get back together. He was planning to go onto his knees in front of Mark as soon as possible. His lover deserved nothing less. He almost shook from the intensity of his feelings.

Now that he got closer to Mark, he could see how pale his lover was. He sat in his chair as though he'd been glued to it, staring back at Rick with big luminous eyes. It made him hurry even more. If Mark would let him, he was going to take him into his arms and never let him go.

When Mark's eyes moved to the side, Rick's automatically followed where they looked. What he saw made the breath hitch in his throat and his heart beat even faster. Adrenaline hit his system, getting his body ready to fight.

Tony was pointing a gun at Ben. Apparently their surprise hadn't worked quite as well as they'd thought, or else, Tony had just been too fast for them. His brother exuded an infuriating level of calmness. How could he not panic? The bastard was going to shoot him if he wasn't careful. And now that the gun was out, nobody else in the room was safe either. Tony Mondello, under threat, might decide to shoot anyone or everyone else while he was at it.

But Ben didn't look worried in the least. He sat there quietly as he was waiting for Tony to make up his mind.

A quick glance around the rest of the room revealed that, luckily, most of the plan had worked as intended. The plainclothes officers who'd posed as patrons had already arrested the four guards and were currently handcuffing and taking them outside. The remaining seven officers were approaching Mark's table, clearly intending to support Ben.

"Drop your gun, sir." An older man with white hair and a slight paunch pointed his own gun at Tony. "You're outnumbered and we'd much prefer this to end in a peaceful arrest rather than a bloodbath."

Tony shook his head. He appeared to have different plans.

Without giving away his intentions by so much as moving a muscle in his face, and with a speed that took everyone by surprise, he turned the hand that was holding his gun from Ben to Mark.

No!

This couldn't be happening.

Without thinking Rick lurched forward the last few steps and threw himself between Mark and the gun. He embraced his lover to protect him with his own body. He wasn't going to let the bastard win by taking Mark's life.

The shot rang out only seconds later and the pain when it hit Rick's back was excruciating. He was still trying to draw a breath when the second shot caused an even more intense flare of pain in his upper arm.

It was too much on top of his already shaky physical and emotional state. He squeezed Mark as hard as he could to let him know that he loved him, then he gave in to the blackness that swallowed him whole.

It had all happened so fast that it was taking Mark's brain a few moments to catch up. He was still trying to digest the fact that Rick had come to save him. Seeing his lover again, knowing beyond the shadow of a doubt that Rick was still interested in him, had made him so happy that everything else hadn't really registered until it was too late.

When Rick had noticed that Tony was pointing a gun at his brother he'd looked shocked, but instead of panicking he'd checked out the rest of the room. For a moment he'd looked relieved, so whatever that part of their plan had been, it had obviously worked. The bodyguards being arrested and out of the way was definitely a step into the direction of making everyone safe.

Tony, however, was the real problem.

The bastard turning around and pointing the gun at Mark had clearly been too much for Rick. His reaction had been so fast that there was nothing Mark could have done to stop him. Rick had pushed him off the chair with the force of his protective embrace and Mark had been helpless to stop the bullets from hitting his lover as he lay on his back, holding onto Rick for support, and trying to recover from the hard thud their bodies had made when he made contact with the floor.

He'd felt the bullets' impact when they hit Rick's body as if it had been his. The shock of that first hit, closely followed by the second had made him want to scream his outrage. If he'd had any air left in his lungs, he would have surely embarrassed himself. Since Rick had knocked it out of him when he threw himself in the bullets' path, Mark couldn't so much as whimper at this point.

Rick had tightened his embrace once as if to say sorry and had gone limp in his arms. His returning hold on Rick's body was so tight that he could feel him breathing in his arms, so at least he knew that Rick was still alive. Blood was flowing from the wound on Rick's upper arm in alarming amounts, making everything on that side of his body slippery.

Fuck!

This wasn't what was supposed to be happening.

"Hold on, sir, the paramedics are on their way." The voice was that of the older man who had attempted to convince Tony that it was better to surrender than to cause a bloodbath.

What a nonsensical idea! He could have told them that Tony wasn't going to give up. The word surrender wasn't even in the bastard's vocabulary. Tony's actions had proven that Mark's opinion was correct, but it didn't matter anymore because by the time the rescuers realised their mistake, it had been too late for Rick.

"Fucking paramedics! I hope they get here too late and the bastard dies." Tony's voice was rough. "And if he doesn't, I'll personally see to it that the job gets finished. He's not going to take my sweetheart away from me."

"You don't get to talk about my brother like that." A loud crunch was followed by a yelp of pain. "And you have *no* right to call Mark your sweetheart, not the way you've kept him against his will and certainly not the way you've treated him."

"Police brutality." Tony's voice was nasal and he sounded like he was in pain.

Mark managed to lift his head to peek around Rick's shoulder. What he saw almost made him laugh. Ben stood next to Mark's former tormentor, shaking his right fist at Tony. The gangster was trying to cover his bleeding nose with shaking hands, clearly hindered by the fact that he was handcuffed.

"This gentleman isn't part of our police force." The older man with the white hair was grinning. "There's no evidence of police brutality here."

Mark smiled. He certainly wasn't going to mention the fact that Ben was a police detective, something the older man was almost certainly aware of but had obviously chosen to ignore. It served Tony right to taste a little of the medicine he'd been so fond of doling out to Mark in large doses.

Mark was glad that Ben had swung his fist. He'd been able to do a lot more damage than Mark would have been able to manage. He still wanted to kick the bastard a few times himself, but Ben breaking his nose was a good start.

A few seconds later the paramedics finally arrived. They checked Rick's vital signs while Ben told them what had happened. They put a neck brace on Rick just in case, and carefully lifted him off Mark and onto a stretcher. Ben held out a hand to help pull Mark up

and he gratefully accepted. The manly hug that followed was even better. It wasn't Rick, but he'd needed some sort of reassurance.

Tony was being lead towards the exit. Just before he reached the door he turned around to glare at him with such fury in his eyes that Mark was sure he would have keeled over dead if looks could kill. As if it was all Mark's fault. Then the bastard was pulled outside. Good riddance.

With the immediate situation resolved, he started shaking from the shock.

"Is Rick going to be okay? Where are they taking him?" The paramedics hadn't said anything, and he'd been too confused and upset to ask.

"They're sending him to the University Hospital not too far from here. They've got the largest trauma centre in the city. He'll be fine. It looked like it was only a flesh wound." The older man slapped him on the back and grinned.

"What? Only a flesh wound? Didn't they see the wound in his back? I felt it when the shot hit him, so I know it's there." He couldn't believe they'd missed the potentially far more dangerous wound.

"Oh, don't worry about that one. He'll have a pretty bad bruise, but it's not going to do any permanent damage." Ben was grinning as well and pulled his shirt and T-shirt out of his trousers to demonstrate.

A bullet-proof vest.

Thank God.

* * * *

San Antonio, Texas

Friday, May 16, 2008

Rick was sure that he'd been hit by a truck, if not something bigger. The entire left side of his back hurt and his right arm was in agony. The rest of him felt surprisingly normal. Maybe not a truck after all?

Someone was holding his left hand. The other hand was small and had callused fingertips. He sighed. It felt like Mark's. He'd missed that sensation of his lover's slight

calluses against his skin. It always made any contact between them, Mark's caresses, extra special. It was a sensation nobody else could give him. And he'd stupidly thrown away the right to feel that. His own idiocy and pride had cost him the man he loved.

Since the whole situation must be a dream, he was going to hang onto it as long as possible. Returning to reality and the emptiness of his life without Mark would be too painful.

He was curious about where he was though, so after a little while he opened his eyes. The ceiling was white. So were the walls. It smelt like someone had dumped disinfectant in a corner and the bed he lay on was hard and uncomfortable.

Where the hell was he?

It almost looked like a hospital. Considering the pain he felt that would make sense. The only questions were what had happened and how he got here.

He could still feel the other hand in his, so he turned his head to find out who was sitting next to him.

Mark.

His lover was actually there, not a dream at all.

He was asleep, head bent forward, and his wavy brown hair almost covered his face. He was as pale as he'd been in the restaurant and there were stress lines around his eyes and mouth. God, what he must have gone through with that bastard threatening him over the last two months. And now, with Rick shot on top of everything else, he must have been worried out of his mind.

With that realisation, all of his memories suddenly rushed back, adding a headache to his list of complaints. He'd found Mark. Tony had turned his gun on his lover and he'd reacted instinctively to protect him. It had got him shot. Thank God he'd worn a bullet-proof vest. Except that the spot where the bullet must have hit still hurt like hell. And his arm hadn't been protected, so that hurt even more.

But he was alive. Mark was holding his hand. He hadn't been this happy in a very long time.

He carefully squeezed Mark's fingers, quietly thanking him for being here. They still had a lot to talk about, but at least now he'd have the opportunity to apologise and ask – no, *beg* – for a second chance.

"Rick?" Mark's fingers tightened as if in automatic response, then his lover's head came up. He blinked the sleep from his eyes as a beautiful smile spread across his face. "You're awake."

"Yeah. Thank you for staying with me. That means a lot to me." More than he could ever say.

"Of course I'm here. Where else would I be? You came to rescue me and ended up saving my life as well. As soon as you're well, I'll show you how grateful I am. If you still want me, I mean." Mark looked down, a tear sliding down his cheek. He quickly wiped it away with his free hand.

"What do you mean if I still want you? I'll always want you." Rick took a deep breath. He'd planned to go down on his knees to apologise properly, but he couldn't do that in his current condition and he refused to make Mark wait. He hoped that the words were more important than the action. "I'm more sorry than I can say for what I've done to you. I wish I could turn back time and undo it all, but I can't. So all I can do is ask you to please consider forgiving me and I promise I'll make it up to you. If you're willing to give me a second chance."

"There is nothing to forgive. I deserved your anger." Mark looked up, the pain in his eyes almost overwhelming in its intensity.

"No, baby. No, you didn't." He needed Mark to understand this. It had taken him too long to understand it himself. "I made so many mistakes that day, I don't even know where to start. When I saw you kissing that bastard I completely lost it. I should have confronted you then and there and you probably would have found a way to let me know what was really going on. At the very least I should have given you the benefit of the doubt. You'd never given me any reason to be jealous or to think you'd cheat on me. I should have known that something was wrong."

"I know that he made it look very convincing, so I don't blame you for losing it." Mark squeezed his fingers as if he was the one who needed comforting. "I should have probably tried to do something to let you know that Tony's kiss wasn't real, wasn't something I wanted. But I was too scared to do anything. He threatened to kill you. He'd already had Peter shot, and I couldn't bear the thought that he'd hurt you or maybe even kill you."

"So what you're saying is that we're both at fault?" Rick's heart beat faster as he started hoping that they could find a way out of this.

"If you want, yes." Mark smiled. "I promise you that next time I'll come to talk to you if you promise that you'll give me the benefit of the doubt."

"I certainly don't hope that there'll be a next time!" He smiled back. "From now on we'll talk about things that bother us. Giving each other the benefit of the doubt is a good thing as well. That brings me to the second part of my apology."

"There's a second part?" Mark tilted his head in question.

"Yes, and it's for something much worse than the first part." Rick swallowed. "I never should have locked you out of our home. The only way I can explain how it happened is that I was so angry that I didn't want to see you at that moment. I convinced myself that you'd be fine because you could stay with a friend. Even that was wrong, because it's your home too and I had no right to lock you out. But once I realised that Tony was probably able to catch up with you and get you back into his clutches because you didn't have a safe place to go, I felt even worse. I know that I can never make it up to you, but I promise you that I'll never ever lock you out again."

"I forgave you a long time ago, Rick." Mark lifted his hand and kissed his knuckles. "I realised that you did it because you were so angry. You probably thought of the apartment as yours. Even though I'd moved in a few months earlier, it was still more yours than mine."

"Oh, shit, that just isn't right. Why didn't you say anything?" God, if he'd only known, if he'd only understood what Mark was really thinking, he would have offered for them to find a new place together.

"It never seemed to be a problem." Mark shrugged. "It still isn't. It'll just take some time for us to start thinking of it as ours."

"That just isn't good enough. I never wanted you to feel like the place wasn't yours. In fact, if you'd consider giving us a second chance, the first thing I think we should do is find a new apartment. Or a house. I don't care. I just want to share my home with you, if you'll have me." He held his breath. This was it. Mark had been very understanding, but moving back in with him would make his forgiveness tangible.

"Of course I'll have you." Mark winked. "I never wanted to let you go in the first place. We've agreed that it was all a misunderstanding, so I see no reason why we shouldn't go back to normal."

"Thank you, baby." He was so relieved that he wanted to jump up and down for joy. That would have to wait until he was feeling a lot better. "Thank you so much."

"You're welcome." Mark got up and pressed a tentative kiss to his lips.

"I won't break, you know?" He wanted a real kiss.

"I'm sure you won't." Mark laughed. "But I think we should let the doctor give you a clean bill of health before we start making out like there's no tomorrow."

"Is that what you're planning to do next?" He liked that plan. It was probably all he'd be able to do comfortably until his arm healed.

"Absolutely." Mark let go of his hand and was on his way to the door before he could stop him. "Just as soon as I can get a doctor in here to confirm that you're okay."

* * * *

Getting a doctor to see Rick was proving to be far more of a challenge than Mark had thought. He was told that Rick wasn't in critical condition, so they'd have to wait for the physician to come around during his early afternoon rounds.

"But that's over four hours from now!" He'd hoped they'd be long gone and back home by then.

"Sorry, sir, there's nothing I can do about it. Hospital policy." The nurse didn't really look very sorry, but Mark thanked her anyway.

Ben needed to know what was going on as well, since they'd agreed that he would pick them up once Rick was cleared to go home. Mark had to go outside to be able to use his cell.

"Hi Mark. Is everything okay?" Ben sounded worried.

"Yes, fine. Don't worry, please." God, Ben must have done enough of that while he was helping Rick find him. "I just wanted to let you know that Rick is awake and feeling better."

"Has he apologised yet?"

"Yeah, and so have I." Mark smiled. It felt so good to have got that behind them. "So we're okay and Rick is ready to leave, but the hospital can't get a doctor to see him until the early afternoon rounds. And without a doctor's confirmation, Rick can't leave."

"Well, not easily." Ben chuckled. "Don't worry about it. I didn't think this would be quick. I'll just do some sightseeing while I'm here, okay? That way you two lovebirds can have some time to yourself. Well, as much as possible in a hospital. You've got to watch those nurses, they're likely to pop into the room at the worst moments."

Mark blushed at the thought of what he and Rick might get up to over the next few hours, but he wasn't about to admit it. The private room they'd given Rick would help give them some privacy, wouldn't it?

"I know what you're thinking. I hope you have fun. You both deserve it after what that criminal has put you through." Ben cleared his throat. "I'll get you some nice food for lunch, okay? I don't want either of you having to rely on that horrible hospital food."

"Thank you, that's very nice of you." Mark smiled. "Have fun."

When Ben hung up, Mark closed his phone and made his way back to Rick's room. He couldn't wait to touch his lover again.

"We're going to have to wait a while for the doctor to make an appearance. They said 'early afternoon', whatever that means." Mark sat back down on his plastic chair, but Rick shook his head and pointed at the side of the bed.

"If it's going to be a few hours, we might as well get comfortable." Rick grinned. "I definitely don't want to spend them with you so far away that I can't even touch you. Not now that we're finally back together again."

"I'm not sure..." He wanted nothing more than to be close to Rick, but he didn't want to hurt his lover.

"But I *am* sure, baby." Rick curled the fingers of his good hand in a come-hither move that pulled at Mark as if Rick had used magic. "I'm fine, believe me. Don't you think the nurse and doctors would be all over me if there was even the slightest issue?"

"I can see why you're a lawyer." He could probably convince a monk that praying was bad for him. "Your argument is pretty watertight."

"Good, so why aren't you over here already?" Rick winked. "I've always wanted to see what hospital sex is like."

"Hospital... You have the weirdest ideas." Mark blushed. "I better go and lock the door, then."

"Yeah, I'll second that." Rick laughed. "I don't want to be interrupted by someone deciding they need to check up on me after all."

"I'll do the checking up for the next few hours." He returned from locking the door and sat down on Rick's good side, at the very edge of the hard mattress.

"Closer?" Rick looked at the distance between them, then back up to him. "Much, much closer."

"You've got to promise to tell me if I do something to hurt you." God, he couldn't bear the thought.

"Baby, I'll promise anything if it gets your pretty little ass close enough so I can squeeze it." Rick held out his arm and made puppy eyes.

That was it, he was officially lost. With a sigh of resignation and relief he scooted close to his lover's body and carefully snuggled into his side. Rick's arm came around his middle and he was squeezed even closer.

He tilted his head up and found Rick's dark blue eyes gazing at him.

"I love you, Mark." Rick's voice was a little rough. "I was lost without you in my life. Thank you for coming back to me."

"I love you too." There was a lump in his throat, so it was probably time for actions rather than words.

He lifted his head and pressed a careful kiss on Rick's lips. His lover moaned and licked along Mark's mouth in response until he opened. The kiss was everything he'd dreamt of while they'd been separated. Rick's flavour burst across his tongue as their tongues got reacquainted.

Rick pulled his T-shirt out of his shorts, looking for skin. The first touch of the warm hand on his back made him moan. He ground his hardening cock against Rick's hip, the pressure quickly becoming almost painful. He angled his head so he could deepen the kiss and hung on for dear life as Rick devoured him.

When that wasn't enough anymore, he slid a hand between their bodies to open the button and zipper of his shorts. *Better.*

"Want to taste you." Rick's voice was husky.

"God, yes." He'd never scrambled out of his clothes so quickly. The hospital bed wasn't wide enough for them to lie next to each other, but if he knelt above Rick, they might just get somewhere.

"What are you doing?" Rick frowned as Mark lifted the thin blanket and moved the flimsy hospital gown upwards to reveal his lover's very hard length.

"I want to taste you too." That was non-negotiable.

"Yes." Rick moaned and wriggled his hips. "Good plan."

Mark carefully climbed up onto the bed, making sure that his knees were well away from Rick's bruised side. With his head now right above his prize, he licked along the leaking cock, moaning as the slightly salty flavour hit his taste buds.

Rick reciprocated, and they quickly settled into a rhythm that had them both aching for more. Mark lifted the hard cock carefully and enclosed the swollen head with his lips. Licking once around the glans for good measure, just to hear his lover whimper with the desire for more, he started sliding his lips down the shaft, taking as much as he could. He covered the rest with his hand and lifted his head slowly, sucking for all he was worth. Rick yelped. *Way to go.*

Rick didn't stay still for long though. He opened his mouth and took Mark inside his hot mouth, opening his throat without even hesitating. The pressure around the sensitive head of his already very excited cock was exquisite, but proved almost too much. It was his turn to groan with the effort of holding back.

One thing was certain. This wasn't going to be the world's longest blow job. Not that he could get himself to give a damn. The feeling of Rick's mouth around him after so long, the tightness of his lover's throat, and Rick's hand on his ass encouraging him to push in farther all combined into a dizzying pleasure that had him unable to reciprocate within seconds. He lifted his head and arched his back as he panted with the effort of holding his orgasm back just a little longer. He didn't want it to end this soon.

When Rick slipped a finger into his mouth next to Mark's cock, then back and straight into his ass, it was all over. He stiffened and shot into his lover's mouth with a force that made him see stars. He was barely able to hold himself up with his arms as his entire body shook with the force of his release.

As soon as he was able to put two thoughts together and take a breath, he lowered his head back to Rick's cock and started bobbing his head. Within seconds he could feel the telltale swelling and Rick grunted as he spurted his hot semen into Mark's waiting mouth. He swallowed everything greedily, licked his lover clean and reluctantly let the softening cock slip out of his mouth when he was done.

Having covered Rick up again he got dressed before sliding back into the one-armed hug that felt like home. He moved as close to Rick's body as possible, put his head on his lover's chest and closed his eyes with a sigh.

"Not bad." Rick was still a little out of breath as he pressed a kiss against Mark's temple. "But it'll be even better when we're back in our home, huh?"

"I don't know if I could have survived 'better' right now," Mark chuckled, unsuccessfully trying to suppress a yawn. "I think this was perfectly wonderful."

"Yeah, it was." Rick yawned and pulled him closer, his large hand placed possessively on Mark's ass. "Thanks for indulging me, baby."

"Like that was a selfless act." Mark snorted and closed his eyes. "I got exactly what I wanted too."

"And that's exactly how it should be." Rick patted his buttocks and started snoring.

Yup, exactly how it should be.

Chapter Six

Highway 59, Texas

Friday, May 16, 2008

Mark was in heaven. The doctor had finally signed Rick's release papers with only a minimum of fuss. Since Mark had promised to take care of him, they were willing to let him go. Detailed instructions of what to do with the wound on his arm and a reminder to make an appointment with his own doctor for a check-up in a week's time had followed. He'd signed a ton of papers and had said yes to everything they wanted him to do, just to have Rick come home with him.

Now they were sitting in the back of Ben's car, thigh to thigh. Rick's healthy arm was draped around his shoulders and his head rested on his lover's chest as he cuddled into him as much as the seatbelts would allow. He was careful not to put any pressure on the left side of Rick's body, mindful of the huge bruise on his back. The warmth from Rick's body, his scent, and the sound of his breathing were balms for his soul.

Ben had offered to drive since it was his car. He'd winked at them when they got in the back, making Mark realise he'd thought about more than the driving. He was hoping that he'd been right. Ben had never seemed to mind that Rick was gay, even if he was as straight as an arrow. Mark remembered the many different women Ben had dated during the ten months that he'd now been with Rick. Rick's brother was certainly popular with the ladies.

Right now kissing Rick was all Mark could think about. The short encounter in the hospital had been hot, but it hadn't really felt intimate. The sterile environment hadn't exactly been encouraging. While the back of Ben's car wasn't luxurious, it was a lot more normal than that hospital room. If Ben had a problem with them making out in the back of his car, Mark was sure he would mention it.

He lifted his head so he could look into Rick's dark blue eyes. They twinkled and there was a small smile on Rick's lips. Was that an invitation?

"I really, really want to kiss you right now." Mark kept his voice low enough so Ben wouldn't hear them over the engine's noise.

"I would really, really like that, baby." Rick tightened his arm around his shoulders and glanced at Ben before looking back at him. "I don't think he'd mind. I figure he put us in the back together for a reason."

"You think?" Thank God Rick agreed with him.

"Yeah. He's never had a problem with you being my lover, has he?" Rick grinned. "He used to have a problem with me having no partner, but that was before I ran into you last year. I told him I didn't have time for a relationship, that my career was more important."

"Was it?" This was great. They'd never really talked about their past beyond the minimal discussion about number of sexual partners and potential diseases. He'd always been curious but somehow the opportunity to talk about it had never come up.

"I used to think so, yes. I mean, my dad's a successful surgeon, Uncle Kaden runs the biggest law firm in Riverside, and Ben's career as a cop was well on its way when I graduated from high school. When he made detective two years later, I got even more determined to make a success of myself." Rick frowned. "What I realise now is that there are more important things in my life than a career. My dad's been trying to tell me this for years, but I never understood what he meant."

"And now you do?" If this episode was going to help Rick become less focused on his job, it might have almost been worth it.

"I know that I've made a start and I want to recognise the importance of our relationship. It'll be difficult to change my habits and may take a while but I'm hoping that you'll help me." Rick sighed. "Look, I know that you didn't like my working late and I'm sorry that I didn't always give you the attention that you deserve. It probably made you accept more evening gigs, which only exacerbated the problem."

"That wasn't the only reason for me to take on more evening engagements, but it was a big part of it." It was time for Mark to open up as well. "The other reason was that they pay better. And I was very focused on earning enough money to pay my way, not to be seen as taking advantage of you financially."

"Is that going to change?" Rick looked hopeful.

"With me having vanished and not being available for so long, most of my regular clients, the few I still had outside Tony, have probably forgotten about me." Mark laughed.

"So in a way I'll be starting from scratch. I've been thinking about going into teaching though."

"You have?" Rick raised his eyebrows. "Is that because of the music theory classes I suggested for you?"

"Yeah, that got me started. Finishing those, if they even let me take the exams after having missed so many classes, does enable me to do some private teaching. But I've been talking to a few people and if I really wanted to go into teaching at a school or something, I'd need to do a full degree programme." Mark hesitated.

"This is something you'd really like to do, isn't it?" Rick smiled.

"Yes." If he had a choice, that would be what he'd do with his life. "It'll cost money though, and I haven't got enough savings to cover four years and..."

"Shhh, we'll sort all of that out." Rick stroked his upper arm. "If I promise not to work so much anymore, which I think I just did, do you think you could consider not worrying about money and paying your own way? I'd really like it if we could make our relationship more of a partnership."

"That makes it sound so easy." Was that's really all there was to it?

"Why does it have to be complicated? I just want us to be happy, focus on the really important things and forget what everybody else may think or say about how we live our lives. Being happy shouldn't be difficult." Rick kissed his temple. "Will you think about it?"

"I don't need to think about it." Mark slid his arm around Rick's middle and held on. "I'll do anything for us to be happy together. I'm done with trying to be independent just because that's what my parents want me to be. The last two months apart from you were hell, and not just because Tony treated me like his slave. They were awful because I missed you more than I can say. It was like there was a hole in my heart and it hurt. I love you and I want to share my life with you. If I have to make some changes to make that work, I will."

"You've just made me the happiest man on Earth." Rick's smile made him want to crawl into him and never leave. "If you're done with being independent, I'm done with wanting a career above all else. I love you too, and I promise you that from now on our relationship and making you happy will be my number one priorities."

Mark tilted his head and kissed Rick. The feeling of their lips coming together was electrifying. God, he loved Rick so much.

Rick's hand slid from his shoulder to behind his head and held him securely as Rick bent his head for a proper kiss. His lover licked along his lips, the hot tongue asking for entrance. He opened on a sigh and let Mark in to explore. Their tongues touched and played, sliding along each other in a tender caress.

Rick's hand played in his hair as Mark made him forget his name. Rick was all that existed and his dark flavour on his tongue, his musky scent in his nose made him so hard it almost hurt.

He had no idea how long the kiss had been going on when Rick started to slow them down and slowly pulled back.

"We need a bed." Rick's eyes were dilated with lust.

"I'd say the back of the car is fine but it's probably not safe." Mark chuckled, the restraints the seatbelt had put on his movements during the kiss a reminder of where they were.

"You're right. And I don't want to be arrested for indecent behaviour by my brother either." Rick winked. "But I sure have plans for when we finally make it home."

"Indecent ones, I hope?" Mark grinned.

"Very!" Rick's eyes twinkled as they settled back into their seats.

He looked outside and was surprised to see they'd already reached the outskirts of Riverside. Somehow the four-hour trip had gone a lot faster than he'd expected. He couldn't wait to be home again.

* * * *

Riverside, Texas

Friday, May 16, 2008

Rick was ready to lie down. His arm was hurting a little and his back was hurting a lot, but he wasn't willing to admit that. The doctor had told him to take it slow and be careful, but he needed to be naked with Mark a whole lot more than he needed to watch his health.

Mark was adorable, all cuddled up against him, as close as he could get. Their first reunion kiss had been everything he'd dreamed of for months, except for the fact that they

were still dressed at the end of it. He sighed. A look out the window had been enough to let him know it wouldn't be long now. The pressure between his legs where his hard-on was trying to push its way out of his jeans told a different story. Any delay was too much at this point.

When they finally made it to his apartment building, he was ready to jump out of the car, drag Mark to the bedroom and not emerge for the next week. In reality Ben took his bag from the back of the car and accompanied them into the apartment.

"Would you like to stay for dinner?" He had to at least offer. He couldn't have got Mark back without his brother's help. He'd find a way to thank him properly, but for now dinner was the least he could offer. "I don't have anything in the house, but we could order take-out, spend some time together, you know?"

"Nah, that's okay." Ben put his duffel down next to the couch. "The two of you need to spend some time alone more than I need to share dinner with you. And I need to let my boss know that I'm back, see what's going on with my cases. I'll probably have dinner with some friends."

"Sometime next week then?" He wasn't going to give up this easily, even if he was more than relieved that Ben seemed to understand his need to spend time with Mark right now.

"Sure, let me know what works for you guys and we can meet at the Irish pub." Ben lifted his hand for a shake goodbye when his cell rang. "Sorry, let me just take that. It might be work."

"Ben Dealy." Ben had flipped his cell open and walked towards the window for some privacy. "Hey, good to hear from you."

That didn't sound like work, but Ben seemed very happy about the call. A new girlfriend who was calling to tell him she'd missed him? Ben didn't seem to be one for lasting relationships but he was looking for a partner. They'd talked about it a lot since Rick had asked Mark to move in last October.

Rick sat down on the couch, pulling Mark down next to him. They'd wait for Ben to leave before deciding if food or sex was more urgent. He knew what his preference was, but his rumbling stomach had a different opinion.

Ben had finished his call, closed his cell and had the biggest smile on his face when he turned around.

"That was Zeke." Ben slipped his cell back into his pocket.

"Your best friend Zeke?" He grinned. Zeke had been around almost since the beginning of time it seemed. The two had met in primary school and had been inseparable ever since. "The one who moved to Austin and got engaged to that awful woman four years ago?"

"Yes, that Zeke." Ben rolled his eyes. "As if there's another one."

"What did he do to put that big of a smile on your face?" He was glad to see his brother happy, no matter what the reason.

"Well, it's his birthday next month and apparently he's planning this big party. He wanted to make sure I'd be able to make it." Ben raked his hair, still grinning. "He hasn't invited me over for a long time, and it'll be great to see him again. Unless something comes up for work, which is always a possibility."

"That's wonderful." He grinned, his brother's happiness infectious. "I think you should plan to go for a few days. It'll be a nice break for you and you can reconnect with him."

"I like that idea." Ben nodded, his eyes wistful. "I'll think about it, talk about it with him to see if it'd be all right with Claudia."

Rick had some choice thoughts to offer about the woman but decided to remain silent. It wouldn't do any good and he knew that Ben didn't like her much either.

"Right." Ben pulled himself together. "Time for me to go."

He got up and they embraced.

"Thanks again for everything you did for us." Mark reached around the much larger man and hugged him. Ben hugged him right back. "I'll be grateful forever. If there's ever anything I can do for you, please let me know."

"You're welcome." Ben stepped back. "Just make my little brother happy, that'll be more than enough thanks for me."

* * * *

"Is your brother a closet romantic or what?" Mark was still chuckling when Rick came back from showing his brother out.

"I never knew, but it sure looks that way, doesn't it?" Rick grinned and pulled him into a one-armed embrace, the wounded arm in its sling out of commission for a while. Even one of his lover's arms around him was better than anything he'd felt in far too long.

"Maybe being around the two of us is catching, huh?" He grinned.

"That would be a first." Rick shook his head. "Can you imagine the headlines, 'gay romance infecting straight couples'?"

"That's too funny." Mark laughed, elated at how good it felt. He hadn't realised how much he'd missed it until just now.

"I've missed your laugh." Rick nuzzled into the soft skin between his throat and his shoulder, the little kisses and licks his lover placed there making him shiver in anticipation of what he hoped would be next. Soon.

"So have I." He turned his head back to give Rick more room to manoeuvre.

His lover took the hint and started licking and kissing along his collarbone. When Rick reached the soft spot at the base of his throat, he remained there for a while, licking and sucking gently until Mark was so hard he thought he was going to burst out of his pants.

"So good." He moaned and ground his lower body against Rick's, only to find an equally hard erection to rub against.

"You make me so hot." Rick let go when his stomach rumbled, managing to laugh while looking desperately aroused. He left his arm where it was though.

"Same here. Man, I wish I wasn't so hungry." But there was no changing it, he needed food first or he'd have a hard time enjoying the physical intimacy he craved.

"So, what would you like to eat? My repertoire of take-out places has grown to almost epic proportions." Rick took his hand and led him into the kitchen. "There are too many folders now to fit in the drawer where we used to keep them."

His lover pulled a shoe box from its spot on the counter. A truly impressive stack of flyers filled it almost to the brim. Rick placed them on the little table they'd used for most of their meals. There was just something about eating food in the kitchen, right next to where it had been prepared.

"Wow. I'm impressed." Mark started rifling through them to see if his favourite Chinese place was still in business. "If not with the things this must have done to your health, the choice is definitely remarkable."

Ah, there it was. China Garden. He held the folder carefully, looking up and down the many pages of tempting dishes. Soup and egg rolls to die for, duck dishes that melted in your mouth, Mongolian beef that was spiced to perfection, and a list of desserts that made his mouth water just thinking about them.

"My health is fine." Rick was grumbling but his sparkling eyes gave away the fact that he was mostly joking. "That doesn't mean that I'm not looking forward to your cooking, because I most definitely am."

"You've missed my cooking?" Today was full of surprising revelations. "But I didn't cook that often. There was never enough time between practicing and the various performances."

"Still missed it." Rick shrugged, looking almost apologetic. "I'm sorry I never said anything, but I've always liked it. Maybe that's another change we can make. You could teach me some of what you know and we can cook together, spend more time preparing as well as eating our food."

"I would love that." He'd use any excuse to spend more time with Rick.

"Good. Consider it done." Rick grinned. "We'll go grocery shopping tomorrow and you can give me my first lesson. As for now though, I'm more interested to find out which of your favourite dishes at the China Garden you've chosen."

"You know me too well." He grinned, certain that was just the way he wanted it to be.

"Some things never change." Rick pulled the kitchen phone closer, clearly ready to order.

When they'd given the restaurant a list that would ensure that they'd have leftovers for days, they agreed that the best use of the waiting time was to take a shower so they'd be ready for bed as soon as they finished eating. Separate showers, to be more precise. While Mark regretted not sharing their wet and slippery time, that plan did make a lot more sense in terms of speed and efficiency. Not to mention actually getting to eat the food while it was still hot.

He'd barely finished drying himself off and putting on a pair of boxers when the doorbell rang. With his hair still slightly dripping he opened the door, took the food from a wide-eyed Chinese boy, paid him, and closed and locked the door. Rick was right behind

him when he carried everything into the kitchen. He spread the little containers out across the table while Rick retrieved their chopsticks.

For the next half hour the only sounds were those of chewing, brief mentions of what was particularly good and moans of delight when they got to the deserts. The pan-fried water chestnut cake was a new addition to the menu but proved to be more than worthy to become one of their regular favourites.

They both leant back to pat their bellies at almost the same time. He hadn't eaten this well since he'd left and was amazed at how much more he'd been able to eat now that his dinner companion was someone of his choice.

"You ready for the next course?" Rick got up and started clearing the table, putting empty containers into the bin and the others into the fridge.

"More than." He'd been hard ever since that epic kiss in the car. The constant proximity to the man he loved was enough to keep him interested and ready for action. Not to mention the fact that Rick had also decided to forego a shirt, and staring at his lover's broad, well muscled chest with the large brown nipples that begged to be licked had been sweet torture.

"Come on then, let's take this to bed." Rick took his lover's hand and led the way. He'd found it increasingly difficult to contain his desire. Watching Mark eat and listen to him moan over his food had been all he needed to stay hard as a rock. Add to that the view of Mark's well-toned hairless chest which moved with every breath and moan and he was more than ready to take the edge off.

He took Mark into an embrace when they reached the bed. Not being able to hold him with both arms was a definite drawback, but even that couldn't stop him from enjoying the deep kisses they exchanged. He was about to come when he remembered that they were still wearing their underwear.

He pulled back, tugging at Mark's boxers until they dropped onto the floor. Mark returned the favour and he was barely able to pull down the covers before Mark gently pushed him back. He let himself recline and pulled Mark against him, loving the feeling of naked skin everywhere from the tips of his toes, along the hardness of his erection, up his stomach and chest to the clean shaven cheek that was currently rubbing against his equally naked skin. While he liked a little whisker burn in unexpected places on occasion, tonight all

he wanted was to be as close to Mark as physically possible. Not even a hair's breadth was going to be allowed between them.

"Make love to me?" He looked up into Mark's hazel eyes as they turned darker with flaring lust.

"Always." Mark pulled back and reached for the lube and condoms in the bedside table. "Not sure how long I'll be able to last though. I'm so hard for you that I could probably come just from kissing you at this point."

"Want you inside me when you come." He stroked his lover's flank as he sat up to sheathe himself. "It doesn't have to be long this first time, I just want to feel you make me yours again."

"God, the things you say." Mark's hips jerked and his lover closed his eyes and squeezed the base of his cock for a moment.

He grinned. Making Mark almost come like that was the hottest thing ever. But when Mark nudged his legs apart and slid a slippery finger between his ass cheeks, it was his turn to take a deep breath in a desperate attempt to stave off his orgasm.

"Shit!" He clenched around the intruding finger, trying to get used to the invasion and desperate for more at the same time. He spread his legs even wider, hoping that Mark would get the message.

He did.

A second finger pushed in with the first, spreading him with just the right amount of burn to make him desperate for more. But Mark wouldn't be hurried. He added more lube and stroked first two, then three fingers in and out of his hole in a rhythm that drove his arousal higher and higher. And he hadn't even touched his prostate yet.

"Fuck me!" He couldn't wait anymore or he was going to come all over both of them. The pressure in his balls was delicious but without some sort of help he wasn't going to be able to maintain control much longer. "Please, baby. Need you."

"Kay." Mark pulled out his fingers, bent over him and looked into his eyes as he placed the tip of his cock against his clenching hole. "Love you."

Mark pushed in and Rick almost lost it right then. That first hard pressure on his muscles until they gave and let his lover slide in was incredibly good. Almost as good as the

long slide of Mark's entire length into his clenching channel. His lover's cock stretched and filled him to the brim until Mark bottomed out, his hot balls pressed against his ass.

His breath came in short, sharp bursts as he let himself adjust to the feelings of having Mark so close again.

"Tight." Mark moaned and closed his eyes as he brought his second arm up to support himself as he started to thrust. "So good."

He could only nod, everything focused on the feeling of Mark thrusting into him with quickly increasing depth and speed. Mark's eyes were big and never left his as he angled his hips in an attempt to find his prostate.

"Fuck!" Pre-cum started flowing from his cock in an uninterrupted stream. Bursts of ecstasy travelled from his ass into his balls. It was even better than he remembered. "There!"

Mark grinned and started to pump in earnest, hitting his prostate every single time, making him whimper with delight. He needed to come so badly, he was willing to beg. But he knew it would be even better if he held on as long as possible. He hadn't often come without a touch to his cock, but he was pretty sure that today would be one of those times.

"Come on." Mark was covered in sweat, his long hair framing a face strained from the pleasurable pain. "Come for me, baby."

"Love!" He started shaking, his whole body convulsing with the strength of his release. White streams shot from his throbbing cock and covered him in his own spunk.

Mark threw back his head and grunted out his own release as he jerked and shuddered inside him, drawing more aftershocks from him as he lay back, helplessly and blissfully overwhelmed with the intensity of his emotions.

Mark collapsed on top of him, taking a moment to recover. The scent of his lover's sweat mixed with that of his own release reminded him of what he'd missed. God, he loved this man.

Much too soon Mark pulled out, carefully dealing with the condom before grabbing a handful of tissues from the bedside table to clean him up. He snuggled into his side, pulling the covers over them, and sighed.

"It's good to be home." Mark's voice was low and sleepy.

"I'm glad that I finally understood you." He kissed his lover's head.

"Huh?" Mark lifted his head eyes blinking in an effort to stay open a little longer.

"It took me much too long to understand why you kissed Tony that day. But now that I do, I promise that I'll do everything I can to stop something like that from happening again." He tightened his arm around Mark's middle. "Everything."

"Good." Mark grinned and rested his head on his chest. "Because I've got to tell you, the first reunion last October was great. This one was even better. But I don't think I could stand being away from you again like that, even with the prospect of great reunion sex."

"I agree." He chuckled. "I think we've done our bit to show that reunions can be great. I have no problem with making this one our last since it was definitely the best."

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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