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LIPSTICK

AND

Handguns

LAWFUL DISORDER 1

Gabrielle Evans

Lawful Disorder 1

Lipstick and Handguns

For three years after his lover left without a goodbye, the only people Detective Ryder Ward keeps close are his grandmother and his partner on the force. It's no wonder he's unprepared for the feelings Sidney Kessler awakens in him.

Finding himself naked and chained to a wall, imprisoned and tortured, and then dumped in the murky harbor weren't high on Sidney's list of things to do. Nor was waking up in the hospital and feeling drawn to the brooding detective stalking about his room. Still, he can't help but feel safe around Ryder.

Though reluctant to start a relationship with the vulnerable man, Ryder knows he's falling fast. He has a case to solve and a psycho to catch, though. He can't let his personal feelings stand in the way of his job, but nor can he allow Sidney to become another body pulled from the bay.

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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DEDICATION

To Lisa: Thank you for all of your help and encouragement, and for making my life so much easier.

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Lawful Disorder 1

GABRIELLE EVANS

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Prologue

The darkness of the alley felt oppressive. It surrounded him, licking at his heels and pressing him to hurry his footsteps. The streetlight at the mouth of alleyway shined like a beacon—the light a refuge.

Sidney Kessler stopped and whirled around, squinting into the shadows, scanning the narrow alley for whatever had made the soft scuttling noise. Thick clouds blocked the moonlight, the night swallowing the space between buildings in a giant gulp and leaving him virtually blind.

Turning back and stepping up his pace, relief flooded him when he realized he was almost to the end of the alley. Keeping his eyes locked on the streetlamp, Sidney marched determinedly toward it, berating himself the entire way for not taking a cab. He just couldn't afford one, though. It would take some fast budgeting, and possibly a miracle, to make the rent on his tiny, vermin-infested apartment.

Wrapping his thin jacket tighter around his midsection and rounding his shoulders, he dropped his head against the harsh November wind. He really needed to find another job, but in reality, there just wasn't much out there for a high school dropout. He made

better money slinging drinks and shaking his ass at Bad Habits than he could flipping burgers at some fast-food chain.

Another scuffling noise, this time much louder and much closer, reached Sidney's ears, and he tensed. Instead of looking over his shoulder this time, he tucked his arms close to his sides, darting down the alley toward the welcoming circle of light.

When he finally stood beneath the streetlamp, he held a hand to his chest and breathed deeply. What the hell was wrong with him? He'd been working in the same part of town for almost a year, and he had never been this paranoid.

Before he could take his next step, a huge, black SUV came barreling around the corner, tires screeching and skidding on the asphalt.

Run!

Sidney didn't know where the thought came from, but he wasn't arguing. Turning on his heels, he fled down the sidewalk, pumping his arms and eating up the concrete with his long strides.

Before he even reached the crosswalk, the SUV pulled in front of him, turning sharply and coming to a halt with the front tires up on the curb. The back doors flew open, and two heavily muscled men, clad in black from head to foot, jumped out and came straight at him.

The bigger one grabbed Sidney around the waist, slapping a hand over his mouth and hauling him backward. Sidney kicked and flailed, contorting his body one way and then another, trying desperately to free himself.

The other man stepped forward, pushed Sidney's sleeve up, and jabbed a needle into the crook of his arm. Gasping around the pudgy fingers covering his mouth, he watched in horror as the needle disappeared beneath his skin. The area around the injection site started to burn immediately, spreading up his arm and down to his fingers, until his whole arm felt like it had been doused in kerosene and held to a match.

Capping the needle, the big goon pocketed the syringe before wrapping his massive arms around Sidney's knees and lifting.

Sidney's body felt heavy, his eyelids drooped, his head swam, and his focus dimmed. He grasped at the fraying strands of consciousness until the rope snapped, tumbling him into the abyss before they finished loading him into the backseat.

* * * *

"Sidney Kessler." Detective Michael Hunter dropped a folder on the desk and moved around to take his seat. "Age twenty-four, last seen leaving work three nights ago. Neighbor says she never saw him enter the apartment complex. Boss called in the missing person's report when Mr. Kessler was a no-call-no-show for the third day in a row."

Detective Ryder Ward yawned and took another gulp of his stale coffee. Grimacing at the bitter taste, he pushed the folder back toward his partner without looking at it. "Take it to vice. I have enough shit going on without trying to track down some brainless kid." Ryder stretched his arms over his head as he glanced at the clock. "He probably just took off with his friends for the weekend. He'll turn up."

Standing from his chair and shaking the numbness from his legs, he glanced at the clock again. Eight on the dot, and he had a date.

"He fits the profile, Ry."

Ryder spun around to find his partner standing right behind him. He yanked the folder from Michael's outstretched hand, flipped it open, and quickly scanned the report. Young, mid-twenties, worked on the city's east side at a hole-in-the-wall bar as a dancer. No living relatives, few friends, and Sidney Kessler had dropped out of high school his sophomore year.

Ryder flipped through the pages until he came to a photo of the missing boy. He was very pretty for a man and looked younger than

twenty-four. His long auburn hair fell in waves down past his shoulders, his vivid green eyes outlined by long, thick lashes, and his lips shined with a cherry-red tint.

Small and petite, the battered oak bar he stood behind dwarfed him, reaching nearly up to his neck. Though his lips smiled in the picture, the happiness didn't reach his eyes. Those beautiful green eyes were weary and cautious.

"Shit." Ryder huffed as he plopped back down in his chair.

"Sidney Kessler makes number eight." Michael returned to his seat as well and leaned across the desk.

"I know, I know. Dammit!" Ryder took a minute to gather his composure, held up a hand to his partner to silence him, and dug his cell phone out of his pocket. Pressing the speed dial, he held the phone to his ear and waited.

"Hello?"

He couldn't help but smile. "Hey, Nana, I'm going to be late tonight."

"Child, you work too hard," his grandmother admonished.

"I know, Nana, but this is important. Tell Frank I won't be able to make our date tonight, but you guys should go on without me."

Claire Ward chuckled. "The way you spoil that dog is shameful."

"You old hypocrite. You spoil him worse than I do."

"This is true." Claire laughed again. "Okay. Frank and I will go to movie night in the park without you. You be safe, honey."

"Yes, ma'am." Ryder's smile widened. "You, too, Nana, and don't let Frank eat too much popcorn. Lock the doors when you get home, and I'll see you in the morning. Love you, Nana."

"Love you, too, child." Then the phone went silent.

"You know if I was twenty years older, Nana wouldn't need to take that old mangy dog with her on a date. I'd sweep her off her feet." Michael smiled mischievously from his chair.

"Frank is not mangy. He smells better than you." Ryder leaned over his desk and glared at his partner of four years. "And if you ever

touch my grandmother, I will change how your jeans fit with one well aimed shot.” He nodded toward Michael’s groin for emphasis. “We clear?”

Michael just laughed and shook his head. “You know I love Nana like she was my own grandmother. I just like getting under your skin.”

Ryder grinned. “I know, and she loves you, too. Though, I can’t imagine why.” He walked over to the map of the city they had tacked to the wall. After staring at it for a several seconds, he pulled a pin from the corkboard and replaced it on the map near the last known location of Sidney Kessler.

“Not much of a pattern is it?” Michael walked up behind him, staring over his shoulder at the map.

“No, but all of the disappearances seem to be isolated to the northeast part of the city.” They had two blue pins in place on the north side, three on the east side, and three on the near northeast side.

Five red pins dotted the map, all located in or around the south harbor. One for each of the missing boys they had found dead.

The bodies all had similar marks when they pulled them from the water. Welts and lacerations across the back, arms, legs, and buttocks, bruises littering every inch of visible skin, and wrists and ankles bound.

After starving and torturing them, the bastard tossed the men into the harbor like yesterday’s garbage. Still alive, but severely malnourished, not one of them had found the strength or will to swim to safety. Each autopsy report pointed to drowning as the cause of death.

The time frame ranged from four to six months between the filing of the missing persons report and the body washing up near the docks. Ryder couldn’t imagine what those men had endured during their months of captivity.

“Landon Marsh.” Michael pointed to the picture of a blond kid tacked up beside the map. “He’s been missing for four months.” He

tapped a picture of another young blond. “Kenneth Dean went missing almost six months ago.”

“We’re running out of time.” Ryder ground his teeth together and fisted his hands.

“No. They,” Michael gestured toward the photos on the wall, “are running out of time.” He took Sidney Kessler’s photo and tacked it beside the others.

Chapter One

Sidney screamed and sobbed around the ball gag in his mouth. With no windows, no sunlight, the days and nights blurred together. The passing hours held no meaning. Time didn't stand still, but seemed to drag out into one, long, miserable nothingness.

He knelt on the concrete floor, naked and shaking, a steel spreader clamped around his ankles to hold his legs apart. Manacles surrounded his wrists, connecting to a chain embedded high in the stone wall, stretching his arms over his head until his muscles and joints roared in protest.

Screaming again, he sagged against his restraints when another crack of the whip sent blazing heat spreading across his back. Sensing more than hearing the movement behind him, he cringed, and long, cold fingers wrapped around his throat, cutting off his air supply.

He prayed they would kill him this time. Anything to stop the pain.

Just as suddenly as it came, the hand released his throat, and Sidney sucked in as much oxygen as he could around the rubber ball in his mouth.

"I'm done with this one. There's no will left in him." He heard the callous voice speak from somewhere in the corner of the dimly lit room. He had seen the man's face, looked into the eyes of the demon, and knew he'd never leave his cell alive.

"Should I find another to replace him, sir?"

He had seen that man as well, though this one never touched him. His calm, soft, refined voice did not match his mammoth size at all.

Sidney fought the urge to giggle. Perhaps the pain had finally driven him to the point of delirium.

“Not yet. I have two that should sell nicely. I want to find out what makes them different so that we can refine our search.” The man sighed heavily. “Buyers want well-trained slaves to whet their carnal appetites—slaves who can take their punishment and beg for more. This one is...defective.”

“Very good, sir. Shall I dispose of him?”

Sidney didn't even have the strength left to be afraid. All he knew is that he wanted it to end. However it happened, he just wanted it to end.

“Yes. I'm afraid the time has come to terminate our association. Just dump him as usual. He can't even stand, let alone swim.”

“As you wish.”

* * * *

Gentle hands lifted Sidney from the trunk of the vehicle. Too exhausted to care, he let his head lull against the warm expanse of a muscular chest. Water pelted his naked body, and a rumbling roar sounded in the distance.

“I'm very sorry about this, my dear.”

Sidney didn't respond. What was he supposed to say? *“Yeah, I'm sorry you have to off me. That must be horrible for you.”*

The rocking ceased, and that smooth voice whispered to him, “Be at peace, little one.” Then the arms supporting him dropped away, and Sidney plummeted through the air.

The icy water felt like needles against his bare skin. The shock of it penetrated the numbness he had shrouded himself in during his captivity. Raw adrenaline coursed through his veins, clearing his mind and gnawing at his survival instinct. Free at last, he wanted to live.

Now, if he could just reach the shore. With his arms roped behind his back and his ankles tied together, the pier would be of little help if

he couldn't grab on to it. His body undernourished and weak from his beatings, every movement caused him pain and depleted his small supply of energy. Even if he managed to get a hold on the dock, he wouldn't be able to maintain it for long.

Rocking his body and kicking his feet together like a dolphin, he ground his teeth together as pain lanced through his body.

Fighting against the agony and bitter coldness of the water, he wiggled his body in small waves, pushing through the water with weak but steady strokes of his feet. His muscles ached and throbbed, protesting the effort. His lungs screamed, and his head spun from lack of oxygen.

If his captor waited on the dock, Sidney was dead. If he didn't get air to his aching lungs soon, he was dead. Though neither option appealed to him, drowning held the least merit. He'd endured too much for too long to end up with a belly full of the disgusting bay water.

Changing directions, he ceased his trek toward the shore and rose upward, straining for the surface.

One last kick, and Sidney's head broke through the water. He gasped, pulling in one lungful of air after another as he tried frantically to keep his nose above the water. Fat raindrops splashed off the surface of the water and splattered against his face. Lightning slashed across the sky, zipping from cloud to cloud, sizzling the air, and illuminating the empty dock.

The relief lasted only seconds before realization dawned that he now floated several hundred yards away from the shore. In the dark, murky depths of the freezing water, he'd inadvertently woven his way in the wrong direction.

Panic and depression waged battle, and Sidney almost burst into tears. The choppy waves created by the storm beat against him incessantly, demanding his sacrifice by dragging him to the floor of the harbor.

* * * *

“They found Sidney Kessler,” Michael said without preamble when Ryder answered the phone. The wooden spoon dropped from his hand and into the pot on the stove, splashing spaghetti sauce everywhere. Cursing and muttering under his breath, he turned off the burner and reached for a dishtowel.

“In the harbor, I’m guessing.”

Almost six months since the little redhead had gone missing, Ryder couldn’t think of anywhere else they could have found him. They’d questioned everyone the kid worked with and half the residents in the apartment complex he lived in. As with all the victims, no had seen anything. No one knew anything.

For damn near a year, they’d been running in circles and getting nowhere on this case. Some days Ryder just wanted to pack it all in and run off to Bora Bora.

“Yeah, but—”

“We’ll go by the coroner’s office in the morning.” Ryder’s stomach churned and his heart ached at the thought of losing another one. Though he knew he shouldn’t, he took the loss personally, feeling he had failed...again.

“Ry, Sidney Kes—”

“I know Michael, but the body isn’t going anywhere. Unless they need us at the harbor, it can wait until morning.”

A loud banging came from the front door. Frowning, Ryder wound his way around the kitchen table and hurried across the living room.

His frown deepened as he checked through the peephole and saw Michael standing on the porch, cell phone to his ear, and dripping wet from the storm.

Quickly disengaging the deadbolt, Ryder threw open the door and stared at his disheveled partner.

“He’s alive, Ry.”

His jaw dropped, and he reached out, gripping Michael's jacket and yanking him through the doorway. "What do you mean he's alive? You said...but...he...the harbor."

Michael held up a hand to stop Ryder's rambling. "Some guy spotted him in the harbor." He rolled his eyes and snorted. "He had it all planned out to take an epic header off the bridge. I guess they saved each other. Guy thinks he's a damn hero now."

Ryder had stopped listening. Sidney Kessler was alive. "Where'd they take him?"

"He's in ICU at Mercy Memorial."

"Let's go."

Michael nodded and headed back out into the storm. Ryder grabbed his jacket and pulled his shoulder holster and police issued handgun from the top of the closet. Shrugging everything on, he ducked his head against the torrential downpour and hurried after his partner.

Wild and heedless, tires slid on the rain-slicked asphalt as Michael took corners at reckless speeds. The sedan shimmied and stuttered, barreling through small lakes of standing water, while the wipers worked feverishly to clear the raindrops that pinged against the glass. Thunder cracked overhead, vibrating Ryder down to his bones as he held the door handle in a death grip.

Remarkably, they made it the hospital in one piece. Jumping from the vehicle, the pair made their way inside and up to the fourth floor, right to the ICU. Two uniformed police officers stood guard outside the door to Sidney's room. Michael and Ryder flashed their badges, ignoring the nurse who tried to prevent them from entering the room, and eased around the curtain.

Ryder's chest tightened, and he had to swallow several times past the burning in his throat as he took in the frail man lying on the bed.

Sidney Kessler appeared even smaller than in his photograph. His pale skin stretched tightly across his protruding collarbones, showcasing just how much weight he had lost during his months of

captivity. A brilliant purple bruise spread over his swollen left cheek, the skin red and raw around the corners of his mouth, and white gauze bandages wrapped his chest and arms like a mummy.

Taking a deep breath and wiping any emotion from his visage, Ryder pushed his personal feelings away. He had a job to do.

A small whimpering noise killed his new resolve, and he rushed across the room to kneel beside the bed. Placing his hand gently against the boy's temple, he leaned closer until they were eye to eye. "Shh. It's okay. I'm Detective Ward. You're safe now."

Opened but unfocused, Sidney's eyes held a terror and desperation that ate away at Ryder's steely facade. He wanted nothing more than to pull the man into his arms and make it all disappear. Confused and unnerved by the feeling, he pushed it away, but didn't remove his palm from Sidney's face.

Several long minutes passed before Sidney's eyes focused on Ryder. An almost silent gasp escaped him, and he jerked away, crying out as his tattered back pressed against the mattress. Ryder snatched his hand away and rose to his feet, taking a slow and easy step away from the bed. He'd rather cut off his own hand than cause the guy any more fear or suffering.

"Mr. Kessler, my name is Detective Ward. And this is my partner, Detective Hunter." Ryder waved a hand toward Michael. He spoke quietly, deliberately keeping his voice soft and even. "We would like to ask you a few questions if you're feeling up to it."

"Can I see your badges?" Sidney's voice was small and weak, and Ryder had to strain to hear him.

"Of course." Michael stepped forward and pulled out his badge, placing it in Sidney's outstretched hand.

Sidney looked it over carefully before nodding and turning to Ryder. He spent less time looking over Ryder's badge, but again, nodded. "I was taken from the corner of Mable and Fifth on November seventeenth."

Michael pulled a notepad from his pocket and began to scribble notes quickly.

Sidney tilted his head to the side, and his eyebrows drew together as though confused about something. “What is today?”

“May ninth,” Ryder answered immediately.

“Oh.” Sidney’s eyes widened, and his lower lip began to tremble. “Five months.”

Chewing on the inside of his cheek, Ryder found himself at a loss. He had questioned victims before, knew what to say, what tone to use, when to push and when to back off. Never had he felt this unsure or uncertain—not even as a rookie cop on the beat.

Something about Sidney Kessler pulled him in and made him want to promise things he didn’t know if he could deliver.

* * * *

Sidney watched the huge detective prowl the room like a caged leopard with long, powerful strides. His blue-black hair brushed against his broad shoulders as the man continually shook his head and mumbled under his breath.

Sidney tugged the ends of his own tangled locks self-consciously. He hadn’t seen a mirror yet, but he could imagine what he must look like.

“Mr. Kessler, can you tell us what happened after you were abducted?”

Returning his focus to the detective beside him, he frowned. “Can you call me Sidney?” He couldn’t explain it, but he needed to hear his name spoken aloud. For too long he had been merely “This one.”

“Of course, Sidney, and you can call me Michael.”

Sidney nodded and offered the man a small smile of gratitude. “I don’t know where they took me. They injected me with a drug before they pulled me into the car.”

“Do you remember what type of vehicle? What color?”

“It was a huge SUV. A Hummer, I think. It was black.”

“What else do you remember?” Detective Ward ceased his pacing and took a step toward the bed.

“There were at least three men. Two came out of the backseat to grab me, and one driving. After they stuck me with the needle, I don’t remember anything until I woke up naked and chained to the wall.”

Detective Ward nodded, and his eyes softened marginally. “Do you know what type of building you were in? Was it maybe a warehouse or someone’s home?”

“I think it was a basement. It was all concrete and stone, and no windows. They lit candles when they came to...to visit me.” Sidney looked down at his hands as he twisted his fingers together in his lap. He didn’t want to talk anymore.

The things those monsters had done to him were horrendous. The scars covering his body were a constant reminder of the torture he had endured.

Detective Ward placed one of his big hands over Sidney’s and squeezed gently. Looking up to meet sapphire blue eyes, he bit his lip to keep it from wobbling.

“I know this is hard, and I hate that I have to make you relive it, but there are still two people missing. Two men that have...are...going through the same things you have. We need your help to save them.”

Sidney squeezed his eyes shut and clutched at the detective’s hand as he spoke. “He said he had two slaves to sell. He told the other man that they wouldn’t need to replace me yet.” Opening his eyes, he looked up at the detective again. “He said he wanted to find out what made them special so they could refine their search.”

“Did you ever see the other men?” Michael asked.

“No. They kept us separated.” Sidney’s voice dropped to a whisper. “I could hear them screaming, though.”

“What about this guy that held you there? Did you ever see his face?”

“Two of them,” Sidney said quietly. “The one that made all the decisions was a little guy, older, with dark, almost black eyes.”

“You said there was a second man?” Michael continued to jot down notes as he spoke.

“Yeah, the other guy was a big, bald black man and really quiet. He never touched me or hurt me, but he gave me the creeps.” Sidney shuddered at the memory of the man dropping him into the freezing water of the harbor.

“Okay.” Detective Ward smoothed the hair back from Sidney’s face. “Okay, that’s enough for tonight.”

Exhausted, he nodded gratefully.

The detective gently extracted his hand from Sidney’s grip and reached into his jacket pocket to remove a small white card. “This is my cell phone number. If you think of anything else, if you need anything, even if you just need someone to talk to, you call me. It doesn’t matter what time, day or night.”

Sidney took the offering and tried to get his bleary eyes to focus. “Ryder,” he mumbled as his eyelids started to droop. “I like that.”

“Good. Then you call me Ryder.” He helped Sidney get comfortable and smoothed his hair back again. “Rest now. We’ll talk again soon.”

* * * *

Ryder stripped out of his sopping clothes and fell into bed with a groan. Cold, wet, and fucking exhausted, he just wanted to curl up under the blankets and sleep for a week.

He had always considered himself tough. He worked hard to keep his muscles lean and sculpted, and he didn’t take shit from anyone. At six-foot-six, not many people were brave enough to cross him, anyway. The amount of courage and internal strength Sidney possessed, however, was nothing short of amazing.

Between his awe of the man's tenacity, and feeling overcome with some long hidden protective instinct, Ryder had never struggled more during a questioning.

The fact that Sidney Kessler was the most gorgeous thing he'd ever seen didn't help matters, either. Even the effects from months of abuse and starvation hadn't detracted from his natural allure.

Ryder groaned again and rolled over to bury his face in the pillow. The poor guy had lived through hell. It would be a miracle if he trusted another living soul again in his life. Yet, Ryder couldn't stop himself from lusting after the man.

Damn, you're sick, Ward.

As their sole witness and direct link to nailing the bastards who had hurt him, Ryder had no business even thinking about Sidney that way. Hell, he didn't even know if Sidney was interested in men. More than likely, he wouldn't be interested in *anyone* for some time to come.

Ryder, on the other hand, had known which way his gate swung since his first year of high school. While the other guys in his class chased after cheerleaders, he had spent his time lusting over Mr. Sweeny's chiseled jaw and tight ass.

Though his brain rebelled, his body still hadn't gotten the memo that Sidney Kessler was off limits. His balls tingled, and a shiver raced up his spine. His cock jerked and filled as he imagined running his hands over Sidney's soft skin, cupping his small, round ass, lapping his tongue over the peaks of his copper-colored nipples.

Ryder guided his fingertips up his rib cage to draw small circles around his own nipples, imagining what it would be like to press his lips against Sidney's neck and trail kisses along the pulsing vein there.

Pinching one of his nipples roughly, he slid his other hand down his rippled stomach to grip the swollen flesh between his legs. His breathing kicked up, and his heartbeat quickened.

He would be so gentle with Sidney, loving the man's body, treasuring him like the gift he was. Closing his eyes, he could almost feel the soft brush of full lips against his mouth. He could almost hear Sidney's quick intake of breath that would allow Ryder to slip his tongue inside and plunder the moist depths.

He stroked his leaking cock slowly, gathering the moisture at the tip with his thumb and spreading it over the spongy head. Planting his feet on the bed and spreading his knees wide, he increased his rhythm as his other hands slipped down his body to cup his heavy sac.

His body jerked, his muscles flexing from the onslaught of pleasure, and he clamped his lips together to contain his moan. Releasing his demanding shaft, he spat in his hand, then resumed working his slippery prick. Moving on from his tightening sac, he guided a finger along his perineum to his back door, lightly caressing the clenching muscles, spiking his pleasure, and hurling him along the path to orgasm.

His brain conjured delectably naughty images of Sidney sprawled on the bed, his head thrown back as Ryder swallowed his cock, sheathing it with his mouth and bathing the smooth flesh with his tongue. Sidney moaning and writhing as Ryder attacked his mouth, pumping his fingers in and out of that sweet ass.

Ryder stroked his throbbing shaft, pushing into his eager hole with two thick fingers. He hissed at the burn, his entire body tensing as he fucked himself on the invading digits. Rocking, bucking, stroking, his brain continued its barrage of erotic depictions.

Sidney touched himself, palming his long prick and stroking quickly. Sidney slick and wet as the water from the showerhead cascaded over his lean body. Sidney straddling his face while Ryder tongue-fucked his glistening entrance.

The last image sent Ryder hurling over the edge. His back bowed, and his inner walls convulsed as liquid heat started in his lower belly and spread throughout his body. Turning quickly, he buried his face in

the pillow to muffle his strangled groans of completion as hot, sticky ropes of cum coated his hand and sheets.

Shit! Sidney Kessler would be the death of him.

Chapter Two

Ryder groaned as he rolled over and reached for his ringing cell phone. Glancing at the alarm clock display, he groaned again, grumbling under his breath. Four o'clock in the morning was an ungodly hour, and someone better be dead or dying.

"Detective Ward," he answered around a yawn.

"Ry, we have a problem." Michael's calm voice held a thinly veiled anger.

Forcing himself out of the warm cocoon of blankets, he shuffled to the closet and pulled out his favorite pair of worn jeans and a plain black, lightweight sweater.

"Ryder?"

"Yeah." Coffee, he definitely needed coffee. "What's going on?"

"Sidney's missing."

Ryder froze in the act of pulling on his jeans. "What the hell do you mean, he's missing? He's in the damn hospital under guard. Where the fuck did he go?"

"Well, if I knew that, he wouldn't be missing now, would he?"

Ryder closed his eyes and sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. "Okay, I get it. I'm sorry. Do we know anything?" He finished pulling on his pants and tugged the sweater over his head.

"As far as we know, the guards never moved from in front of that door. No one went in or out other than hospital personnel. I don't see how anyone could have come in, let alone taken Sidney out of the window. It's on the fourth fucking floor, and it doesn't even open. It's like he disappeared into thin air."

“I’m on my way. We’ll find him, Michael.” Ryder spoke with more confidence than he felt.

“Yeah, all right, Ry. I’m going to have another look around his room. Come find me when you get here.”

“See you in a few.” Ryder flipped the phone shut and pulled on his boots. They *would* find Sidney. He wouldn’t rest until they did.

After scribbling a quick note to his grandmother, he slipped on his shoulder holster and pulled a light jacket from the closet.

He drove as fast as he dared, though not fast enough to his liking. The rain continued to pour from the skies, slicking the roads, and forcing his wipers to work double-time.

The beeping of his phone informed him of a text message just as he climbed out of his SUV in the hospital parking lot. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he flipped it open and sighed in relief at Michael’s message on the display screen.

Got Sid. Asking 4 u.

Ryder hurried across the parking lot, growling when he noticed the swarming crowd gathered around the front doors. Several uniformed officers did their best to hold back the masses, but it appeared even the ongoing storm couldn’t hold back the press.

Sidney would be hot news, making all of the front pages. Reporters would be scrambling and desperate to get “exclusive” interviews with him. The latest gossip surrounding the case the media had dubbed *The Suicide Murders*. A very unoriginal, unimaginative, and inaccurate title as far as Ryder was concerned.

He pushed through the throng of reporters, cameramen, and photographers, trudging toward one of the uniformed officers, mumbling, “No comment,” repeatedly as he went. What he really wanted to do was yell, “Back the fuck off!” Shaking off a few of the leeches, he flashed his badge to the young officer standing guard near the entrance.

The uniform eyed the press wearily as he motioned him through. “Bunch of damn hyenas, if you ask me,” he muttered under his breath. Ryder couldn’t agree more.

Hurrying through the front lobby, he bypassed the elevators and took the stairs two at a time to the fourth floor.

The hallway looked like a zoo. More uniforms, patients well enough to stand, doctors, nurses all littered the area in front of Sidney’s door. He spotted Michael talking to one of the officers, gesturing wildly, the vein in his temple throbbing as his face mottled with anger.

Ryder made his way over to his partner and touched his shoulder. “Calm down or you’re going to have a stroke. Where is he?”

Michael continued to glare at the young officer for a moment before he turned abruptly and pushed open the door to Sidney’s room. Ryder followed him inside, anxious to see Sidney for himself.

The man sat in his hospital bed, much as he had been when Ryder left him the night before. Thick hospital blankets covered him to the waist, and Ryder’s skin itched just from looking at them. He made a mental note to find Sidney a more comfortable covering if they intended to keep him much longer.

Sidney’s chin rested against his frail chest, and his delicate fingers twisted together in his lap, causing Ryder’s heart to ache at the sight. Moving slowly and cautiously to Sidney’s side, he gingerly sat on the bed beside him.

“Hello, Sidney.” Ryder waited for a reply or some acknowledgement that the man had heard him. When he received none, he gently laid his hand over Sidney’s, stilling his agitated movements.

“Detective Hunter—Michael—said that you wanted to see me.” Ryder kept his voice quiet, sure and unwavering. “Is there something you need to tell me?”

The air whooshed out of his lungs when Sidney threw himself into Ryder’s arms and embraced him with more strength than he would

have believed possible. The little man buried his face into Ryder's throat as he clutched his sweater in a death grip.

Ryder didn't say a word. Careful of Sidney's injuries, he rested a hand on the boy's hip and used his other to caress the back of Sidney's head. Hot tears rolled down his neck, accompanied by muffled sobs.

The best thing Ryder could do was just hold him until the emotional overload had passed. Rocking the thin man in his arms, he cradled the back of his head and pressed him closer. He placed a hand over Sidney's where it still clung to his shirt, rubbing calming circles on the delicate skin with his thumb.

After several long minutes, Sidney's sobs quieted, his breathing became deep and heavy, and his hold on Ryder loosened.

Ryder smiled tenderly, kissed Sidney's temple, and eased him back to the bed. Covering the sleeping man with the blankets, he wrinkled his nose in distaste at the rough material and tucked them around Sidney's boney shoulders.

Looking up at his partner, he found a faint smile on his lips. "What?" he mouthed. He dared Michael to say something.

Michael shook his head and motioned for Ryder to follow him back out into the slowly emptying hallway. "Where did you find him?"

"In a small storage cabinet under the bed," Michael said. He shook his head and frowned. "It was luck really. We had walked past that thing a hundred times. No one imagined he'd be able to wedge himself inside the damn thing."

Ryder's brow furrowed. "Why in the hell was he in there?"

"No clue." Michael shook his head again. "He wouldn't talk to anyone. Anytime someone got close to him, he'd start shaking like a leaf and saying that he wanted to talk to Detective Ward."

Ryder's eyebrows shot up and his eyes widened. "Why me?"

"I don't know that either, Ry. For whatever reason, he trusts you. If we're going to find those other victims, we'll need that trust."

Ryder nodded, but didn't like the way Michael made it sound as if he were exploiting Sidney. Damn if the asshole wasn't right, though. Sidney held the key to unlocking this whole damn case.

"Don't get in over your head, either." Michael held up a hand stalling Ryder's denial. "I see the way you look at him. He's a victim and a witness. Use your head, Ry."

Ryder glared at his partner, resisting the urge to stick his tongue out. Did Michael think he was stupid? Did he honestly believe that Ryder would destroy months of work, not to mention take advantage of a vulnerable man, just to get a little ass?

"I'm aware of who he is and what he means to this case. I'll do my job," Ryder replied coldly. He would treat Sidney Kessler just as he would any other victim-witness. So what if he felt some kind of connection to the guy? He wouldn't let it interfere with the case.

Michael sighed. "I didn't mean it like that, and you know it. I'm just saying be careful. It's hard to remain objective when you let personal feelings influence your judgment."

"I'll do my job," Ryder repeated, but with slightly more warmth. "You go home. I'm going to stay until he wakes up and see if I can get anything out of him."

Michael eyed him for a moment, then shrugged. "Okay, but call me if you find out anything useful."

"You got it." Ryder smiled just a little as he backed through the door to Sidney's room. "Later," he whispered and closed the door in his partner's face.

* * * *

Sidney blinked his eyes open sleepily, feeling exhausted, both mentally and physically. Much to his surprise, his stomach snarled, demanding sustenance. He had yet to eat anything and hold it down since they'd brought him to the hospital. Even the thought of food had made his stomach curl in revulsion.

“Well, hello there.”

Sidney jerked, whipping his head around to see who had spoken. Placing a hand against his chest, his muscles relaxed, and he chuckled breathlessly. “Oh, you scared me.”

“Sorry,” Detective Ward said, smiling. He stood from his chair and came to sit at the foot of the bed. Sidney wanted him closer. He felt oddly safe with Detective Ward—as if nothing in the world could hurt him.

“Want to tell me what’s going on?” Detective Ward had such an amazing smile. It lit up his entire face and made his blue eyes sparkle. Sidney couldn’t help but stare.

What the hell was wrong with him? He had been through something awful. Something so horrible, others hadn’t survived it. He was lucky to be alive and should be focusing on getting well. He certainly shouldn’t be wondering what the detective’s mouth would taste like.

Any sane person would be cringing at the thought of physical contact—not contemplating ways to initiate it. God, he had to be the most messed up person on the planet.

“Sidney, do you want to talk about it?” Ryder spoke patiently, soothingly, and Sidney found himself leaning closer.

“I don’t know exactly.” The words tumbled out of his mouth before he realized he intended to speak. “I heard someone yell and nurses talking about getting restraints. I panicked. It was like I was back in that basement all over again. So, I hid.” Sidney bit his lip and averted his eyes. Ryder probably thought him a mental case.

“Understandable.” Sidney’s eyes shot back to the detective as the man spoke. “Do you remember why you were asking for me?”

Yeah, he remembered. That didn’t mean he wanted to reveal the reason, though. Completely terrified, the only thing that made him feel safe in months came in the form of a big, muscular detective with sapphire eyes and pin straight black hair. Totally irrational

considering how little he knew Ryder, but it didn't stop him from seeking the shelter and assurance the man represented.

"I'm not comfortable around people yet," Sidney said. This would be harder than he thought. The tears welled in his eyes, but he forced them back. He would not cry. "I was scared, and I remembered how kind you were to me. You said I could call you anytime." He looked at Ryder pleadingly, willing him not to be angry. "I'm sorry."

Ryder looked away and cleared his throat. Sidney felt the panic bubble in his chest and fought the urge to squirm. "I'm sorry," he repeated in a soft whisper.

"Stop. There is no reason to be sorry." Ryder's lips lifted just a bit at the corners. "I promised I would do whatever I can to help you." He patted Sidney's ankle reassuringly. "I'm glad you asked for me."

Sidney lost the battle with his tears, and they slipped over his cheeks, leaving a wet path in their wake. Never prone to emotional displays before, he hated it. It made him feel weak. He swiped roughly at the tears, angry with himself for showing such vulnerability.

"Hey." Ryder took Sidney's hands into his own. "It's okay to cry. You're doing much better than you can imagine. I'm sure they would have to sedate me if I had lived through what you have. Give yourself a break, okay?"

"I'm scared, and I'm in pain. Every shadow, every unfamiliar face sends me into a panic. I cry at everything and nothing. My body is beaten, broken, and weak." Sidney took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "I'm so angry."

Opening his eyes, he scowled at the detective. "I'm angry at what has been done to me. Not just the abuse." Sidney shook his head. "I'm angry that I don't even recognize myself anymore. Not just physically, but I don't recognize me in here." He tapped a finger to his forehead. "It fucking pisses me off to be quite frank."

To his utter bewilderment, Detective Ward beamed at him. "That's good. I want you to be angry. Rage at everyone and

everything. Break stuff, hit stuff. Though, I'd prefer if you didn't hit me." He winked, and Sidney couldn't help but chuckle.

"It's better to be angry," Ryder said seriously. "Don't close yourself up and cut everyone out of your life. Get angry and fight back."

Sidney nodded firmly. That's exactly what he intended to do. "I want to help, Ry—Detective Ward. I'll tell you anything I can, anything I remember."

"I thought I told you to call me Ryder?"

"Fine." Sidney let out a breath in mock exasperation. "I want to help, *Ryder*." He stressed the last word, drawing it out. It felt good to be able to joke around, even just a little. It made him feel more like his old self before all of this craziness had started.

"Better." Ryder laughed. "You're quite the smart-ass, aren't you?" Standing from the bed, he reached to pull the covers up around Sidney's shoulders. "You need to rest. I'll come back around lunchtime, and we can go over some questions then." He pointed a finger in Sidney's face warningly. "And I better see you eating."

Sidney frowned but nodded. He didn't want Ryder to leave. Selfish maybe, but he liked having the beefy detective with him. He loved the deep, sultry sound of Ryder's voice, his easy smile, the way his eyes softened with understanding.

"Thank you, Ryder."

"Stop it. I'll be back in a couple of hours. Try to get some sleep."

Settling back against the pillows, he closed his eyes. Maybe he'd be able to sleep until lunch. Right before he drifted off, he swore he felt a light caress along his cheek.

Chapter Three

“Did you bartend at Bad Habits? Or were you a dancer?”

“Both.”

Ryder nodded. A week and half later they were no closer to finding the missing boys, and he felt more frustrated than ever. He had spent countless hours interrogating Sidney, making him relive every horrid moment, repeat every nightmarish detail.

“Did you ever have problems with any of the patrons? Did anyone ever show inappropriate interest?”

Sidney snorted. “It’s a gay strip club. Everyone shows inappropriate interest.”

Rolling his eyes, Ryder still had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling. Not only did Sidney Kessler represent sex personified, but he was smart, funny, brave, caring, and vivacious. He possessed a strong will and a soft heart, never seeming vain or shallow, judgmental or critical. He was...electric.

“Okay, then did anyone ever hassle you? Give you a hard time? Make advances toward you outside of work?”

Scrunching his nose in concentrations, Sidney shook his head slowly. “No. Another dancer had some problems with a guy once, but not me.”

Ryder took a deep breath, steeling himself for the next question. “I know you never saw any of the other captives, but would you guess there were only other men? No women?”

“I can’t be sure, but they all sounded like men.” Sidney spoke quietly, but clearly.

Pride in the man swelled Ryder's chest. Sidney never cracked under the strain—always courageous, looking Ryder in the eye as he answered every question tossed at him.

"Are you gay, Sid?" Though relevant to the case, Ryder had a certain personal investment in the answer as well.

"Yes." Sidney smirked at him. "Are you?"

Little smart-ass. "Yes."

Sidney smiled and nodded. "Don't worry. It's not obvious, and your secret is safe with me."

Ryder chuckled as he punched the man in the arm lightly, playfully. "Believe me, it's no secret. Everyone on the force knows."

"Well, I didn't." Sidney stuck his tongue out, causing Ryder to laugh harder. "I'm hungry."

"Good. I'll go tell the nurse." Rising from his seat beside the bed, Ryder made his way to the door, peeking over his shoulder one last time before slipping out.

Able to keep down his meals, eating a little more each day, Sidney had managed to add three pounds to his thin frame. The lacerations and bruises were healing well, and the doctors were impressed with his tenacious attitude. They had finally gotten the infection under control, and if everything went well, they'd be releasing him in the morning.

Ryder couldn't stop smiling as he made his way down the hall to the nurses' desk.

* * * *

Walking into Sidney's hospital room the next day, Ryder found the little man sitting on the edge of the bed in a pair of blue scrubs at least two sizes too big for him. His arms wrapped around his midsection as he rocked back and forth, and worry lines marred his delicate face. He chewed his bottom lip so vigorously Ryder feared it would bleed.

Rushing over and crouching down in front of Sidney, he reached up to push the silky auburn locks over his thin shoulder. He tilted Sidney's chin up with two fingers until the man looked back at him. "What's wrong, Sid? I thought you would be happy to get out of this place."

"Oh, I am," Sidney hastened to assure him. "I just don't know where I'm going to go. My apartment was rented out, all of my things sold or trashed. I have a little money in the bank, but not enough for a deposit on a new place." He smiled and shook his head dismissively. "I'll figure something out. I always do."

Well, he wouldn't have to figure anything out this time. Not if Ryder had a say in the matter. "You'll come home with me. I have plenty of room. It's just me, Nana, and Frank in our big old house." He rose to his feet and held out a hand to help Sidney up as well. "You can stay as long as you like."

"Oh, I don't know. I couldn't impose on you. I'll be okay, really."

"I insist," Ryder said firmly. "Besides, it's the safest place for you right now, other than Detective Hunter's house. You're our only witness. You don't think I'm going to let you disappear on me, do you?"

Much more tinted his offer than mere protection, but if that's what Sidney needed to hear, Ryder had no qualms about smudging the facts a little. Sidney didn't need someone to take care of him, but he did need a place to sleep. If that meant Ryder got to share his days with the gorgeous man, well...call it perks of the job.

"Let's go." He bit his tongue, but smiled inwardly when Sidney took his hand tentatively and rose from the bed.

"Thank you. It will just be until I can find a job and save up some money. I promise I won't inconvenience you or your family." Sidney tilted his head to the side and frowned. "Who is Frank?"

"Frank is the love of my life. He's big and strong, but lazy as they come. He's going to love you."

Sidney continued to frown for a second, but quickly recovered with a sweet smile. "I look forward to meeting him." He sounded hesitant and a bit unsure.

"Well, as long as you don't mind a little drool, I'm sure you two will be fast friends." He grinned when Sidney looked at him in confusion. "Frank is my Great Dane. He is spoiled rotten, but he's a good guy."

Sidney's smile instantly brightened. Ryder repressed the urge to grab the man and hug the life out of him. He looked too tempting for words when he smiled.

"I have always wanted a dog," Sidney said. "I just love animals."

Ryder chuckled softly. Maybe this arrangement would be good for Sidney. "And Nana is going to love you. I warn you, though. She's going to fuss over you and shove food in your face every chance she gets."

"I think I'd like that. I never had grandparents." Sidney's smile dimmed, and he worried his bottom lip between his teeth again. "I just hope she likes me."

"Didn't I just say she would love you?" Ryder wrapped an arm around the smaller man's shoulders and led him out of the room. "Stop worrying, everything is going to be fine."

Sidney nodded as he shuffled along in his bare feet. Ryder stopped just outside the door and held up a finger to tell Sidney to wait as he took out his cell phone, flipped it open, and dialed.

"Hey, Michael, we're coming down. Is everything clear?"

"Yep, you're good to go. I have your mammoth of a car waiting out back by the staff entrance."

Ryder nodded and smiled. "Lay off my car, asshole. We'll be down in a minute."

He led Sidney over to the nurses' station and asked for a pair of slippers. The elderly nurse behind the desk smiled warmly before going to retrieve a pair of standard blue hospital slip-ons. She handed

them to Sidney, and Ryder thought the woman's eyes looked a little misty.

"We're going to miss you, honey, but I'm glad to see you well. You take care of yourself."

"Thank you." Sidney offered a warm smile before slipping his feet into the slippers and smiling up at Ryder. "Let's blow this joint."

Ryder laughed. Sidney had come a long way in the three weeks since they'd met. He still had a long road of recovery ahead of him, but Ryder hoped he'd be there to help.

They made it to the elevators before Sidney suddenly jerked to a stop. "One minute," he pleaded. His eyes rounded, and he looked nervous.

"We can go down the stairs. I just didn't think you'd be feeling up to it."

"It's not that." Sidney shook his head frantically. "Just one minute, please." Then he turned and rushed down the hallway, back toward his room.

"Sidney!" Ryder raced after him, catching Sidney around the arm in just a few strides, and spinning him around. "What are you doing? What's wrong?"

"I just forgot something. Please, just one minute." He looked up, his eyes openly pleading. "Please, Ryder."

Studying Sidney's face for a full minute, Ryder finally nodded. "Hurry."

The man raced down the hall and into his recently vacated hospital room. Ryder had to fight the urge to follow him. He didn't like not being able to see the man. News had spread like wildfire about the only known survivor of *The Suicide Murders*. Whoever had kidnapped Sidney, and then left him for dead, would surely know by now that he hadn't succeeded in finishing the guy off.

The sicko couldn't leave a witness that would potentially lead back to him. Ryder hadn't said anything to Sidney yet, but he'd have

to soon. Someone would be coming for him, and he needed to be cautious.

Sidney hurried back, his slipper-clad feet scuffing across the ugly vinyl tile, clutching a piece of dark blue fabric to his chest. Ryder's brow creased in confusion. "What is that?"

"The blanket you brought me last week," Sidney whispered. "It's so beautiful," he said as he smoothed his hand over the dark blue chenille.

Ryder's heart melted at the thought something he had given the man meant so much to him. "Not as beautiful as you," he heard himself say.

He clamped his lips shut and repressed a groan. Where the hell had that come from? Of course, he thought Sidney was hot as hell, but that didn't mean he needed to say it out loud.

Sidney smiled shyly. "Thank you, Ryder."

Okay, maybe a little compliment wasn't such a bad thing. Ryder needed to watch himself, though. He could see himself falling easily for the green-eyed shrimp, and he couldn't allow that to happen.

"Are you ready?" He coughed to clear the roughness from his voice. "Is the elevator okay, or do you want to take the stairs?"

"The elevator is fine."

Pushing the call button, relieved when the doors opened immediately, Ryder ushered his companion inside and hit the button for the basement. Not until the elevator began to move did he notice Sidney had his eyes closed, and he trembled from head to toe.

He didn't hesitate, didn't even think about his actions. He took the blanket from Sidney's grasp, wrapped it around his quivering shoulders, and pulled the small man into his arms, rocking him gently, side to side.

"Shh now, we're almost out. Just take deep breaths."

"You must think I'm such a twit." Sidney's voice wavered as he spoke.

“You know I don’t. Just keep your eyes closed. Only one more floor.”

When the doors opened, Ryder released Sidney long enough to step out and scan the surrounding area. Once satisfied that everything appeared as it should, he motioned for Sidney to join him.

Wrapping an arm around Sidney’s shoulders again, he held him close as they moved quickly through the corridors of the basement toward the staff entrance. After what felt like an eternity, they finally made it through the heavy door and up the stone steps to where Michael waited beside Ryder’s SUV.

His partner hurried forward when he saw them, reaching out for Sidney. Ryder tightened his hold protectively when the man in his arms flinched away from Michael’s advance.

Letting his hands drop, Michael grinned apologetically and slowed his movements. “Sorry, kiddo. Everything okay?”

Ryder felt Sidney nod against his shoulder. “Yes, and I’m sorry as well, Detective Hunter. I guess it’s going to take a little time.”

Michael waved him away. “No problem, and I don’t know how many times I have to tell you to call me Michael.” He hurried to open the back door as Ryder hustled Sidney to it and helped him inside.

Sliding in beside him, he motioned his partner to take the wheel. Michael looked at him funny, but nodded and settled into the driver’s seat. “Where to, gents?” he asked in a poor British accent.

Sidney giggled, the sound sweet and musical, causing Ryder’s insides flutter and his prick to twitch in interest. *Down boy.* “My place.”

Michael arched a brow at him in the rearview mirror, but kept his comments to himself. *Smart man.*

Ten minutes later, they pulled into Ryder’s driveway, and Michael cut the engine. “Home sweet home, my dears.”

Sidney laughed again, the smile on his face radiant. “I wouldn’t quit your day job, Detective. You are a lousy impersonator.”

Michael spun in his seat and stared at Sidney in shock. "And here I thought you were a nice kid. A smart-ass is what you are. You've been around Ry too long. He's corrupting your youthful innocence."

"You're probably right," Sidney quipped in a perfect British accent. "He is a rather horrible influence. Though, some might find that right attractive, they would." Opening his door, he slid out, leaving both detectives staring after him.

Ryder turned to look at his partner. "What the hell was that?"

Michael shook his head dazedly. "Hell if I know, but it was kind of hot, huh?"

He rolled his eyes and groaned. "Back off, Hunter. I already warned him about Frank drooling on him. Do I need to warn him about you, too? You don't even like men."

"Doesn't mean I can't appreciate beauty when I see it." Michael chuckled as he stepped out of the vehicle and went to stand beside Sidney. He bumped Sidney's shoulder with his own and smirked at Ryder. Leaning closer, he whispered something into the smaller man's ear, making his face turn a blazing scarlet.

"Michael." Ryder stalked over and shoved him roughly away before gently wrapping an arm around Sidney's waist. "Don't mind him. He was dropped a lot as a baby." He led the way up the front steps.

"I'll be sure to tell my mother you doubt her parenting skills," Michael called after him. "She won't make you anymore of her famous blackberry cobbler, and then you'll be sorry."

"Your mother loves me more than she does you." Ryder laughed, opening the door and urging Sidney through it.

* * * *

By the time they made it inside, Sidney had a terrible case of the giggles. The two detectives were just too much. He could tell they

shared a deep bond and love for each other that went well beyond their partnership. They were family.

He couldn't remember the last time he had laughed so much. He hadn't had much to laugh about over the last few months, but even before that, there had never been much occasion for happiness.

"You two stop it." An elderly lady came floating into the room. Sidney guessed the woman was in her sixties, but still very beautiful. She had an air of sophistication and class about her—traits that usually intimidated Sidney and left him looking for a place to hide. Something about this woman, though, drew him to her. She just looked so...alive.

"Welcome, honey. I'm Claire, but everyone calls me Nana." She embraced him, hugging him as if he were a long lost friend. "Are you hungry, child? I'll go put something on," she continued without waiting for a reply. "Michael, be a dear and take those bags up to the spare room." She pointed to several shopping bags near the front door.

"Thank you for welcoming me into your home. I promise I won't be in the way." Sidney didn't want to be a burden.

"Oh, hush that nonsense." Claire waved a hand at him dismissively. "You will be in the way as much as you please. Lord knows Michael is." She winked over at the detective. "You just make yourself at home, and we'll worry about the rest as it comes."

She kissed Sidney's cheek, hugged him again, and bustled out of the room.

"I told you she would love you." Ryder smirked. "Hunter, get those bags up to Sidney's room before Nana comes back."

"Why are those bags going to my room?" Sidney watched Michael gather them and proceed up the stairs.

"Well, because they're yours." Ryder eyed him for a minute before rolling his eyes. "Don't get your panties in a bunch. It's not a big deal. Just a few clothes, socks, underwear, pajamas, and two pairs of shoes."

“What?” Sidney gasped. “Ryder, there were half a dozen bags there. That’s way more than a few, and way more than I need!” He felt the tears prickle the corner of his eyes. He couldn’t afford all of those things. “How am I ever going to pay you back?”

“Oh just shut up.” Ryder glared at him. “You aren’t going to pay me back. They were gifts from Michael, Nana, and me. I didn’t know you’d be coming here, of course, but I still figured you’d need a few things to get started. Are you going to insult my Nana by not accepting them?” He raised an eyebrow and quirked one corner of his mouth.

“You are rotten, Ryder Ward.” Sidney grinned crookedly in return. “Thank you.”

Chapter Four

Sidney stood inside his new temporary bedroom in utter disbelief. Enormous didn't begin to describe it. Hell, he thought it might be bigger than the entirety of his last *apartment*. The chocolate-brown carpet felt soft and thick between his toes, and the queen sized sleigh bed looked big and soft—enough to make him drool. He had been sleeping on an old futon he'd found at a garage sale.

Jumping a little to get up on the bed, he lay back and sighed, the sound deep and content. The blue comforter matched the chenille blanket Ryder had brought him at the hospital. Sidney wondered if he had ever mentioned blue was his favorite color.

A knock at the door had him jerking upright. "Come in," he squeaked.

The door eased open, and Ryder sauntered in. He eyed Sidney critically, and then let out a sound of complete exasperation. "You haven't even looked in those bags have you?" He pointed to the shopping sacks in the corner of the room. "You're killing me here."

Sidney shook his head quickly as he looked the detective up and down, trying not to be overly obvious. The fact that Ryder had changed into a pair of cotton sleep pants that apparently didn't have a matching top didn't make it easy. All that smooth bare skin on display had his mouth watering in seconds.

"God, you have great abs." Sidney clamped his mouth shut and stared up at Ryder with wide, fearful eyes.

Ryder just laughed, flexing and stretching his stomach muscles. "They are pretty great, huh?" He laughed again and grabbed the bags, depositing them on the bed. "You ready?"

Sidney eased off of the mattress. "Ready for what?"

"To model for me. I want to see what these things look like on you." Ryder looked over and frowned. "And you really need to get out of those scrubs. They do absolutely nothing for your figure."

Sidney choked on his laughter as his heart kicked into high gear. He was supposed to model for Ryder? For holy-shit, oh-my-god, where-have-you-been-all-my-life, can-I-please-lick-you-now Ryder?

"Um, I'm sure everything will fit." He shrugged, trying for nonchalant. "Even if it doesn't, I'm really in no position to complain."

"It'll fit. I still want to see it on you." Ryder crawled up on the bed and sprawled in the middle of it. "I promise I'm not going to ogle you."

Is that what Ryder worried about? Good grief, if Sidney wasn't so nervous, he'd have a boner the size of freaking semi right now. What was it about Detective Ryder Ward that had him wanting to roll over and pant like a bitch in heat?

Gathering his resolve, he slowly began pulling the scrub top up his torso. Not like he had never been naked in front of another person before. This felt different, though.

"Wait, you're doing it wrong."

Sidney stopped undressing and glared at the older man. Was he kidding? "I'm sorry. I didn't realize there was a proper way to undress. And here I've been doing it wrong all my life, apparently."

Ryder laughed so hard, Sidney thought the man might rupture something. What the hell? He really didn't see anything humorous in the situation.

"You have quite the temper." Ryder regained some of his composure and settled back against the pillows. "You need to put a little sway in your hips. Be sexy. Shake your ass a little."

Sidney stared in shock, his eyes rounded, and his mouth hanging open like a guppy. "I thought you weren't going to ogle me?" Not that he minded, but his body still had a ways to go to be fit for ogling. Even he couldn't stand the sight of it.

Ryder gave him a wicked grin. "I lied."

Biting his lip to keep from sighing, Sidney still couldn't bring himself to attempt *sexy*. A roadmap of scars and still healing wounds littered the majority of his body. Sure, he'd gained a few pounds in the hospital, but he remained at least twenty underweight.

Slipping the top over his head, he dropped it to the floor. "Just pick something, and I'll put it on. Whatever you want, Ryder." Too embarrassed to look at the detective, he spoke to the floor as he pushed his pants down his legs and let them pool at his feet. He stood there, trembling and blushing, covering himself the best he could, unsure of what to say or do next.

Ryder moved in front of him before he could blink, wrapping a blanket around his shoulders and pulling him into his massive arms. "I'm sorry. Put on whatever you want, and I'll meet you downstairs for dinner."

He fled the room, not looking back, and Sidney sank to the floor in defeat. His body wouldn't win any prizes in its current condition, but for Ryder to be so disgusted he had to leave the room devastated him.

He couldn't do this. He needed time to heal, time to work through the things that had happened to him in privacy and peace. Though he didn't understand the attraction or the pull he felt toward the detective, maybe it would be best to leave the feelings unexplored. Ryder didn't want him anyway. Sidney was just a charity case. A witness the police department needed to keep safe in case they needed him to testify at trial.

He'd stupidly fooled himself into believing that Detective Ward's kindness came from a genuine sense of caring. He didn't care, though. He was just doing his job. Sidney was just a job.

And why the hell did it even matter? He barely knew the guy. Why did he already feel so attached to Ryder? Why did he have a painful ache in his chest at the thought of never seeing the detective

again? Sure, they'd spent a lot of time together over the last few weeks, but it hadn't exactly been wine and roses.

Damn, he needed help. Maybe it was some weird thing where victims fall in love with their rescuers. Maybe like a slut cousin to Stockholm Syndrome. Sure, that made sense.

Sidney pulled out a pair of pajama pants and a hooded sweatshirt from the bags on the bed. He stayed so cold these days. Once dressed, he made his way down the stairs to find Ryder. He would just explain that he appreciated everything Ryder had done for him, but he couldn't stay.

He just couldn't stay.

* * * *

Ryder felt like the biggest asshole on the planet. What the hell had he been thinking? Sure, he thought Sidney was sin on legs, but it hadn't been about that at all. He only wanted to give the man a little confidence, help him have a little fun.

Well, that had blown up in his face.

He'd acted rashly, moving too quickly. Sidney wasn't ready to step out of his comfort zone, yet Ryder had tried to drag him kicking and screaming more or less. Sidney had looked so frightened, so miserable, Ryder wanted to punch himself in the ear. Why had he done that?

He stopped his internal berating and froze mid-pace when Sidney stepped into the kitchen. What did he do now? Should he pretend nothing had happened? Should he fall to his knees and beg forgiveness? Maybe Sidney wouldn't bring it up.

"Detective Ward," Sidney said quietly.

Detective Ward? Oh, this could not be good. Ryder took a deep breath and crossed his arms over his midsection, tucking his hands in to hide their shaking.

"I appreciate you letting me stay here, but I'm not sure it's such a good idea. Maybe I should find somewhere else to stay."

Ryder squeezed his hands into tight fists. "Sidney, listen." He paused, searching for the right words. "I'm sorry about what happened. I didn't mean to upset you or make you feel uncomfortable." At this point, he decided the truth would probably be best. "I just wanted to give you a little confidence. I wanted you to see that you are still desirable."

Sidney held up his hand to stop Ryder's ramblings. "Thank you, but you didn't make me feel uncomfortable for the reasons you're thinking. I still feel it would be best that I leave."

"Please, don't go." Ryder had never begged for anything in his life, but he would kneel in glass to keep Sidney there. The thought, the emotions fueling the thought, scared the hell out of him.

Sidney shook his head. "I think it's for the best," he repeated.

If Sidney had been anyone else, if Ryder had met him under different circumstances, he would have the man in his arms and kissing the protest right out of him. But, Sidney Kessler was different—special—and his witness and ward. He couldn't.

"Look, I'll keep away from you. I won't bother you. Hell, I'm not even here most of the time anyway." He started pacing again. "I think it would be best if you stayed, though. I can't protect you if you leave."

Oh, god, if anything happened to Sidney, Ryder would never forgive himself. *Talk about bringing work home.* It didn't matter. He'd sworn to protect Sidney, and he'd do whatever it took to keep that promise.

"Ryder, please, I think—"

"No!" He whirled around to face Sidney, pointing a finger at him. "You are not leaving. Now, dinner will be ready in ten minutes. I expect you at the table in five." Then he stormed out of the room like a petulant child.

* * * *

Sidney stood frozen to the kitchen tile. What the hell had just happened? Ryder refused to let him leave? So, he was to be a prisoner again.

“The fuck if I will.” Squaring his shoulders and drawing up to his full five-foot-six height, he marched after the detective. “Ryder Ward, get your ass back here!”

The air rushed out of his lungs in a whoosh when he turned the corner and plowed right into a solid wall of muscle. Strong fingers wrapped around his biceps to keep him upright, but Sidney jerked away, stumbling back another step. Under normal circumstances, he would have reveled in the touch. Now, however, he felt nothing but anger.

“You screeched?” Ryder smirked down at him.

Sidney narrowed his eyes and snarled. “Who in the hell do you think you are? You can’t keep me locked up like some damn prisoner. If I want to leave, then I will fucking leave, and you can’t stop me!”

“Fine.” Ryder spoke calmly, but Sidney could see the fire in his eyes, the slight quivering of his body. “If you want to leave so damn bad...” He strolled to the front door and held it open. “Don’t let the door smack that skinny ass on your way out.”

Sidney didn’t move. For all of his ranting and protest, he really didn’t want to leave. Besides, where would he go?

“No?” Ryder shrugged and slammed the door. “Then stop acting like a whiney little snot and get ready for dinner.”

“Fuck you,” Sidney sneered. He had never cursed so much in his life. He had also never been so angry before. Hell, he didn’t even know why he was mad. Hadn’t he just been the one to propose he should leave?

Sighing, his entire body slumped, and his head dropped back on his shoulders. “What’s wrong with me?”

“You’re hurt, angry, confused, and you feel like you have no control over anything. Does that about sum it up?”

He sighed again, but nodded. “Yeah, that sounds about right.” Walking up to the detective, he tentatively wrapped his arms around Ryder’s waist, and rested his head over the man’s heart. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be difficult. I just...I don’t...oh damn.”

The floodgates opened, and he sobbed into Ryder’s chest, drenching his shirt with his salty tears. A huge palm cradled the back of his head, and long fingers massaged his scalp as Ryder rocked him side to side in comfort.

“Hush now. Everything is going to be okay. We were both wrong.” Leaning away, he pulled lightly on Sidney’s hair, tilting his head back to look into his eyes. “You can’t just storm off every time you get upset, though. It’s not safe.”

Sidney gulped audibly, but nodded his understanding. Ryder was so close, his luscious lips only a few inches away. His head swam, his brain fogging in a haze of lust. His cock perked up, taking notice of Ryder’s closeness as well and demanding some attention. What would it feel like to kiss Ryder? Would it be soft and tender, like the feel of satin against bare skin? Or would it be explosive like lightning bolts and fireworks?

Only one way to find out.

Leaning in, pressing their chests together, his lips hovered just a breath away from his detective’s, and still he needed to be closer. Just...a little...

Ryder jerked back, and his eyes went wide like startled colt. “Uh, okay, well,” he stammered. Sidney noticed the large bulge behind Ryder’s zipper and smiled. The man looked in danger of injuring himself—or destroying his zipper. “So, dinner should be ready. Let’s eat. Um, food, I mean. We should eat food.” Then Ryder stepped around him and practically sprinted from the room.

Watching the object of his desire flee into the kitchen, Sidney slapped a hand over his mouth to muffle his laughter. If he didn't know better, he'd swear Detective Ward had wanted to kiss him.

He had no idea why the older man hadn't acted on his desire, but it didn't matter. He could fake a lot of things, but not the raging hard-on he'd been sporting. Ryder wanted him!

Leaving the room with a little extra bounce, his day vastly improved in the course of three minutes, Sidney couldn't wipe the smile from his face. He wanted Ryder, and Ryder wanted him. The rest would take care of itself.

Still, no rule said Sidney couldn't help things along a little. With a newfound determination, he made his way up the stairs to clean up for dinner.

Chapter Five

Over the next couple of weeks, Sidney slowly acclimated himself to his new life. Though there hadn't been any more up close moments with Ryder, they had spent a lot of time together. They talked about mundane things, some about the case, but mostly a wide range of topics from music to childhood memories. Sidney enjoyed the time they spent together, even when they didn't talk. Watching movies with Ryder when he came home from work had become his favorite part of the day.

Sidney wanted more. Everything he learned about the detective, every casual touch, every smile, every glimpse into the man's soul made Sidney ache to get closer. If he waited for Ryder to make the first move, he'd be old and gray before he got what he wanted, though.

So, all throughout dinner that night, Sidney planned and plotted. He ate quietly, sneaking glances at the scrumptious man sitting across from him. Though he never caught the detective looking at him, he could feel the intensity of Ryder's gaze.

"So, what do you boys have planned for the weekend?" Claire asked as she placed a beautifully iced chocolate cake in the center of the table.

A quiet moan escaped Sidney's lips before he could stop it. Blushing to the tips of his ears, he smiled bashfully. "Sorry. I love chocolate cake, and that looks simply divine."

Claire's generous smile lit up the room. "No need for apologies, dear. I never could resist anything chocolate myself." She placed a liberal slice onto a plate and passed it to him. "This is my

grandmother's recipe, and I'm afraid I just simply do not do it justice. That woman was magic in the kitchen."

Sidney mumbled a thank-you and dove into the decadent dessert. Closing his eyes, he moaned again, not caring who heard him or what they thought. "Now this is magic. I don't know what your grandmother's cake was like, but I can't imagine it gets any better than this. You are amazing, Ms. Ward."

Claire pointed a finger in his face and glared. "I will have none of that." Then her lips lifted in a gentle smile. "You will call me Claire or Nana. I prefer Nana."

Sidney smiled and nodded in assent. "Okay...Nana." The word felt foreign on his tongue, but well worth it to see the joy on Claire's face.

He went back to his dessert with inappropriate enthusiasm. He couldn't have stopped himself if he tried. It was the most amazing thing that had ever passed through his lips. After he finished, he tongued the fork clean of all the sweet, gooey icing and set it on top of his empty plate.

"Would you like another slice, or were you planning to lick the plate clean as well?" Ryder smirked, and his eyes twinkled.

Sidney blushed and bit his lip. Okay, so maybe licking the fork had been a little over the top. At least he hadn't started squealing and grunting like a pig. "I apologize if I have offended your delicate sensibilities, Detective."

Claire laughed. "I doubt there is a delicate bone in his body. Don't pay him any mind. He's just upset because he doesn't have your metabolism." She shook her head, smiling fondly. "He was a chubby little boy."

Sidney looked over at Ryder and cocked an eyebrow in question. "It's true." Ryder grimaced. "I was a fat fuck."

"Ryder!"

Ryder winced. "Sorry, Nana, but you know it's true."

"Be that as it may, you'll watch your tongue at my table."

“Yes, ma’am.”

Sidney had never seen anything as funny as the huge, mountain of a man cowering under his petite grandmother’s stern gaze. His eyes drifting over Ryder’s chiseled chest hidden beneath his thin T-shirt, Sidney decided there might be one thing better than chocolate cake. Ryder looked like a walking fantasy come to life.

Although he respected Ryder’s dedication to a healthy lifestyle, he also felt the man needed to loosen up a bit. What was life without a little indulgence?

“I’ll go ahead and get the dishes started while you two finish up.” Standing from her seat, Claire began to gather the empty plates from the table.

“Nana, we are perfectly capable of doing the dishes. Why don’t you go relax in front of the television for a little while?” Ryder stood and took the dishes from her hand.

Sidney smiled and shooed her away. “We’ll take care of everything.”

Waiting until Nana left the room, he moved around the table, taking the plates from Ryder’s hands, and placed the stack back on the table. He placed his hand against Ryder’s stomach and pushed him back into his seat. “Sit.”

Leaning across the table, he grabbed the fork from his dessert plate, scooped a small sliver of cake onto it, and held it to Ryder’s mouth. “One little bite. It won’t give you warts or put ten pounds on your thighs. I promise.” He waved the sticky goodness back and forth close to the detective’s lips. “Live a little, Ry.”

Ryder pressed his lips into a thin line and shook his head.

Sidney inched closer, leaning over him. “Open up,” he whispered.

Ryder’s nostrils flared, and Sidney couldn’t miss the heat emanating from his blue eyes.

Good.

“Come on, one little bite.” He batted his lashes and poked his bottom lip out. “For me?”

Ryder's breathing accelerated, but still he shook his head. "Nope." His eyes held a teasing glint, though, and Sidney wanted to shout for joy.

Straddling Ryder's massive thighs, he eased himself into the detective's lap before shrugging innocently and pushing the fork past his own lips. Closing his eyes and dropping his head back, he moaned like a pro.

Then he tossed the fork over his shoulder, barely hearing it clink and tumble across the table, and brushed his lips over Ryder's, teasing them with his tongue. "How about now? Want a taste now, Detective Ward?"

Without waiting for an answer, he mashed his mouth to Ryder's, nibbling at his lower lip and begging for entrance. He couldn't remember ever being this bold, but found it well worth the effort when Ryder's lips parted with a groan, and his tongue snaked out to meet Sidney's. Not about to waste the gift, he thrust inside, licking at Ryder's welcoming mouth.

He couldn't tell who moaned louder, and didn't really give a damn. Nothing in his life had ever felt this good, tasted this sweet. He swirled his tongue around Ryder's, sliding, pushing, and stroking, pressing his body closer, gasping as he ground his aching erection against the detective's groin. What would it feel like to touch the man without the layers of clothing between them?

Ryder growled, the sound low and primal. One hand came to rest on Sidney's hip in a bruising grip, while the other slid around the back of his neck to fist in his hair. He took over the kiss, biting and sucking at Sidney's lips and tongue, dominating and overwhelming him.

Please, please, please, Sidney chanted over and over in his head. God, he wanted this man. Liquid heat pooled between his legs, gathering in his tightening sac as electricity zinged up his spine. "Touch me," he panted, breaking the kiss and shuddering with need.

With those two little words, the spell was broken. Ryder jerked back, staring wide-eyed and shaking his head. "Fuck! I can't do this. We shouldn't be doing this."

Sidney wouldn't give up without a fight. Wrapping his arms around Ryder's neck and pulling him closer, he stared him right in the eyes. "Shut up and quit thinking. I want you, Ry." Then he captured his mouth again in a scorching, toe-curling kiss.

Ryder's body stiffened, resisting for only a moment, then he sighed and opened to Sidney's questing tongue.

Better than the first, this kiss caused Sidney's skin to tingle as he felt the slow burn work its way through his body and out to his limbs. When Ryder broke the kiss, Sidney didn't retreat. He flicked his tongue over the hollow of Ryder's collarbone, licking his way up the smooth column of his throat.

"Please," he begged against the soft skin just behind Ryder's ear. One taste of the man's lips, and Sidney had become an addict for life. He'd do anything to get his daily fix. "Please, Ry."

* * * *

Brain and body, common sense and lust, waged an internal battle. Though the throbbing in his cock and balls snarled at him to shut up and take what Sidney offered, Ryder's brain screamed orders to get a firm grip on the situation.

Doing the right thing held little appeal with Sidney's plump lips sliding up and down his neck. The sweet fragrance of man and desire overwhelmed his senses and had Ryder fighting not to throw the tempting little morsel down on the table and have his wicked way with him.

The back of Sidney's hand hesitantly brushed across Ryder's zipper. When Ryder didn't immediately stop him, Sidney's hand flipped over, palming and squeezing Ryder's straining erection.

Desperately trying to hold back his moan of pleasure, Ryder continued to battle with himself. If he let his body lead the way, he didn't think he would ever be able to forgive himself. Whatever Sidney thought, he wasn't ready for what Ryder wanted from him. And he wanted it all—heart, mind, and body. It had been barely more than a month, though, and Sidney still needed time to heal, both physically and emotionally.

"I won't break, Ry," Sidney whispered as if reading his mind. "I know what I want, and I want you. Stop thinking so hard and just say yes."

Oh, how he wanted to. To just let go of the niggling worry and doubt and turn himself over to the man in his lap. Damn, but there were too many reasons to say no. "We need to talk."

"Later." Sidney inched down to nibble at the skin just below Ryder's collarbone. "Need you, Ry."

Ryder's resolve almost flew out the window. He understood need. His desire for Sidney went well beyond want and straight into a clawing demand. If only things could be different.

"No." Ryder gently pushed the man back to look into his brilliant green eyes. Smiling shakily, hoping to convey everything that he couldn't say in words, he ran the pad of his thumb over Sidney's swollen bottom lip. "We need to talk first." He laughed softly as the lip he caressed poked out into a pout. The guy was too cute. "I'm not saying no, just not right now. This is what *I* need. It will make me feel better." He tried a pout of his own, giving Sidney his best puppy dog eyes.

It seemed to do the trick because Sidney sighed and rolled his eyes, but nodded. "Okay, fine. I guess I understand. Can I kiss you again?"

"God, yes." He could live on Sidney's kisses. He might be unwilling to take things further just yet, but he'd be a fool to pass up those gorgeous lips.

When the kiss threatened to turn heated again, Ryder reluctantly eased away and smiled. "Dishes, and then we talk."

Sidney seemed a little dazed as he nodded again. "Okay, up ya go." He helped Sidney out of his lap and stood beside him. "Ready to get dirty?"

Sidney purred, arching against him. "Oh, yeah."

Groaning, Ryder adjusted himself inside his pants and smacked Sidney on the ass. "Behave."

* * * *

With the last dish dried and put away, Sidney pushed Ryder up against the refrigerator, pressed their chests together, and pulled him into a devouring kiss. Ryder offered no resistance, opening readily, wrapping his arms around Sidney's waist, and dragging him closer.

Several long minutes passed before Sidney realized he was dry humping Ryder's leg. No one had ever made him lose control the way the sexy detective did. "Upstairs," he mumbled against Ryder's lips.

"We need to talk." Ryder spoke without any real conviction as he chased Sidney's retreating lips.

"Okay, so start talking." Sidney backed away, taking Ryder's hands and pulling him toward the staircase. Tired of playing games, tired of tiptoeing around each other, he wanted the detective in his bed.

"Are you sure about this? I mean, have you ever even been with another man before?"

Sidney stopped halfway up the stairs and turned to face his soon to be lover. Glancing down at his tight purple T-shirt, too-short shorts, even the way he stood with one hip cocked out to the side, he couldn't help but snort. "Uh, duh?"

Ryder glared and pushed him up the stairs. Once inside Sidney's bedroom, he sat on the edge of the bed, patting the space beside him. "Come sit down."

Sidney shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest. “Ryder, I’m not a child. I know what I want. I want you. I know you want me. So, what is all this hesitancy about?”

“Why me? Really think about it, Sid.” Ryder moved to stand in front of him, placing his hands on Sidney’s shoulders. “I don’t want you to do something you will regret later. Just give yourself time to heal, and you’ll see that I’m right.”

Taking a step back, Sidney brushed off the other man’s hold. “I really wish you would stop putting words in my mouth and trying to decide what is best for me.” He waved a hand when Ryder began to protest. “Yes, you do. I feel safe with you. Everything goes away when I’m with you. Something I haven’t felt in a long time.”

Ryder closed his eyes on a sigh. When he opened them, Sidney could see the rejection shining there before he even opened his mouth. “Don’t you see? That’s exactly why I can’t do this. I think you are confusing your feelings of safety and gratitude with lust and desire. How could I possibly take advantage of that and still look at myself in the mirror?”

When Sidney’s only response came by the narrowing of his eyes, Ryder ran a hand through his hair, pulling at the ends. “Why do you want to be with me?”

Sidney didn’t hesitate. “You make me feel safe, yes, but there’s more than that. You are sexy, Ry. Gorgeous really.” His face heated as he spoke. Talking about his feelings had never come easily for him. “You are smart and fierce, and you never back down from anyone or anything. You make me want to be more like you. I feel braver when I’m with you—like I can climb mountains and capture stars.”

He paced back and forth in front of the bed as he spoke, his voice rising, the passion and determination to make Ryder see his feelings were genuine seeped through his calm.

“I don’t understand it, and I don’t really care. I just want to be with you. I like how I feel when I’m with you.” Sidney stopped

pacing and dropped his face into his hands. “I’m not explaining this right at all.”

How could he make the detective understand? It wasn’t hero worship. He didn’t need Ryder to slay his dragons or shield him from the world.

“I need to think.” Ryder moved so quickly through the door it was as though he had simply vanished.

Flopping onto the bed, Sidney crawled to the center and curled himself into a ball. Why did this have to be so difficult? Why couldn’t Ryder just love him back, and they could run across a field of daisies, hand and hand, into the setting sun?

Love?

Sidney rolled over and stared at the ceiling. Was he falling in love with the surly detective? Oh hell, maybe Ryder had it right. Sidney was so emotional, he felt like a mental patient most days. How could he trust what he *thought* he felt?

“I need help.”

Chapter Six

Ryder stalked about his room, waving his hands wildly, and mumbling under his breath. “This is ridiculous. Are you seriously even considering it? What the hell is wrong with you, Ward?”

No one had ever gotten under his skin like Sidney did. He worked damn hard to be the best detective on the force. He never had anything handed to him. No one had pulled strings or bent any rules for him. Everything he had, including the respect of his peers, he earned. Would he really jeopardize it all for the little auburn-haired sprite in the next room?

“Fuck!” Ryder scrubbed his palms over his face and sat heavily on the mattress. If the Chief found out he had something going on with Sidney, he’d yank his ass off the case quicker than he could blink.

And he wanted this one bad.

He couldn’t deny he found Sidney Kessler attractive. Beyond that, he loved spending time with the smaller man, listening to him babble with excitement about all the things in life he still wanted to accomplish.

The more time he spent with Sidney, the more he felt himself slipping. The guy had a heart of gold and an enthusiasm that didn’t fit with the life he’d lived at all. He made Ryder want things. Things he had no business wanting. It would be so easy to fall, to lose his heart completely.

He couldn’t do it, though. He wouldn’t throw away everything he had worked for just so Sidney could decide a few months down the road he needed more than Ryder could give him.

With a new resolve, he marched from his room, down the hall, and threw open the door to Sidney's room without preamble. "Look, I'm sorry, but—"

He froze. Sidney laid in the middle of the bed, wrapped around a pillow, his small, frail body shaking with the effort to contain his sobs. "Just go away, Ryder."

Just like that, his new resolve disintegrated. He moved to the bed, sliding in behind Sidney, and wrapped the weeping man in his arms.

"Hush, baby. We'll figure it out." With a bit of surprise, Ryder realized he meant what he said. With his heart breaking for the man in his arms, he knew he'd do anything to make Sidney smile.

Damn, he needed to get a firm grip on something—anything—before he skidded over the edge and into free fall.

That didn't mean he would walk blindly into the fire, though. There were still things they needed to work out.

"I think you need to see a therapist."

"I think I need to see a therapist." Both men spoke simultaneously.

Ryder's hand paused in its trek through Sidney's hair. "What did you say?"

"I think I need to talk to someone about the things that happened to me. A professional. I know that I have feelings for you, and I think I understand why you don't trust those feelings. Maybe it would help."

He bit his lip, his eyes downcast. "I didn't really care for it before, but I think I need it. I'm falling for you, Ry. I want you to believe that. If this is the way to make you see, then I want to do it."

Ryder stared into those emerald eyes, completely lost. "I want you to do this for you, not for me."

Sidney pressed his lips to Ryder's in a chaste but tender kiss before pulling back and looking into his eyes again. "I am mostly doing this for me. I will admit that I'm partly doing it for you." He shrugged adorably. "I guess I'm doing it for us."

Us. Ryder liked the sound of that more than he should. “You’ve been in therapy before?” Though none of his business, he wanted to know everything about Sidney.

“There was a robbery at the bar I worked at about a year ago. I was the only one working, and it shook me up a little. The owner paid for it.” Sidney shrugged. “I don’t think it helped much at the time, but maybe it just wasn’t a good fit with the therapist.”

“We’ll find someone you trust.” He kissed Sidney’s shoulder. “Trust is important.”

Sidney nodded and changed the subject. “We can hold off on the hanky-panky if that’s what you need. I just want to feel close to you, Ryder.”

With a short nod, he kissed Sidney’s forehead and sighed. “I won’t lie. I would love nothing more than to press you into the mattress and run my tongue all over every inch of this creamy skin, but I think we should wait. I care about you, and I don’t want to rush into anything that you’ll regret later.”

“Can we still cuddle?”

Wrapping his arms more securely around Sidney’s waist, he pulled him closer and rested his cheek on the top of the smaller man’s head. “Yeah, baby, we can cuddle.”

* * * *

The ringing phone roused Sidney from a peaceful sleep. Reaching across a sleeping Ryder for the phone, he couldn’t help but smile. Yep, this is just where he wanted to be.

“Hello,” he said softly into the phone so as not to wake his companion.

“Sidney?”

“Yes. Who is this?”

“It’s Michael. Hey, is Ryder around? I’ve been trying to get him on his cell phone, but he’s not picking up.”

Sidney looked down at Ryder and smiled again. “Yeah, he’s right here. Hold on just a second.”

He shook Ryder’s shoulder just a little, but got no response. His detective looked so tired with the dark bags under his eyes.

Whispering his lips over Ryder’s cheek, he gave him another little shake. “Rise and shine.”

Ryder groaned and curled in closer to Sidney. As much as the action warmed his heart, he needed to get the man awake. He pressed his lips to Ryder’s and tickled his tongue across the seam. “Ryder, Michael’s on the phone.”

Ryder’s eyelids fluttered open, and he smiled. “Hey, baby.”

Sidney melted even further at the endearment. “Hey yourself. Good nap?”

“You have no idea.” Ryder smiled wickedly, pulling Sidney closer.

“Well, as much as I’d love to continue this, you have a phone call, Detective Ward.” He held the phone out. “Michael. He said he’s been trying to reach you on your cell.”

“Oh shit.” Ryder jerked upright and snatched the phone out of Sidney’s hand. “Talk to me.”

Sidney didn’t know if he should leave the room and give the detectives some privacy or not. Luckily, Ryder took the decision from him by reaching over and rubbing circles at the small of Sidney’s back.

Grinning, he cuddled in close, resting his head on Ryder’s muscled thigh. Those long fingers worked their way from his back to slip gently through his hair. He doubted Ryder even realized he did it. The thought made him smile.

“M’kay. I’ll be there in twenty.” Ryder sighed as he hung up the phone and looked down at Sidney. “I have to go into the station. I’m sorry.”

“What on earth are you sorry for? It’s your job.” Sidney glanced at the clock, realizing he’d slept for a full eight hours. He couldn’t

remember the last time he slept for so long without a sleeping aid. “Jump in the shower, and I’ll get you some breakfast.” He kissed Ryder’s cheek and hopped from the bed.

Ryder just chuckled as he climbed out of bed as well and met Sidney at the door. Pulling him close, he planted a kiss on his lips that left Sidney’s head reeling. “Now, that is a proper good morning kiss.” He chuckled lightly. “I’m not very hungry, but I would love some coffee.”

Sidney shook his head to clear the lusty haze from his brain. “Oh, no you don’t. You need to eat something. There is no telling when you’ll be home or have a chance to eat again. At least let me make you something to take with you.”

Ryder grinned and nodded even as he rolled his eyes. “Okay fine. I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

* * * *

Stepping under the hot spray of the shower, Ryder groaned. *Not another one.* When would boys stop going missing? When would they stop pulling bodies from the harbor? Shaking his head in disgust, he quickly showered and shaved, then hurried to the bedroom to dress.

As he pulled on his clothes and exited the room, he thought over his conversation with Sidney the night before. Sidney said he was falling in love. As much as Ryder wanted to believe him, he still worried Sidney was just confused and lonely. What would happen when Sidney came to his senses and realized it had all been just some kind of trauma-induced infatuation?

The thought stopped Ryder in his tracks halfway down the stairs. Perhaps he needed to reevaluate his own feelings. He felt protective of Sidney, wanted him to be happy and safe. He liked spending time with the man, and the thought of Sidney leaving caused his gut to tighten.

Why did everything have to be so complicated? Slowly descending the remainder of the stairs, he made his way to the kitchen. He stood in the doorway, watching Sidney hustle around the room, making a bacon sandwich and placing it in a small baggy.

The man moved so gracefully—everything done with purpose and poise. Ryder felt the *rightness* of watching Sidney in his kitchen. For so long it had been only him, Nana, and Frank. When Gavin walked out on him, he swore he would never again let any man become his entire world.

Watching Sidney pour coffee, he realized he had failed miserably. He swam in uncharted waters, desperately struggling to keep his head above the surface. In just a few weeks, Sidney had become, maybe not his everything, but damn close. Yes, he wanted to protect him, keep him safe, and make him happy. He wanted to wrap the little man in his arms and cocoon him from the evils of the world.

Ryder shuffled into the kitchen, right up behind Sidney, and curled his arms around the man's tiny waist. Burying his face in Sidney's silky hair, he breathed. He didn't know if he loved the man, but he could see it heading that way. Whatever he felt, it went much deeper than some misguided sense of duty.

Old wounds crept into the moment, worrying at Ryder's insecurities. Could he be what the man needed? He certainly hadn't been enough for Gavin. Six years together and all he had to show for it was a scattering of photographs in an old shoebox. Hell, he hadn't even been important enough for a personal good-bye. No, Gavin had just disappeared without word or explanation.

Leaning his head back and sighing, Sidney turned in his arms, giving him a dazzling smile. "As much as I'm enjoying this, you need to be on your way, Detective Ward." He winked like the little imp he was and pushed a thermos of coffee and the sandwich into Ryder's hands. "Call me?"

Ryder nodded, unable to form speech around the lump in his throat, and gave Sidney a brief but passionate kiss. “Stay inside and keep the doors locked.”

Sidney wrinkled his nose. “Okay, if that will make you feel better. I need to start looking for a job, though.”

He wanted to protest, but knew it would only lead to an argument. His sweet Sid was too stubborn for his own good. Not wanting to get into it until he had time to debate his point, Ryder let it go, kissed Sidney’s cheek, and hurried out of the kitchen.

Chapter Seven

Sidney clicked off the television with a grumble of frustration. Twelve hours since Ryder left, and he was bored out of his mind. He tried to clean earlier, but Claire just pushed him out of the way, reprimanding him the entire time.

“You are supposed to be resting. Besides, it’s my job to take care of you and Ryder. Why don’t you go take a nap?”

Sidney frowned as he stared at the blank television. Not hearing from Ryder all day caused his mood to sour, and he damn sure didn’t want a nap. He wanted to *do* something. He lunged up from the sofa with a frustrated grunt.

“Cl—uh, Nana!” He didn’t want another scolding for not calling the woman by her preferred name.

Claire bustled into the room and smiled. “Yes, dear?”

Sidney blushed. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to yell. Um, do you have a morning paper delivered?”

“Of course. It’s in the kitchen near the toaster.” Claire placed her hands on her narrow hips and cocked her head to the side. “Is there something in particular you’re looking for?”

“A job,” Sidney said simply. He needed something to do before he went batty. He never spent so much time just sitting around before. Not even as a child had he been so idle.

“Oh, well I think that’s a lovely idea.” Claire bustled from the room and came back seconds later with the classifieds section of the paper. “I don’t suppose you’ve talked to Ryder about this?”

“Uh, I mentioned it earlier.” Sidney took the paper, avoiding the woman’s gaze.

“Mm-hm. Don’t let him bully you. He’s a sweet boy, but he has a tendency to throw a fit when he doesn’t get his way.” Claire winked. “You don’t stand for that baloney.”

Sidney couldn’t stop his smile of gratitude. “Thanks, Nana. I promise I’ll put Ryder in his place if he messes with me.” He gave Claire his best tough guy glare.

She threw her head back and laughed loudly. “Oh, yes, very intimidating, dear.” Still chuckling, she sauntered out of the room.

Sidney flipped open the paper and scanned the job listings. He needed to find something within walking distance, which unfortunately narrowed his options greatly. Though his heart rate accelerated at the thought of working in a bar again, there wasn’t much else out there for a high school dropout. Besides, he couldn’t find better money anywhere, and he’d had plenty of jobs to compare.

A club just four blocks from Ryder’s house advertised for a bartender. Though a little fancier than the places Sidney had slung drinks before, he could do it if they gave him a chance.

Dialing the number, he took a deep breath and put a smile on his face. Although the person on the other end of the line wouldn’t be able to see him, he hoped it would be evident in his voice.

* * * *

Damn, what a brutal day! Ryder trudged through the door and fell to the sofa in an exhausted heap. He couldn’t begin to count the number of blocks walked or people questioned. One of the busiest neighborhoods in the entire city and no one had seen anything.

Fan-fucking-tastic!

“Nana! Sidney! Frank!” Where had everyone gone? Hell, he didn’t even know the time.

“What on earth are you hollering about, child?” Claire wagged a finger as she marched into the room. “It’s after ten, and time for old ladies to be in bed.”

“You aren’t old. And you obviously weren’t in bed.”

“Now, you watch your attitude young man.”

Ryder closed his eyes and sighed. “Sorry, Nana. It has been one hell of a day. I didn’t mean to be snappy with you.” Opening his eyes, he graced his grandmother with a smile that had always gotten him out of trouble as boy. “So, why are you awake?”

“Oh, well, I was just waiting up to see Sidney off.”

“Sidney?” Ryder shot up from the couch and grabbed Claire’s shoulders. “Nana, where is Sidney?”

Claire’s eyes widened briefly, before her brows drew together, and she frowned. “Didn’t he tell you?”

Ryder shook his head, barely containing the urge to shake the woman in front of him.

“Well, he called about a job, and I guess they’re shorthanded. They wanted him to start tonight. He will be leaving in a few minutes.”

“The hell he will.” Ryder groaned as he turned sharply and headed for the stairs. He was going to strangle Sidney when he got his hands on the man.

“Ryder, you stop right there!” Claire hurried over and placed herself between him and the staircase. “Sidney is a grown man, and if he wants to work, that is his choice. What exactly are you planning to do? Storm in there and lock him in the closet like some Neanderthal?”

“Sounds about right,” Ryder agreed. Hell, he’d hog-tie the guy if he had to. Placing his hands on either side of his grandmother’s face, he looked her in the eye. “It’s too dangerous for him to go out alone. We haven’t caught the men that did those things to him. It has leaked to the paper, and they know he’s still alive. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Claire’s eyes rounded, and her face paled. “Oh, no.” Taking a step back, she turned and waved a hand toward the stairs. “Go talk to him. I don’t think he understands.”

Ryder kissed her forehead and nodded. “You love him already, huh?”

She looked at him as though he were crazy. “Well, of course. You can’t look at the boy without loving him.”

Ryder chuckled as he hurried up the stairs.

* * * *

“Would you mind telling me just what the fuck you were thinking?” Ryder’s voice remained low, but it trembled with barely contained fury.

“That I needed a job,” Sidney answered snidely. Petty, maybe, but he was pissed. Ryder had no right to call and tell the manager of the club that he quit. Damn it, he hadn’t even *started* yet!

“Are you wearing makeup? Is that lipstick?” Ryder looked him up and down, his lips thinning into a white line. “And I’m pretty sure we could have found you a pair of jeans in your size. Or did you just roll around in blue paint? Where the hell did you get those?”

Sidney rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest. “Nana took me shopping earlier so I could get something to wear before I started tonight. It’s a freakin’ gay club, Ryder. So what? I get better tips if I look nice.”

“Nice? You look like a whore.”

Dropping his arms to his sides, he gaped at the man in front of him. “That’s a pretty dickhead thing to say.”

Ryder shoved a hand through his hair and groaned. “You just got out of the hospital two weeks ago. You are still weak, tired, and have wounds that need to heal. You are asking too much of your body, pushing yourself too hard.” His voice dropped lower, but it lost some of the ire.

“I know.” Sidney deflated, and his anger drained away. “I was just so bored, and I kept thinking about all the money I owe you.” His

lower lip trembled, but he refused to acknowledge it. He would not shed even one more tear.

“You don’t owe me anything, so you can stop that right now.” Ryder moved closer as he spoke. “We can find something for you to do, but you have to rest and heal before you can go back to work.” He opened his arms, and Sidney gladly went to him.

“You scared the hell out of me. If I had gotten here even five minutes later you might have been gone already. Don’t ever do that shit again.” He pushed Sidney back and tilted his chin up. “There’s something else we need to talk about.”

Sidney didn’t like the sound of Ryder’s voice. He sounded almost afraid. Swallowing past the burn in his throat, he nodded.

“The reason I had to go in this morning is because there’s been another missing persons report.” He eyed Sidney’s expression for a minute before he continued. “Also, you know it was leaked to the press that you are the sole survivor of this damn mess. Right?”

Sidney frowned but nodded again.

“Baby, whoever took you is not going to be happy that you lived. They are going to be doing everything they can to remedy that.”

Sidney began to tremble, and he lost the battle with his tear ducts. The thought that someone would still be after him had never crossed his mind.

Ryder hugged him closer, rocking him from side to side. Seemed he spent a lot of time doing that. Sidney was a wreck, but he’d worry about it later. Leaning his head against Ryder’s chest, he soaked up the offered comfort. “I’m sorry I’m so stupid.”

“Stop it. You are not stupid.” Ryder kissed the top of his head before pulling away. “Let’s get you in bed, baby. It’s been a long day.”

“Stay with me?”

Ryder looked at him for a long time. Searching for what, Sidney didn’t know. Finally, he smiled. “In that case, you better come with me. My bed is a lot bigger and lot better on this old back.”

“You are thirty-two, Ry, not a hundred and two. But I like the idea of sleeping in your bed.” He kissed the detective under the chin and stepped back to look up at him. “Do you really think I look like a whore?”

His eyes softened, and Ryder reached out to cup Sidney’s cheek, caressing the sensitive skin with his thumb. “No, baby. You were right. It was a dickhead thing to say. I was just scared and angry.” He sighed and the corners of his mouth twitched as if he had a secret. Then he kissed Sidney’s nose and pushed him toward the door with a smack to his ass. “I think you look like temptation with a pretty red bow.”

Chapter Eight

Ryder slapped at the nightstand, fumbling to find his cell phone. “Ward,” he answered groggily.

“Ry, they found one of the missing boys.” Michael sounded just as tired as Ryder felt.

“In the harbor.” They had yet to find one anywhere other than the harbor.

“Actually, no.”

Pushing himself into a sitting position, he rubbed soothing circles on Sidney’s back when the man began to stir. They’d been too exhausted to do more than sleep once they had fallen into bed. That suited Ryder fine. He still battled between what his heart and body wanted to be right, and what his brain yelled would only end in heartbreak.

“Who and where?” He didn’t know how to feel about the information, so he’d wait until he had the facts before forming an opinion.

“Kenneth Dean. They spotted him down at Bad Habits—that club Sid used to work at.”

Ryder’s blood ran cold. The information hit much too close to home for comfort. “Alive?”

“Yes. It doesn’t make any sense, Ry. He’s in much better shape than Sidney was when we found him, but it’s obvious he’d been beaten and starved. The manager said he came in looking for a job a little after eleven last night.”

Ryder flew out of the bed and began dressing at top speed. “Michael, I need you to get your ass over here. Make sure you aren’t followed.”

“Why? Ryder, what’s going on? What do you know?”

“Kenneth Dean didn’t match the profile. He had family, a wealthy family. He graduated high school and enrolled in college classes just before he went missing. He disappeared from one of the safest neighborhoods in the city. Something isn’t adding up, Michael. Why would this guy just let him go?”

“Fuck,” Michael spat. “You think he’s working with our guy?”

“I don’t know, but something smells fishy. Where is he now?”

“Uh, well”

“He’s gone, isn’t he?” The news didn’t surprise Ryder. This creep was toying with them, taunting them.

“Yeah, he is. The manager recognized him from the news and called the station. By the time officers arrived, he had vanished.”

“Are we sure it was Kenneth Dean?”

“Yeah, we’re sure. We have video surveillance from the manager. It’s definitely him.”

“Okay, get over here, and I’ll fill you in on the rest. Our guy just stepped up his game. I’m starting to think he’s not just picking these men at random. There has to be a connection, and Kenneth Dean might just be it.”

“On my way. How’s Sid doing?”

Ryder smiled at the concern in his partner’s voice. It really was easy to love Sidney. “You can ask him yourself when you get here. Now hurry.” He flipped the phone shut and sat on the edge of the bed.

Two o’clock in the morning. Though they had slept for a little less than four hours, Ryder needed Sidney to meet Michael with him. If correct in his assumption, and Kenneth Dean was indeed the connection they had been looking for, perhaps Sidney could identify him.

Maybe they should think about relocating until they had this creep in custody. He couldn't let anything happen to Sidney. Plus, he had his Nana to think of. He would die if anything happened to either of them.

He didn't know how long he sat there watching Sidney sleep. He shot up and hustled over to the window when Frank's loud bark signaled the arrival of a visitor. Peeking through the curtains, he sighed in relief when he recognized Michael's personal pickup parked by the curb.

"Frank! Enough," Ryder called as he made his way down the stairs to let his partner in the door.

Frank met him at the foot of the stairs, tail wagging, and tongue lolling. "Good boy." He loved that silly mutt like a child. "It's just Michael. Now, go lay down."

Frank barked softly and trotted down the hall toward Claire's room. Ryder had to admit it made him feel better knowing the big Great Dane would take care of his grandmother. Frank was loyal and protective, and he doubted many were stupid enough to cross him.

He eased the door open just as Michael bounded up the steps. "Frank," he said by way of explanation when Michael quirked an eyebrow at him.

Michael laughed quietly and shook his head. After relocking the door, Ryder gestured his partner toward the kitchen. "Start a pot of coffee while I go wake up Sidney."

Michael yawned and nodded. "I brought some photographs of our missing boys. Maybe Sidney can give us something."

Ryder shrugged but didn't respond. He hurried up the stairs to his room and flipped the light on. "Sidney, wake up."

Pulling a pillow over his head, Sidney groaned. "What the hell, Ry? Go back to bed and leave me alone."

Ryder bit his lip to keep from laughing. Damn, the man sounded cute as hell, and he looked so right sleeping in Ryder's bed. He'd do anything to keep him there.

Pushing those thoughts aside, he made his way to the mattress and sat down heavily, bouncing several times. “Michael is in the kitchen, and we need to talk.”

“Are you running away to elope with him and have a bunch of little detective babies?”

Sidney sounded so serious, Ryder couldn’t hold back his laughter any longer. “Nope. Michael is definitely *not* my type.”

“Then, I don’t care. Go play with your friend and let me sleep.”

Falling back on the bed, he rested his head on Sidney’s hip as he chuckled. Once he felt he had himself under control, he turned over and shook Sidney’s leg. “Come on, baby. It’s about the case, and we need your help.”

Sidney turned until he peeked out from under the pillow. “My help?”

“Please?” He tried for the doe-eyed look the man always used to dupe him.

Rolling his eyes, Sidney grunted. “Let me get dressed, and I’ll be down in a minute.” He glanced at the clock and groaned. “Really, Ry? Three-thirty in the morning? Really?”

“Such is the life of those sworn to serve and protect.”

“Ugh! You are way too perky for this early in the morning.” He climbed out of bed and stumbled toward the door. “I’ll be down in five minutes. Please try to curb the happiness before I get there.”

Ryder pressed his lips together and tried not to smile. He doubted it would earn him any brownie points. God, he couldn’t remember the last time he had smiled or laughed so much. Normally, instead of trying to contain his humor, he was forcing himself not to be a morose bastard.

Happy felt damn good.

* * * *

Sidney placed a hand over his mouth to cover yet another yawn, and wondered how Ryder did it. He felt exhausted. Looking over the man sitting next to him, he decided Ryder looked a hell of a lot better at this unholy hour than he did.

“Sid, I’m going to show you some pictures.” Michael interrupted his contemplation of Ryder. “I want you to look at them and tell us if you recognize any of these men.”

Sidney yawned again and nodded. Why couldn’t this wait until a decent hour in the morning? Preferably, sometime around noon.

He studied the first picture Michael handed to him. Handsome, young, dark hair, but Sidney didn’t recognize him. Shaking his head, he passed the photo back to the detective.

Ryder rose from his chair beside him and leaned over to whisper in Sidney’s ear, “You want some coffee, baby?”

“Please.” Coffee sounded like heaven.

“Okay. Just do your best.” Ryder kissed the top of his head and wandered over to the coffeepot.

Refocusing on Michael, he found the man staring at him with a shocked expression. He quickly schooled his features, though, and passed him another photograph.

The guy looked much like the other one, and Sidney didn’t recognize him either. “Nope. Sorry, I’ve never seen him before.”

Michael didn’t seem deterred. He just smiled as he took the picture back and handed him another one.

Sidney paused and studied the photo intently. Though the hair was the wrong color and the guy looked a little thinner in the photo, he definitely knew him. “This one.” He spoke with conviction.

Michael smiled and nodded as if he’d been expecting the answer. “How do you know him?”

“He came into the bar I used to work at every Friday night. I don’t know his name, but I remember he never drank anything but water. He came in and sat at the end of the stage, drank his water, watched the dancers, and left.” Sidney shrugged. “I’ve seen stranger.”

“Was he ever with anyone?” Ryder asked as he set a cup of steaming coffee in front of Sidney.

“No, he was always alone.” He tilted his head to the side as he continued to study the photo. “He looked different then.”

“Different how?” Michael leaned forward in his seat, his elbows resting on the table.

“His hair was blond then, a little shorter, and he definitely wasn’t so pale. He wasn’t quite so skinny then either.”

“Excellent!” Ryder beamed at him and leaned over to kiss his lips. “You did a great job, baby. Why don’t you go on back to bed? I’ll be up in a little bit. I just have to wrap some things up with Michael first.”

Though Sidney wanted to listen in, he could barely hold his eyes open. Bed sounded like the best idea he’d heard all day.

Leaving his coffee untouched, he rose from his seat and kissed Ryder’s cheek before disappearing out of the kitchen.

* * * *

“You move fast.” Michael smirked once Sidney had left the kitchen.

“Nothing is going on, so drop it.” Ryder refused to get into his personal life with the man.

“Yeah, that looked like nothing.”

“I haven’t slept with him, except for the extreme literal sense of the word, if that’s what you’re asking. I like him a lot, yes, but nothing has happened. Drop it.”

Michael continued to smirk, but being a smart man, said nothing.

“Okay, so we know that Kenneth Dean was hanging around the bar before Sidney’s kidnapping.” Ryder thought out loud as he tried to work through the puzzle in his brain.

“We need to go back to the beginning. Show this photo around where our missing boys worked, lived, hung out, and anywhere someone might recognize Dean.”

Ryder nodded his agreement. They needed to find the connection. “We also need to question his family again. His parents died a few years ago, leaving him in the care of his grandfather. We need to get a background on any other immediate family members as well.”

Michael nodded his agreement. “Do you think you’re safe here?”

“I’m not sure,” Ryder said honestly.

“I don’t know, either, but I think you guys need to plan on staying at my place until we catch this guy.”

Stopping midstride, he turned to his partner and shook his head. “It’s too risky. If they can find me, they can find you as well. I think we’re okay for now, but we’ll talk to the Chief tomorrow about setting up a secure location.”

“And if we move them, what about you?”

“I’ll stay here until you can get Sid and Nana to the safe house. If they think he’s with me, then hopefully they won’t be watching you.”

Michael nodded. “Makes sense. I’ll take care of them.”

“I know you will.” He glared at his partner and pointed a finger in his face. “No flirting with my grandmother, dickhead.”

* * * *

“That was really nice. Thank you, Ryder.” Sidney stood beside him on the front porch, as Ryder dug around in his pocket for the keys.

“Anytime, baby.” Though, he’d been nervous, uptight, and paranoid the entire meal—even carrying his service revolver in the holster under his jacket—everything had gone smoothly. Sidney really enjoyed the little Japanese steakhouse he’d picked, smiling the entire night. He’d have to buy his grandmother something nice for suggesting it.

Pushing open the door, he stepped inside and flipped the lights on.

“What the hell happened here?” Sidney slid past him, his mouth hanging open as he surveyed the remains of what looked like Armageddon. Broken glass, smashed furniture, ripped cushions—the place was completely demolished.

“Let’s go.” Ryder grabbed Sidney around the elbow and tugged. He’d be mad later. Right now, he needed to get them the hell out of there.

“Shouldn’t we call someone?” Sidney pulled his arm free and travelled further into the wreckage. “Oh, God, where’s Nana?” He took off like a bullet, racing toward the kitchen, yelling for the woman.

“Sidney, stop!” Ryder hurdled the overturned coffee table and sprinted after him. The little man better start praying because Ryder was going to kill him.

Sidney flew back into the living room, colliding with Ryder hard enough to knock him backward several steps. “Where is Nana?” His eyes darted around the room frantically.

“She took Frank to movie night in the park. Now calm down. We have to get out of here.” Ryder pulled him toward the front door, practically dragging him as he held a firm grip on his wrist.

Headlights flashed through the thin curtains covering the windows, and tires screeched near the curb. Wrapping his arms around Sidney’s waist, Ryder tackled him to the debris-strewn floor and landed on top of him. “Stay down!”

The sound of automatic gunfire, breaking glass, and splintering wood echoed throughout the house. Sidney screamed, throwing his hands over his ears, and Ryder curled around him, covering his body and shielding him.

Everything stopped, and the silence felt almost deafening. Ryder lifted his head, straining to hear anything that sounded suspicious. He didn’t have to wait long. Heavy footsteps creaked on the front steps,

slowly ascending toward the still open door. He rolled off Sidney and shoved him away roughly.

“Hide,” he hissed as quietly as possible.

Sidney shook his head, his eyes wide with terror. “Come with me.”

Ryder pulled his handgun from its holster, climbed to his feet, and assumed his shooting stance. “There’s no time. Get the fuck out and hide!”

Nodding once, Sidney jumped to his feet and ran toward the kitchen. Ryder was proud of him for not running up the stairs like some bimbo in a cheap horror flick.

Then several things happened at once. Gunfire sounded from the front door, the back door burst open, Sidney screamed, and sirens wailed in the distance. “Stop! Police!” Ryder trained his gun on the man that burst through the front doorway.

His mouth dropped open as he stared into the eyes of Kenneth Dean. Not much bigger than Sidney, the man looked like a little boy with a toy gun.

A bullet whizzed past Ryder’s ear from behind, forcing a curse from his lips as he dove behind the sofa to seek refuge. Sidney screamed again and sounds of a struggle drew Ryder’s attention to the other room. He turned just in time to see Sidney bite into the fleshy meat of his attacker’s forearm. The act earned him a vicious backhand to the face.

“Grab him and go!” Dean shouted. Then running footsteps sounded across the boards of the front porch and down the steps.

Ryder crawled to the end of the sofa and peered around it, looking for Dean, but the room appeared to be empty. Cautiously, he gained his feet, his finger on the trigger of his revolver, and scanned the room.

Empty.

Turning his attention to the scuffle in the kitchen, he aimed his gun, but couldn't fire. They were too close together, and he couldn't risk hitting Sidney. "Freeze!" he yelled.

No one paid any attention to him.

Sirens wailed from the end of the street, growing louder, but still too far away. The assailant whirled to face Ryder, holding Sidney in front of him with his arm around his throat. Sidney stared at Ryder with wide eyes, clawing frantically at the arm cutting off his air supply.

"Let him go." Ryder took a step toward the kitchen.

The guy's hand shot out, lightning quick, and another report rang through the kitchen. Ryder dropped to the floor, rolling toward the side of the doorway. The shot went wide, splintering the wood of the doorframe on the opposite side of him.

Sidney screamed again, and Ryder glanced around the corner and swore. The lunatic hurried across the back lawn, pulling Sidney by his hair, the little man kicking, screaming, and putting up one hell of a fight.

Jumping to his feet, Ryder took off in pursuit.

He watched them slip through the back gate and into the alley. A moment later, an engine revved and tires screeched against the asphalt. By the time Ryder reached the alleyway, all he could see were taillights. Watching the little red dots disappear to the left, he sprinted around the house and jumped into his SUV.

He peeled out of the drive and sped down the street, passing two patrol cars on his way. Thank God for nosey neighbors. Spotting a dark van blowing through the intersection two streets ahead of him, he pushed the gas, increasing his speed and skidding around the corner. "Hold on, baby. I'm coming."

The van swerved recklessly through traffic and barreled past red lights. "Come on, come on." Ryder rocked in his seat, pushing harder on the gas pedal.

Chapter Nine

Sidney tumbled and rolled in the cargo hold as the van rocketed around another turn. “Let me out!” He crawled forward and beat against the cage separating him from the cab. “Let me the hell out of here!”

“Shut up, whore of Satan!” The driver pounded his fist against the screen, the van shaking violently as he pulled hard on the wheel.

Sidney stumbled sideways, slamming into the wall of the vehicle. Scrambling toward the double doors at the rear, he gripped the handle and yanked forcefully. The latch disengaged, but the doors remained closed. Growling in frustration, he sat on the floor, reclined back, and kicked with all his strength.

The doors banged open, just as the van swerved again. Sidney struggled for a handhold to keep from falling from the speeding vehicle. Headlights flared and a horn blared as a big SUV bore down on them. He didn’t have to see inside to know who sat behind the wheel.

“Ryder.”

With a move straight from some B-rate action movie, Ryder pulled up beside the van and rolled down the window. “Jump!”

“Are you crazy? I can’t jump!” Sidney shook his head vehemently. Ryder needed to find a new star for this low budget film. Scared out of his mind, and certainly not a stuntman, no way could he jump from a moving vehicle.

Ryder stared at him for a second before nodding. “Hold on!” He floored the accelerator, pulling even with the runaway van.

Oh, crap!

Sidney searched for something to grab onto, but came up empty. Before he could find anything, the van braked hard sending him flipping butt over head to crash into the metal cage barrier. He flopped to his back with a groan, rolling toward the rear when the vehicle lurched forward again.

Gaining his feet, he staggered toward the open doors. The yellow lines whizzed by on the street below as he clutched at the frame. “Oh, crap, oh crap, oh crap!”

Closing his eyes, he sent a silent prayer skyward...and jumped.

He hit the pavement, his knees crumpling, and rolled. The cement curb made a nice stopping bumper.

Sounds of screaming tires, a loud crash, and men yelling reached his ears where he sprawled on the side of the street. Lights flashed behind his closed eyelids, and footsteps pounded on the road, rushing toward him. Ryder fell to his knees, bending over Sidney and touching him everywhere.

“Shit. Are you okay? Do you hurt anywhere? Is anything broken? Sidney! Talk to me!”

“I would if you’d shut up long enough to let me talk.” Sidney rolled to his back with a pathetic moan. “I’m fine. I don’t think anything is broken.”

“I’m taking you to the hospital.”

“No. Ry, I’m fine. No more hospitals.” Sidney climbed to his feet, wincing at the throbbing in his protesting muscles. “Did you get him?”

“Yeah, we got him.” Ryder pulled him close and kissed him passionately, right there in the street. “Don’t ever scare me like that again,” he mumbled against Sidney’s lips.

“Well, I didn’t exactly plan to get kidnapped or bail out of a creeper van.”

“I don’t care. Never do it again.”

“You’re the one that told me to jump!”

“Never again.” The words came out distorted around Ryder’s growl.

Sidney rolled his eyes and kissed his detective once more. “I promise.”

Steam churned from the crumpled radiator of the van where it rested on the sidewalk, the front end bent like an accordion after bouncing off of the streetlamp. Blue and red flashing lights surrounded it as officers pulled the driver from the wreckage and onto the ground, pinning him roughly.

Sidney watched with a kind of strange fascination. When he could finally pull his eyes away, he turned to Ryder and smiled. He fought. He hadn’t simply rolled over and played the damsel in distress. He fought back.

“Take me home, Detective.”

Ryder shook his head. “Michael is picking up Nana and Frank, and you’re all going to Michael’s cabin down by the river.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “I have to do my job, but you’ll have two officers with you, and I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Sidney didn’t like it, but he didn’t really have a choice. Nodding slowly, he took Ryder’s hand and squeezed. “Be careful and hurry back.”

* * * *

Ryder walked into the brightly lit interrogation room with a chip on his shoulder. It wouldn’t be hard to play good-cop-bad-cop with this asshole.

Leonard Ashbury, age thirty-seven, had racked up quite the rap sheet. Armed burglary, grand theft auto, and possession of an illegal substance with the intent to distribute, were just a few of his acquired skills. Now, they could add kidnapping, reckless driving, evading arrest, and assault with a deadly weapon.

“Hello, Leo,” Ryder sneered.

Leonard remained silent, staring down at his fisted hands on the table.

“Is there anything I can get you?” Michael asked, playing the good cop.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” Leonard mumbled.

“You broke into a house, kidnapped a man, shot at a police officer, and took out a city block evading arrest. I think that qualifies as *wrong*.” Ryder’s patience ran thin as he barked at the man. He wanted answers, and he wanted them right damn now.

“God told me to take him.”

“Excuse me?” Michael’s eyebrows disappeared into his hairline. “God told you to kidnap Sidney Kessler?”

“He’s a whore and an abomination against God. He wanted him to suffer.”

Ryder’s hands fisted at his sides, itching to slam into the bastard’s face.

“Why did He want him to suffer?” Michael asked quietly.

“God told me he was evil. He practices black magic and partakes in sins of the flesh with another *man*!”

“So, God told you to abduct and torture Mr. Kessler because he’s gay?” Ryder couldn’t contain his snort of derision.

“Yes,” Leo said firmly. “I was sent on a holy mission to eradicate the evil that dwelled inside that house. You can’t hold me here! It was an edict from God!”

Ryder rolled his eyes. This guy had dropped acid one too many times. “And how did God speak to you?”

“He sent one of his apostles to me in the night.”

Before Ryder could open his mouth to say something scathing, Michael cut him off. “Wow, a real apostle, huh? I’ve never seen one before. Can you tell me what this apostle looked like? Did he have a name?”

Leonard seemed to brighten at that. “He was a very large black man, and he dressed pretty nice, I guess. He said his name was Mark or Luke, or something like that.”

“And the man that came in the front door, and told you to take Mr. Kessler and leave? Was that another apostle?” Ryder still couldn’t believe Kenneth Dean had just waltzed right into his house and then disappeared without a trace.

“He is my guardian,” Leonard said without a trace of sarcasm. “He guides and protects me.”

“Were you supposed to tell him once the job was done? Maybe deliver Mr. Kessler to him?” Michael reclined in his chair, the picture of ease.

Leonard clammed up. His eyes darted around the room nervously, lingering on the exit. “I’m not answering any more questions until I talk to my lawyer.”

Ryder choked back a growl. “Where were you supposed to meet him?”

“I want to talk to my lawyer!” Leonard yelled desperately.

“I thought this was an edict from God? Why would you need a lawyer?”

“I want a fucking lawyer!”

Michael rose from his chair and nodded. “By all means, Ry, get the man a lawyer.” He motioned Ryder to follow him out of the small room. “We’re not going to get anymore from him right now.”

“We didn’t get shit from him. A big black man named Mark or Luke. What are we supposed to do with that?”

“Well, we know Kenneth Dean is involved.”

Ryder just growled. With no way to track the man down it didn’t do them a fat lot of good.

Michael shook his head slowly. “Go check on your family, Ry. Mr. Ashbury isn’t leaving any time soon.”

* * * *

Ryder stepped through the front door of the cabin after speaking with the officers out front, shut the door quietly, and checked the deadbolt twice. After all the precautions he'd taken to get there, he wouldn't allow something as simple as a lock to put the people he loved in danger.

The rational part of his brain argued that he shouldn't be there at all, and his very presence risked the people in the house. The other part of his brain, and a large part of his heart, couldn't be restrained.

"Hey, anyone home?" Ryder yelled to announce his presence

Soft, quick footsteps and a quick blur of auburn hair were Ryder's only warning. Sidney flew around the corner, throwing himself into Ryder's arms. The impact knocked the breath from him, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

It had only been a few hours since he'd seen Sidney, yet it felt like forever. Wrapping the man up tightly in his arms, Ryder hugged him, breathing in his clean, freshly showered scent. How did he think he'd ever be able to walk away from this?

"I was worried about you," Sidney breathed against his neck.

Ryder shivered, running one hand down Sidney's back to palm his hip and drag him closer. Twining his other hand through those long waves, he tilted Sidney's head back. "You worry too much." Then he lifted Sidney into his arms and crushed their mouths together in a hungry kiss.

With a happy little whimper that sent electricity racing down his spine, Sidney opened, and their tongues met, twined, exploring and tasting. Ryder slanted his mouth to take the kiss deeper, dominating the small man in his arms.

Damn, Sidney tasted good. Ryder doubted he'd ever get enough.

Breaking away and gasping for air, Sidney wiggled down his body to the floor, grabbed Ryder's shirt, and started pulling him from the room. "Need you, Ryder."

He hesitated for less than a heartbeat before happily following his soon-to-be lover. Though he still had reservations about being intimate with Sidney, he couldn't deny his attraction any longer. His body demanded that he claim the man leading him, and Ryder was powerless to stop the seduction.

Maybe he'd pay for it in the end. Maybe Sidney would break his heart and leave him more miserable than he'd been before the man came along. Maybe, but it would be a hell of a ride along the way. No matter the outcome, Ryder wouldn't waste a single day he had Sidney in his arms.

They tripped and stumbled, pausing to steal more kisses as they slowly made their way to Sidney's new temporary bedroom. So lost in the feel of Sidney's mouth on his, the warmth of his body, the satiny skin beneath his fingertips, it took a minute for Ryder to notice the quiet of the house.

"Where's Nana?"

"Giving us some privacy," Sidney answered distractedly as he mouthed the skin at Ryder's collarbone.

Conversation lost as his brain short-circuited, Ryder reveled in the feel of Sidney's soft lips on his skin. Fire leapt through his body, starting as smoldering embers, but quickly erupting into a raging wildfire that had him hard enough to cut glass in no time. His sac tightened almost painfully, his balls tingling, begging to be touched and fondled.

"I don't have a lot of experience." Sidney whispered the words against Ryder's ear, then his tongue shot out, licking a wet path along the shell. "You'll have to tell me how to make you feel good."

Ryder could only nod. The sensations zinging through his body left him light-headed. They needed to move this little reunion to a flat surface before someone ended up hurt.

Sidney's hands slipped under his sweater, pressing flat against the skin on Ryder's stomach. "I need to feel you, Ry. I need to touch you

and taste you. I may not be very good this first time, but I'll get better."

Stumbling into the bedroom, Ryder whipped his shirt over his head and tossed it across the room. Working feverishly to disrobe, his eyes never left the petite, almost willowy, man in front of him. "Let me see you."

Sidney smiled as he untied the belt to his robe, slowly parted the sides, and let it slip from his shoulders to pool around his ankles.

Ryder almost swallowed his tongue. Gloriously bare, naked as the day he was born, Sidney had to be the most gorgeous thing he'd ever seen. "Perfect." His breathing sped as he gripped Sidney's hips, tugging him closer and plundering the depths of his mouth.

The man went wild, fisting his hands in Ryder's hair and practically climbing his body. Sidney locked his ankles around Ryder's hips, rocking his hard, naked prick against Ryder's stomach.

Ryder couldn't touch enough of him. One arm wrapped securely around his lover, his other hand mapped the contours of Sidney's body, learning every dip and valley, exploring the soft curves and lean muscle.

Still, he needed more. Jerking away, gulping in oxygen, he turned sharply and dropped Sidney to the mattress. "In the middle."

Sidney immediately complied, wiggling into position, spread out like some mystical water nymph. "Get naked." His eyes held a glazed look, and he licked his lips as he palmed his leaking shaft.

Quickly stripping the remainder of his clothing, he hurried to join Sidney on the bed. Yeah, he acted like an overeager teenage boy, but he'd been fantasizing about this moment for weeks.

Sidney didn't seem to mind. He wrapped his arms around Ryder's neck, pulling him into another hungry kiss.

Ryder let his hands roam over Sidney's soft skin. He'd gained a little more weight since his release from the hospital, and it had gone to all of the right places.

Pulling away from Sidney's mouth, he kissed a wet trail down his neck and across his collarbone, then down his chest to swirl his tongue around one copper-colored nipple. Sucking it into his mouth, he bit and licked, smiling as it pebbled for him.

Sidney moaned loudly, his head falling back against the pillows. Completely wanton, he looked absolutely gorgeous in his desire.

Ryder gave special attention to each nickel-sized bud before moving on, gliding his tongue down Sidney's flat stomach and lapping around his belly button.

Long fingers knotted in Ryder's hair again as Sidney arched up into his touch. "Please, Ry. Oh, god, touch me, please."

Grinning against Sidney's belly, running one hand up his inner thigh, Ryder cupped his lightly furred sac.

"Here? Do you want me to touch you here?" He breathed warm air over the engorged crown of Sidney's prick. "Tell me, baby. Tell me what you want."

"Yes," Sidney cried. "There, touch me there."

Ryder ran the back of his knuckles up Sidney's pulsing shaft and teased the weeping slit with his tongue. "Like this?"

"More." Sidney's breathless plea was the sweetest sound Ryder had ever heard. He'd never had a lover so responsive. His very touch seemed to ignite the flames inside his man and made Ryder feel invincible.

He lapped up the clear bead of pre-cum, inwardly moaning at the salty flavor, then licked a slow circle around the head. "Like this?"

His body shuddering and bucking, Sidney jerked on his hair and growled. "Please, Ryder, stop teasing!"

Ryder moved between Sidney's spread thighs, parted his rounded cheeks, and just stared, completely enraptured with the tight, pink rosette. Leaning in, inhaling the musky scent, he swiped his tongue over Sidney's clenching hole. Nothing could have prepared him for the taste that exploded over his tongue. A clawing hunger built inside

him until he felt he'd implode if he couldn't have more of the delicious man writhing beneath him.

He dove in like a starving man, licking and sucking, probing Sidney's opening with his tongue over and over. More. Damn, he needed more.

Gripping the base of Sidney's cock and flattening his tongue, he licked a long path from his lover's hole up to the tip of his shaft and sucked the swollen head into his mouth. Sidney cried out, rocking his hips, pushing into Ryder's mouth as his breathing came in panting sobs.

Bobbing his head faster, taking the hard flesh to the back of his throat, Ryder walked his fingers up Sidney's trembling body and tapped at his parted lips. Sidney's fingers wrapped around his wrist tightly, and he sucked Ryder's fingers into his warm, moist mouth, moaning as he sucked and laved them.

The sight, the feel of Sidney's slippery tongue over his digits, drew a soft moan from Ryder's own mouth. Once good and wet, he pulled his fingers from his lover's mouth and guided them to Sidney's entrance, caressing the tight muscles, but never penetrating.

Sidney's body jerked and tensed, his cries grew louder, and a fine sheen of sweat beaded across his flushed skin.

With renewed vigor, Ryder set to work, licking and sucking, flicking his tongue at the dripping slit before diving down to swallow around the engorged helmet in his mouth. At Sidney's next moan, Ryder slowly glided one shaking finger into the man's eager entrance, pumping slowly as he worked the cock in his mouth.

"Ryder!" Sidney's shoulders came up off the mattress and his slick pole twitched against Ryder's tongue.

Maneuvering to his knees, Ryder stared into his lover's eyes, adding a second finger to his ass and stroking his spit-slicked shaft. "Come for me, baby."

"Yes. Close, so close. Please, Ryder!"

On the next inward glide, Ryder curled his fingers, brushing against the smooth walnut-size gland. “Come on, baby. Come for me. I want you to come.”

The naughty words, spoken without thought, combined with the stimulus to his prostate, seemed to be what Sidney needed to push him over the edge. Screaming, his body going ramrod straight, his inner walls clamped down on Ryder’s fingers and creamy ropes of sticky cum bathed Ryder’s hand.

Continuing to saw his fingers in and out of Sidney’s convulsing hole, Ryder milked his climax, his own dick in danger of exploding. He wanted to be inside his sweet lover, and he wanted it right fucking now!

Dipping his fingers in the pearly spunk on his lover’s stomach, he moved his fingers to Sidney’s mouth, moaning deep from his chest when Sidney sucked them right in. The sight erotic as hell, the feel of a slippery tongue sliding over his fingers, had Ryder inwardly begging for more. “You taste good, huh?”

Sidney released his fingers with a naughty slurp and grinned wickedly. “I bet you taste better.”

Chapter Ten

Sidney felt more relaxed and content than he could ever remember. Ryder was an amazing lover. So giving, never asking for anything in return, but Sidney wanted to give back the same pleasure he had just received. Ryder deserved the world, and Sidney intended to take him around it. “Tell me what to do. Tell me what you want.”

“I want in. Let me in, baby.” Ryder leaned over, pressing their damp chests together, and slid his tongue along Sidney’s bottom lip before sucking it into his mouth and nibbling on it.

Hell fucking yes! He cupped the back of Ryder’s head with one hand as he used the other to explore the sleek lines and rippling contours of his lover’s hard body. Ryder’s fingers began pumping in and out of his hungry hole again, driving Sidney out of his mind.

He continued his inexpert seduction, enjoying the feel of Ryder’s slick skin beneath his palm. The flat expanse of Ryder’s stomach, the hard muscle of his thighs, the shallow valley just above his perfect ass—every inch of him begged for exploration.

“Please, Ry. Fuck me. I want to feel you inside me.”

Ryder groaned against Sidney’s throat, shaking his head. “No lube. I won’t take you without slick.” He sat up on his knees, gripping his straining erection, the look on his face one of complete frustration and need.

Sidney could definitely see why they needed something to ease the way. Ryder’s cock jutted proudly from his groin, long, thick, and gorgeous. Pre-cum oozed from the slit, coating the tip, making it glisten in the soft light of the lamp.

Maybe it had to do with his inexperience, but Ryder's prick looked enormous. Sidney doubted he could even wrap his fingers completely around the thick member. The realization that the beautiful cock belonged to him, begged for him, made Sidney's head swim.

Slipping his hand beneath the pillow, he produced a condom and a small bottle of lube. "Gifts from your grandmother."

Ryder snatched the supplies from his hand so quickly, Sidney couldn't help but chuckle. The action caused his inner muscles to clench, pulling Ryder's fingers deeper into his ass, and his light chuckle turned to a breathless moan. "Hurry."

"I'm trying." Ryder growled, ripping open the condom wrapper with his teeth, then hurriedly sliding the latex down his shaft. His fingers eased from Sidney's body, and he popped the cap on the lube, drizzling the slippery oil over his jumping cock.

Sidney watched him stroke the monster between his thighs, coating it, as three slick fingers dove back into Sidney's hole, twisting, pumping and scissoring.

"Enough! Fuck me!"

Seemingly eager to please, Ryder removed his fingers again, lined up the blunt head of his prick, and pushed in slowly. Sidney's eyes widened at the feeling of fullness, and the bite of pain caused his breath to rush out in a hiss. Holy shit! He'd never taken anyone this big before.

Breathing deeply, trying to work his way through the pain, he watched his lover quaking with the effort to move slowly as he continued to feed his cock to Sidney's ass. Soon, Ryder's thighs brushed against him, and they both stilled, each panting and shuddering.

"Damn, you're fucking tight, baby. I need to move. Please, can I move?"

Reaching up to smooth his knuckles over Ryder's cheek, Sidney smiled and dipped his chin. "Make love to me."

Ryder's entire being softened toward him, and he leaned over once more, bracing his hands on either side of Sidney's head, and pressed their foreheads together. Closing his eyes, his breath stuttering across Sidney's face, he retreated until only the flared crown remained, then pushed in again.

Slow and deliberate, eager but gentle, Sidney felt the emotions his lover poured into every movement. The burn dissipated, the fullness became something he craved, and he bowed his back, arching into his detective, moving with him in the ageless dance.

Ryder moved away, just far enough to look into Sidney's eyes, his gaze never wavering. In and out, back and forth, the pressure built, the flames erupted, and the air sizzled between them. "Harder, Ry. I won't break."

Taking his words to heart, Ryder began thrusting harder, faster, his movements jerky and wild. "Yes! More, more, Ry!"

"Hold on, baby." Sidney scrambled for purchase on Ryder's broad shoulders as the man fell into abandon, setting a punishing pace, driving into Sidney's body with primal desire.

"Close. I want you to come for me. Can you come for me, baby?"

Sidney nodded rapidly, reaching between their undulating bodies to grip his throbbing cock and stroked quickly, almost roughly. Ryder's arm slipped under his hips, tilting him and changing the angle, nailing Sidney's sweet spot on every thrust.

"Oh, shit...gonna...Ryder!" His orgasm rocketed through him, exploding from his cock to fill the space between them.

"So gorgeous," Ryder whispered before his eyes closed, the chords in his neck tightened, and he stilled, growling his release.

It was the most perfect compliment Sidney had ever received.

Ryder's head dropped forward, and Sidney stared up into those beautiful blue eyes he adored. His heart longed to say the words on the tip of his tongue, to pour every ounce of love and devotion into articulation. His lips parted, and he took the breath needed to speak, but a knock at the door interrupted him.

“Ry, I’m sorry, but we’ve got a problem.” Michael’s voice sounded a little strained.

“Stay here, baby.” Ryder kissed his forehead, reached down to hold the condom in place, and gently slipped from Sidney’s body. Disposing of the condom, he quickly swiped the sheet over his groin before wrapping it around his waist, and covering Sidney with the blanket.

Marching to the door, he threw it open and cocked his head at his partner. “This had better be good.”

“Gavin is missing.”

As if perfectly choreographed with Michael’s announcement, Ryder’s cell phone rang. He snatched it up, his hands trembling when Gavin’s name appeared on the caller ID.

“Ward.”

“Ryder? Oh, god, Ryder help me!”

“Gavin?”

“They’re going to kill me! It’s so cold here. Oh, Ryder you have to help me. Please. Oh my—”

“Gavin!”

“If you want to see Mr. Hart alive again, you’ll give me Sidney Kessler.” The rough voice coming over the line made the hair on Ryder’s neck stand on end. Then the line went dead.

* * * *

Ryder flew around the room, an instant whirlwind of activity, hastily throwing on his clothes. “I knew something like this would happen.”

Sidney just stared at him in shock. Who the hell was Gavin?

“Ry?”

Ryder completely ignored him. He pulled on his ugly boots, mumbling to himself the entire time. With his shoes laced, he turned to Sidney and pointed a finger in his face.

“You!”

Sidney jumped at the vehemence in his lover’s voice. “Me? What did I do?”

“Nothing, and that’s exactly what you’re going to continue to do. I have to go to the station, and you are not to leave the house. In fact, don’t even leave this fucking room. Do you understand me?”

“Ry, calm down.” Michael spoke quietly from the doorway.

“Shut up!” he roared at his partner. “Get out! I will meet you downstairs in minute.”

Michael held up his hands in surrender and backed out of the room.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Who is Gavin? Why are you acting like a complete psycho?” Sidney untangled himself from the sheet and stomped up to his detective. “Answer me, damn it!”

Ryder didn’t say a word. He stared into Sidney’s eyes with such intensity that he felt the urge to look away. Reaching up slowly, he cupped Ryder’s face, caressing the bristly skin. “Talk to me, Ry.”

Instead of answering, Ryder grabbed Sidney by the back of the head and crushed their mouths together in a kiss that bordered on desperate. It scared the hell out of him.

Jerking away and gasping for breath, he stared at his lover with wide, fearful eyes. “Tell me what’s going on. Now, Ryder Ward!”

“Do not leave this room,” Ryder repeated. “I’ll be back as soon as I can, and we’re going somewhere safe.” He turned and practically ran for the door.

“Ryder!” Sidney yelled as panic bubbled in his chest.

“Don’t leave the room.” Then he was gone, leaving Sidney standing naked in the middle of the bedroom, scared and frustrated.

He dressed quietly, wracking his brain to figure out what had just happened. Ryder looked afraid, but Sidney didn’t think anything could shake Detective Ryder Ward.

A soft knock on the door had Sidney rushing across the room and flinging it open. His heart fell when he saw Claire standing on the other side. "Nana."

"Can I come in, dear?"

"Yes, please." Sidney stepped aside to let Ryder's grandmother into the room. "Nana, what's going on? Who is Gavin?"

Claire sighed and sat down on the side of the bed, motioning Sidney to sit beside her. "Gavin was Ryder's lover. They were together for six years. It was kind of disgusting how much Ryder loved him." She smiled fondly as she spoke.

Sidney's stomach felt queasy at the information, but he needed to know everything. "So, what happened?"

"Gavin left. He didn't leave a note, didn't say good-bye. He just packed his things and snuck out while Ryder was at work. We haven't heard from him since."

"Poor Ry," Sidney whispered. He couldn't imagine anyone being stupid enough to leave someone as amazing as Ryder. Another thought occurred to him, causing his heart to flop over in his chest. "He must love Gavin very much to be so upset."

Claire smiled kindly and reached up to wipe away a stray tear Sidney didn't realize he'd shed. "No, honey, he doesn't. He loves you. He hasn't admitted it to himself yet, but a grandmother knows these things. I see it every time he looks at you."

Sidney didn't know what to say, so he said nothing.

"He's afraid," she continued. "Ryder believes this man took Gavin to get to him...and ultimately to you." She patted his knee. "He's afraid of losing you."

"What do I do?"

"You just love and support him. Keep yourself safe so he won't worry about you. He can't afford distractions in his line of work." Claire stood and placed a quick kiss on Sidney's forehead. "Get cleaned up, and we'll make a special dinner for our detectives."

Smiling weakly, he nodded. Claire's words chased themselves around his mind, leaving him feeling worse than ever. "I'll be down in a little bit."

Claire nodded and left the room.

Had he become a distraction for Ryder? Between the effort exerted to keep him safe and their budding love affair, the answer came as a resounding *yes*. By pursuing a relationship with Ryder, by just being with him, he jeopardized his lover's safety.

If he stayed, he was a distraction. If he left, Ryder would worry about him, would search for him, and Sidney would be a distraction. What did he do?

With so many question and no answers, Sidney crawled back into bed, pulled the covers over his head, and closed his eyes.

* * * *

The smell of Alfredo sauce filled the house as Ryder stepped in through the front door. Turning to his partner, he grinned widely. "Nana cooked."

"You guys staying here has some definite advantages." Michael rubbed his stomach and led the way to the kitchen.

Claire smiled at them as they entered and indicated they should take their seats at the table. "Sit down, and I'll bring you both a plate."

Michael didn't hesitate. He sat down heavily in one of the kitchen chairs and rubbed his hands together greedily. "You are a saint, Nana."

Ryder stood by his chair and frowned. "Where's Sidney?"

Claire shook her head sadly as she carried a steaming plate of pasta over and set it in front of Michael. "Still in his room, I imagine."

Closing his eyes, Ryder groaned. "I told him not to leave the room. I'll be back."

He took the stairs two at a time and hurried down the hall to Sidney's room. He had some groveling to do. Easing inside, he went directly to the bed, winding his way through the dark. "Sidney?"

No answer.

He'd been so worried earlier, so scared that something would happen to his new lover, he had completely lost it. There was no doubt in his mind that Gavin's disappearance had everything to do with their previous relationship. It seemed the bastard would go to any lengths to get to Sidney, and Ryder would do whatever it took to keep his little man safe.

"Sidney," he said a little louder. He flipped the beside lamp on and stared down at the lump in the middle of the mattress. Shaking his head, he kicked off his boots and crawled into bed, pulling the blankets back from Sidney's head. "Talk to me."

"Why should I?" Sidney spoke with his back to Ryder. "You weren't exactly into conversation when I asked you to talk to me earlier."

Ryder edged closer, molding his front to Sidney's back. "I know, and I'm sorry. I was scared, and I'm not proud of it."

"Do you still love him?"

Ryder decided it would be childish to pretend ignorance. "No, I don't love Gavin. I did, very much, at one time. He broke my heart, and more importantly, my trust. He was a big part of my life, and I can't take that back, but you're the one I want. I would do anything to keep you safe."

Sidney moaned miserably, confusing him. What had he said wrong? "Baby, what's wrong?"

"I'm a distraction for you," Sidney mumbled into his pillow. He finally turned and faced Ryder, his eyes red-rimmed and shining with unshed tears. "You could get hurt because of me."

"I could get hurt regardless. You are not a distraction," Ryder said firmly. "Where did you get such a ridiculous idea?"

His lover shook his head. "It doesn't matter. You'll be careful, right? You won't put yourself in danger because of me? Promise me, Ry."

Ryder shook his head and swallowed around the lump in his throat. "I can't do that. I won't make a promise I can't keep. I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe." He fisted his hand in Sidney's hair and pressed their mouths together, cutting off his lover's argument.

Sidney whimpered and sucked greedily at Ryder's tongue, sufficiently distracted. Ryder figured he should feel bad, but he didn't. Attacking Sidney's mouth, pulling him closer, he let go of his worries and lost himself in his love.

Sidney's stomach growled loud enough to hear over his soft moans. Ryder pulled out of the kiss, chuckling breathlessly. "Hungry?"

Sidney bit his lip and nodded shyly.

Ryder laughed again as he rolled from the bed and held out a hand to his lover. "Food, sex, sleep, sex. In that order."

Chuckling, Sidney took his hand and gained his feet. Ryder breathed an internal sigh of relief. Crisis averted...for the moment. "Let's hurry. I'm exhausted, and I still need to go home and see if the CSI guys will let me pack a bag before we go to bed."

"I'm going with you," Sidney replied instantly, pulling Ryder toward the stairs.

"I knew you were going to say that." Ryder groaned. He didn't want to argue, not after they'd just made up. "You do remember almost being kidnapped again, right? Your ass isn't going anywhere."

"I'll be with you, though. We'll be in and out. I'll do everything you tell me to do."

"You were with me last time. Not going to happen." He slapped Sidney's ass, giving him a little push toward the kitchen.

Sidney glared over his shoulder, released Ryder's hand, and strolled into the kitchen to take his seat beside Michael. Ryder sat

across from them and shook his head. “You might as well get over it. You’re not going.”

“Does it ever get old?”

“What’s that?” Ryder grinned as he loaded his fork with pasta.

“Always getting your way.”

“Not yet, but if it does, you’ll be the first to know.”

Chapter Eleven

“Hunter.”

“How’s Sid?” Ryder glanced in his rearview mirror, eyeing the car behind him suspiciously.

“Pissed off.” Michael chuckled.

“He’ll get over it.” Ryder turned left, still watching the car in his rearview mirror. “His emotions are all over the place anyway. He needs to talk to someone. He didn’t sound too excited about the idea when we discussed it before, but I think that’s some leftover prejudice from his last experience.”

“Sid’s seen a psychiatrist before?” Michael sounded more curious than the information warranted.

“Something like that. I guess there was a robbery at the bar where he used to work. The owner paid for him to go.” Ryder made another left, gritting his teeth when the car behind him turned as well.

“Do you know who he was seeing?” Michael asked casually—too casually.

“I’m not sure. He didn’t say. What aren’t you telling me?” Ryder made a right and burned through a red light. The car following blew the red light as well, but still maintained its distance.

“We’ll talk when you get here. I need to look at something and make a couple of phone calls.”

“I’ve got a tail.”

“Description?” Michael went into full work mode.

“SUV, dark, black I think, but I can’t be sure. It’s big, Expedition or Suburban size.”

“Like the one that took Sidney,” Michael deciphered. “Get somewhere safe, Ry. How far are you? I’ll call dispatch and see if there’s a car in the area.”

Ryder nodded his head even though Michael couldn’t see him. “I’m about six blocks from the hospital. Go do what you need to, and I’ll call dispatch. I’ll take a little detour and see if we can get some backup headed this way.” Ryder kept his attention divided between the car behind him and the road in front of him.

“They’re not exactly being discreet. I think it’s more of an intimidation move.”

“Be careful, Ryder.”

“Always am.”

* * * *

Tired and pissed off, Ryder sat in the hospital parking lot and seethed. Just blocks after hanging up with Michael, his tail had veered off, leaving him to drive in circles, looking for the dark monster of a vehicle.

Nothing.

Maybe he suffered from paranoia. Maybe it had all been coincidence. Ryder highly doubted it.

Leaving the hospital, he drove around in circles again, but still no vehicles followed, so he drove out to the river, doubling back several times before finally pulling up in front of the cabin.

Jumping down from the driver’s seat, he approached the squad car sitting just beside the small dirt road. Two officers emerged cautiously. They weren’t the same pair Ryder had spoken with earlier. He didn’t like it.

The smaller of the two stepped forward and nodded. His partner, a big burly man, came around the front of the car and took up a defensive stance beside him, his hand resting on the butt of his gun.

That, Ryder approved of.

He pulled his shield from his pocket and held it up to the officer. "Detective Ward."

The first officer relaxed slightly and held out his hand. "Officer O'Dell." He motioned behind him. "My partner, Officer Denton."

Ryder shook their hands in turn and led them up the front steps, pausing to unlock the door. He moved everyone inside quickly, introducing them to Claire and indicating they should wait in the kitchen.

"I need to talk to Sidney before I bring him down. Make yourselves comfortable, and we'll get started shortly."

He left the officers in the excellent care of his grandmother and hurried up the stairs. He took a few moments outside of Sidney's door to pull himself together emotionally and smooth his wrinkled shirt. Giving both up as a lost cause, he took a deep breath and knocked softly on the door.

Receiving no answer, he slipped inside the room and made his way to the bed. Sidney looked so small and young lying in the middle of the big mattress. Easing down on the edge of the bed, he gently brushed a stray lock from Sidney's face and winced at the bruising around his lover's right eye. It still had the ability to push him from calm to seething in seconds flat.

He didn't know how long he sat there, just staring at the man, before Sidney's jade green eyes blinked open, and he smiled warmly. "You look tired. Come to bed."

"I have to keep you safe. Then I'll rest."

* * * *

Sidney rolled his eyes. "I'm a grown man, and believe it or not, I managed to survive twenty-four years without you."

"Doesn't matter." Ryder shook his head defiantly. Then he cocked his head to the side and frowned. "You look like shit."

"And you're an asshole, Detective Ward."

Ryder grimaced, looking properly chastised. "I didn't mean it like that," he mumbled.

Sidney laughed quietly. "But, you're my asshole. He motioned for Ryder to move closer. "Now, come here and kiss me."

"My pleasure." Ryder brushed a tender kiss over his lips, pulling back much too quickly for Sidney's liking.

"What kind of kiss was that?"

"Baby, you are still sore, and I lose myself when I kiss you. I don't want to hurt you." He pressed another kiss to Sidney's mouth, then trailed his lips along his jaw and up to his ear. "I love you." He breathed the words, barely a whisper, but it didn't dilute the emotion in his voice.

"There you are," Michael called as he strolled into the room. "Hey, Sid, how are you feeling?"

Sidney glared at the man. "Way to kill the mood, Michael."

Michael just continued to smile. "You'll have plenty of time for that later."

Ryder tensed and moved away, standing beside the bed, and looking anywhere but at Sidney. His arms hung at his sides, his hands fisting and relaxing.

"Ryder?" Sidney ignored the other man in the room, his eyes focused on his lover.

Ryder looked at him, smiling crookedly, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Michael, wait outside." Sidney didn't look at him as he spoke. Once the detective had left the room, he tried again. "Ryder, come here."

"Bossy little thing aren't you." Ryder chuckled as he sat down beside Sidney again, but it sounded strained, and he still avoided Sidney's gaze.

Crawling to his knees, he palmed Ryder's cheek and turned his face until the man had no choice but to look him in the eyes. "I love you, too, Ry."

Ryder didn't so much as blink. He just stared back at Sidney, his face a mask of total shock. Sidney couldn't help but snicker. "Close your mouth, honey."

The words seem to snap Ryder out of his momentary paralysis. He rolled his eyes and kissed Sidney's forehead. "I get no respect," he muttered under his breath. Then he pushed Sidney back to the mattress and tucked the blankets around him. "Go back to sleep. We'll talk when you wake up."

Too exhausted to argue, Sidney nodded slowly, mumbling words of love, and drifted back into the warm embrace of sleep.

Chapter Twelve

“Let’s get some coffee.” Michael spoke immediately when Ryder exited the room. “O’Dell and Denton are doing a patrol around the area, so we have some time.”

Ryder just nodded. “What’s going on?”

“Walk and talk,” Michael insisted, leading the way down the stairs. “I was serious about coffee.” He looked him up and down before snorting. “And food, too, I suppose. You look like shit.”

“Love you, too, dear.”

Michael just rolled his eyes. “You’re dead on your feet, Ry.”

“What do you have?” Ryder asked, cutting off any more commentary on his appearance.

“Did Sidney say why he was seeing a therapist?”

“The robbery.” Hell, did the man ever listen to anything he said? “I told you this. I guess it shook him up. Being held at gunpoint would do that to anyone.”

“He wasn’t held at gunpoint.” Michael looked decidedly uncomfortable.

“Spill it.”

“I talked to the owner of the bar. It wasn’t a robbery. Sidney was held and almost raped at knifepoint.”

Ryder stopped, ice forming in his veins. “Where the hell was everyone?”

“It was after hours. Sidney was closing down and locking up when an unknown man came out of the men’s room.”

“He is never leaving my sight again,” Ryder vowed. “That man is too young to have been through so much. So, I’m guessing there’s

more to this story,” he said as they walked into the kitchen. He didn’t even remember coming down the stairs.

Michael held up a finger as he stepped to the counter and poured two cups of coffee. He brought them to the table and set one in front of Ryder before taking his own to his seat across from him. Pulling out a small notepad from his jacket pocket, he began flipping through it, testing Ryder’s patience.

“From what the owner tells me, he forgot some paperwork and came in through the back door in time to pull the guy off Sidney.” He paused and a dark look crept over his face. “It took a little *persuasion* to get the rest out of him, but I did gather there was no robbery. Nothing was taken. No police report filed.”

“Nice work, partner.” Ryder sipped his coffee and yawned. “What about the counseling?”

“The owner never paid for anything. Cheap bastard,” Michael added under his breath. “The whole thing understandably shook Sid up. The bar owner didn’t want unwelcome attention for the shithole, so he convinced Sid not to report the assault and pushed him off on a support group for rape victims at St. Joseph’s.”

Ryder nodded, partly in understanding and partly because he just couldn’t seem to hold his head up. “Okay, so what does that have to do with our case?”

“Jonathon Frost,” Michael said as he laid a picture out on the table. “His landlord says he attended St. Joseph’s. Elton Jameson,” Michael continued as he positioned another photo next to the first. “His roommate drove him to the support group twice a week.” Michael slid the last photo across the table and looked up into Ryder’s eyes. “Sheldon Peterson,” he said. “His ex-boyfriend confirmed that he also attended the support group.”

Ryder stared at the photos, not really seeing them. “We know Kenneth Dean is somehow involved,” he talked through the jumbled thoughts in his head. “I don’t think Gavin counts, since he was only

taken because of me.” Ryder looked up at Michael and frowned. “What about the other four? How do they tie in?”

“From what I’ve found out, the other three men belonged to similar support groups at other churches.”

“Who was leading this group?”

“No clue.” Michael sighed.

Ryder yawned again.

“Go to bed, Ry. Get some sleep. You’re no good to anyone like this.”

Ryder waved a hand in dismissal before covering his mouth to hide another yawn. “I’ll catch a couple of hours in a few.” He looked down at his dirty and wrinkled clothes. “I need to change.”

Michael just shook his head as he eased out his chair. “Stubborn man,” he mumbled. “I have some stuff you can borrow for the night.”

Ryder nodded his thanks. “I don’t want to, but we need to know if Sidney recognizes any of those guys.”

“I know,” Michael said softly. “In the morning.”

* * * *

“This one...here...and him.” Sidney pointed to each photograph, tapping it lightly where it set on the coffee table. “I don’t remember their names, but they were...I’ve seen them before.”

He looked up to meet Ryder’s probing gaze and shifted uncomfortably under the scrutiny. Sidney knew he needed to come clean with Ryder about the “robbery,” but it was painful to talk about it.

“Where do you know them from?” Ryder asked. The look in his eyes said he knew the truth. It also said he was hurt Sidney had lied to him.

After a deep breath, he whispered, “I’m sorry.”

“Where do you know them from?” Ryder repeated.

“You know exactly where I know them from.” Sidney sighed. “I’m sorry, Ry. I didn’t mean to keep it from you. I didn’t think it had anything to do with the case, and I just wasn’t ready to talk about it on top of everything else.”

Ryder closed his eyes, and the tension drained from his muscles. His entire body seemed to deflate before Sidney’s eyes. “Don’t keep things from me,” he whispered. “I understand there may be some things that you aren’t ready to talk about, but I need you to be honest with me.” He opened his eyes and took Sidney’s hand. “Just say that you aren’t ready to talk. Don’t give me half-truths.”

Sidney nodded, squeezing Ryder’s hand. “I promise.”

“Okay. Now, I’m going to ask you some questions, and I need you to be honest and give me as much detail as possible. Do you think you can do that?”

“Yes.”

Ryder nodded curtly. “What nights did you attend the group? What time?” He sounded distant, clinical—almost cold. His lover wasn’t asking Sidney questions. Detective Ward was interrogating him.

“Right after the ro—the...incident.” Sidney knew he had to be honest, but he’d thought of the attack as “the robbery” for so long, he found it hard to reprogram. “February through April, last year. I went on Monday and Thursday afternoons from four until six.”

“Were you working at Bad Habits then?”

“No, I moved to that neighborhood in June. I was working at The Purple Lizard.”

Ryder jotted down notes in his little tablet and nodded. He didn’t even look at Sidney. “Was it a member of the church that led the group? Maybe the priest or another clergyman?”

Sidney shook his head. “We called him doctor. I remember someone saying he volunteered to lead groups at different churches in the city.”

“So, he was a psychologist?”

"I guess." Sidney shrugged.

"Doctor what?"

Sidney scrunched his eyebrows together, concentrating, trying to remember the name. "Dr. Matheson."

Ryder glanced up as he nodded. He seemed to look straight through Sidney. "Do you remember what he looked like?"

Sidney bit his lip briefly to stop it from trembling. "Um...older, maybe in his fifties, salt-and-pepper hair, tall, well-built, handsome, I suppose."

"Anything distinguishing about him?"

"Nothing physically, but I remember he wore a silver chain around his neck. It seemed odd because it didn't look like his style. He was always impeccably dressed and groomed."

"Did Dr. Matheson ever act inappropriately or make unwelcomed advances toward you or the other group members?" Again, Ryder sounded detached, almost bored.

"Nothing so forward, but he would stare at me oddly. It made me uncomfortable," Sidney whispered.

"How so?"

"I don't know. He just seemed to watch me, like he was waiting for something. It was creepy." Sidney sank back into the cushions. He didn't want to talk anymore, and especially not to Detective Ryder Ward.

Closing his eyes, he willed the man to leave. Screw Ryder and his pissy attitude.

Then suddenly a gentle weight settled on his arm, and warm breath against his forehead preceded the soft brush of velvet lips. "I'm sorry, baby. You did great. Thank you."

Sidney opened his eyes and stared blearily up at Ryder. "You are the most confusing person I have ever met."

Ryder chuckled without much humor. "I have to do my job, Sidney. I didn't mean to be a dick, but it's the only way I can separate

my emotions to do what I need to. Please understand. If I didn't shut down that way, we'd have never gotten through the questioning."

He kissed Sidney's head again. "As it is, I want to run out that door and find every person that has ever looked at you wrong and beat them to a bloody mess." The next kiss landed lightly on Sidney's lips. "Please, understand."

Sidney huffed out a sigh. It wasn't fair.

Ryder chuckled again, the sound much warmer this time. "What's all that about?"

"I'm mad."

"I know, baby, and I'm sorry."

"It's not fair," he said indignantly. "I'm mad because I can't be mad at you. What sense does that even make?" He narrowed his eyes and shook his head. "I hate you."

Ryder smiled, wide and wicked. "Sweet talker."

Sidney rolled his eyes. "Oh, shut up and kiss me."

"Your wish. My command."

* * * *

Three weeks passed without anything more eventful happening than Sidney learning to bake Claire's famous chocolate cake. No one had been reported missing, no more phone calls, and no new bodies in the harbor.

Sunlight peeked over the horizon, lightening the sky to a dusky gray, and filtering in through the bedroom window. Ryder snuggled closer to Sidney, but his thoughts strayed to Gavin.

His ex-lover came from money, never having to work or struggle a day in his life. They'd been good together. For six years, Gavin had been his entire world, his very reason for breathing. Ryder had poured everything into their relationship, and gained very little in return. With his heart so completely ensnared by Sidney, he wondered if he had ever been truly in love with Gavin.

Nothing in his life had prepared him for the all-encompassing love and adoration he felt for Sidney. Maybe he had loved Gavin, but it was nothing like what he felt for Sidney.

Privileged, Gavin had been sheltered from the harsher realities of the world. Everything in his life had been handed to him on a silver platter with gold wrappings. Even Ryder had doted on him, lavishing him with gifts and attention. He just prayed Gavin would come away unscathed from this ordeal.

A soft hand slid over his hip, pulling a contented sigh from his smiling mouth. Rolling to face his love, Ryder's grin grew until it stretched across his face. The bruises were mostly faded, the swelling, a thing of the past.

"Good morning, Ry," Sidney mumbled sleepily. "What are you thinking so hard about?"

Ryder nuzzled his nose against Sidney's, dropping a quick peck on his lips. "How did you know I was thinking?"

"You are never *not* thinking." Sidney continued to mumble with his eyes still closed. "Besides, you were thinking so hard you woke me." His eyelids fluttered a moment before opening to reveal the mesmerizing eyes Ryder adored. "Wanna talk about it?"

Ryder debated for several seconds. He wanted to be completely honest with his lover, but he didn't want to worry him unnecessarily either. Finally, he sighed and kissed Sidney's lips, lingering just a bit before pulling away.

"I was thinking about Gavin." He stared into Sidney's eyes and waited to see the hurt and trepidation.

It never came.

"You're going to find him," Sidney whispered. "I know you will, Ry." He gave a crooked half-smile and kissed Ryder's nose. "What were you thinking about?"

Ryder felt as though his heart had melted and spread warmth throughout his entire body. "You are amazing."

"I know." Sidney winked before becoming serious again. "What's wrong, Ryder?"

"He's not strong like you, baby. He...well to be honest, he's a spoiled, selfish, self-entitled brat." Ryder smiled sheepishly. "I don't think he has done a day of manual labor in his life. It's been almost three weeks. I don't know how long he can hold up. He's not like you, baby. He's...weak."

Sidney frowned. "I'm not strong."

"Just like you aren't gorgeous...smart...kind...brave...humble." Ryder punctuated each word with a kiss or nibble to the column of Sidney's throat. "Should I continue? I have a whole list of adjectives."

"You talk entirely too much, Detective." Sidney closed his mouth over Ryder's, sucking on his tongue.

Ryder groaned, pushing Sidney to his back and delving into his lover's mouth. He kissed, licked, sucked, and nibbled at Sidney's mouth as though he were dying and Sidney's mouth held the antidote.

Sidney moaned, rocking his hips, clutching at Ryder's waist. "Need more, Ry."

That, Ryder could do. "Are you sure you're feeling up to it?"

"If you stop, I swear I will end you," Sidney growled.

Ryder laughed breathlessly, rubbing his hand down Sidney's hip to the swelling flesh between his legs. "You only needed to ask."

* * * *

Shudders wracked Sidney's body when a long, thick finger slid along the crease of his cheeks.

Ryder groaned as he rested his forehead against Sidney's thigh. "I have to taste you. Can I taste you, baby?"

Why the hell was Ryder asking permission? With the heat spreading through his body, the lust threatening to overwhelm him, there was only one answer. "Please."

A sharp cry wrenched from his parted lips when Ryder's very wet, very hot mouth closed unerringly around his throbbing cock. It took only seconds for Sidney to realize that Ryder was intent on sucking his soul out through his weeping slit.

Electricity raced so quickly up Sidney's spine it left him blinking away the lights that exploded behind his closed lids. He moaned and squirmed, arching his back and pushing his hips toward Ryder's talented mouth. "More."

Ryder pulled back, sitting up on his knees, and Sidney contemplated killing him. A small whimper escaped his mouth before he could stop it. Staring back at his lover, the heat in Ryder's gaze burned straight through him, leaving his body sizzling.

A surge of pure lust ripped through him, and with a sound purely predatory, he flipped Ryder to his back with a strength he never knew he had. He felt like an animal, untamed, unhindered, instinct urging him to ravage the perfect body that shuddered beneath him.

The kiss he delivered to Ryder's panting mouth was savage, almost brutal. Sidney had never had anything in his life to call his own. Nothing had ever been important enough for him to fight for.

Until now.

The need to possess Ryder—to brand him, mark him, to claim the gorgeous man as his own—made Sidney dizzy. Too crazed by his passion for preliminaries, Sidney dove between his lover's legs, enveloping the head of Ryder's cock and taking it clear to the back of his throat in one swift move.

Closing his lips around the pulsing flesh, Sidney sucked and tongued, drawing out Ryder's pleasure, groaning at the tangy taste of Ryder's pre-cum as it washed over his tongue. Licking a slow path up the gorgeous prick, Sidney flicked his tongue over Ryder's slit, loving the moans and whimpers coming from his lover.

Ryder was completely at his mercy. Smirking to himself, Sidney reached out blindly, fumbling for the bottle of lube on the nightstand.

He clicked open the lid, quickly coating his fingers with the slick liquid, as he continued licking, suckling, and biting at the tormented flesh in his mouth. He gently pushed Ryder's thighs toward the man's chest with his wrists until his well-toned ass cheeks parted, revealing the pink flesh of his tightly puckered entrance.

Catching on quickly, Ryder looped his arms behind his knees and held his legs in place. With his hands once again free, Sidney used one finger to circle the fluttering hole, caressing, but never entering.

"Oh, oh, fuck!" Ryder cried as his hips jerked and thigh muscles tensed.

Sidney nibbled along the inside of Ryder's thigh, sucking the sweet tasting skin into his mouth. When he felt Ryder's hole began to relax under his constant touch, he eased just the tip of his finger inside the hot opening.

* * * *

The slim digit pushed into his ass and a slick tongue laved his aching dick, setting his nerve endings on fire. Ryder arched his back, pushing against the invading finger. "More."

Panting and groaning, feeling Sidney's finger saw in and out of his ass, sweat beaded across his body, his skin heating and tingling with his arousal.

The slight burn as a second finger slid in along the first only added to his pleasure, sending Ryder into overdrive.

"Stop!"

Sidney's hand stilled, and his head popped up to look at Ryder in confusion.

"Ride me, baby. I want to feel that tight ass strangle my cock when I come inside you."

Eyes glazed and lips slightly parted, Sidney nodded. Ryder didn't know how he did it, but Sidney managed to flip around and straddle

his waist, presenting his perfect pucker, without ever removing his fingers from Ryder's clenching hole.

"Get me ready while I play." Without another word, he sheathed Ryder's cock in his mouth, his fingers still pumping and curling, leaving Ryder scrambling to catch up.

He had never seen, never felt, anything so erotic in his life. Parting Sidney's globes, his nostrils flared and his mouth watered at the fluttering opening staring back at him. Leaning up, he swiped his tongue across the muscles, shuddering at the musky scent and earthy taste. He set to work, licking, lapping, prodding, and sucking.

Sidney moaned and whimpered around his cock, sending vibrations along Ryder's shaft and straight to his tightening sac. He needed to move this party along before he lost it completely.

Snatching the lube up from the mattress, he coated his fingers with the slippery oil before pushing two into Sidney's hole. Quickly but gently, he stretched the tight muscles, opening his lover to receive him.

Suddenly, Sidney growled, popping up from Ryder's cock, and looked over his shoulder. "Not going to last, Ry. Need you in me."

"Climb on, baby."

Sidney shook his head. "Where's the rubber?"

Motherfucker! Ryder slammed his head back on the pillow, almost whimpering in frustration. He'd gotten completely ahead of himself and hadn't even thought of a condom. He knew he was clean. His last test for the department had only been a couple of months before. Sidney had all kinds of test run on him in the hospital. Surely...

"I'm clean, Sid. I have the papers if you want to see them."

He lifted his head to look at his lover, begging with his eyes. Sidney shook his head again, though. "When I wouldn't stop screaming, they'd sedate me. I don't know how clean those needles were, but I doubt they were sterile. My tests were negative in the

hospital, but they said it might not show up yet. I won't risk it. Won't risk *you* like that."

Though his dick snarled and jerked in protest, Ryder's heart flopped over in his chest and beat a quick staccato against his breastbone. Slapping Sidney lightly on the hip, he nodded his head and grinned. "Back to work."

Sidney groaned and nodded enthusiastically before turning back and swallowing Ryder's length to the root in one swift move. Ryder arched his hips, pushing into the welcoming heat of his lover's mouth, groaning when Sidney's fingers found their way back inside his hungry tunnel.

It took several seconds, and Sidney wiggling his ass, for Ryder to remember his previous task. Pulling on Sidney's hips until the man's prick dangled above him, he encompassed the head with his lips, pushing three fingers deep into Sidney's ass.

Sidney cried out, the sound muffled around the turgid flesh in his mouth, and began rocking his hips, pushing into Ryder's mouth and back against his fingers.

Fire burned in his balls, electricity raced along his spine, zipping out to tingle across his skin. Ryder took Sidney to the back of his throat and swallowed as he added a fourth finger, brushing across his lover's prostate.

Sidney's slick entrance clamped around his fingers, and hot, salty seed splashed over Ryder's tongue, pouring down his throat. He swallowed quickly, working his tongue against Sidney's length, curling his fingers against the smooth, walnut sized gland to prolong his lover's orgasm.

A small pinch at the base of his cock where Sidney's teeth bit into his aching flesh had Ryder bowing up off the bed, sucking hard on the prick still lodged in his mouth, as his climax ripped through him, rocketing from his slit to flood Sidney's mouth.

A soft, wet tongue cleaned him thoroughly, and Sidney's fingers gently eased from his body. He levered himself up, his cock slipping from Ryder's slack mouth, and collapsed on the mattress beside him.

"Holy shit."

Ryder couldn't agree more. He reached out, gripping Sidney's hip and tugging him until the man scooted around and curled against his chest. "Thank you, baby."

Sidney snorted and placed a quick kiss over his heart. "My pleasure, love. Now go back to sleep."

More sleep sounded great, but a knock at the door doused any hopes of a lazy morning in bed with his lover.

Chapter Thirteen

“Landon Marsh and Brock Childress attended support groups at Our Lady of the Lake.” Michael informed Ryder of his findings as they sat at the kitchen table sipping coffee.

Ryder nodded. Michael would get around to the point in his own good time.

“Joseph Cortez and Conner Graham were seeing Dr. Matheson as part of a rehabilitation program at the GLBT shelter downtown.”

“So, we’re sure that Dr. Matheson led all of these groups? That he was in contact with every one of our victims?” Ryder frowned, staring down into the steaming liquid of his mug.

“Yep,” Michael answered. “And here’s the clincher. Kenneth Dean was also seeing Dr. Matheson, though at his private practice.”

“Where does that leave Gavin? I mean, how did he even know about him?” Ryder rubbed at his temples, trying to soothe away the headache he could feel building. “And why the fuck hasn’t he called back? He sounded pretty damn adamant about wanting Sid, but we haven’t heard anything else in three weeks.”

“He’s playing with us, Ry. Cocky bastard,” Michael muttered under his breath. “I don’t know about Gavin, but I think he’s using him to get to you. I talked to his parents, and they have never heard of our good doctor.”

Ryder sighed. “I figured as much. It just doesn’t make sense. He calls the one time and then nothing. What’s his game?”

“How about we pay the asshole a visit and find out for ourselves?” Michael smirked. “We have an appointment at three.”

Ryder nodded. “You’ve been busy, Hunter.”

"I don't think it's Matheson. We're missing something," Michael said seriously. "I mean, wouldn't Sidney have recognized him? He said he saw his abductors."

"I didn't see everyone, but it wasn't him," a sleepy voice answered from the kitchen doorway.

Ryder looked up at Sidney, an automatic smile covering his lips. "Hey, baby. Are you hungry? You want some coffee?"

Sidney waved his hand. "Sit. I'll get it."

"Why do you say it's not Matheson?" Michael asked.

Sidney tilted his head to the side, considering, as he poured coffee into his mug. "Dr. Matheson had a really soft, smooth voice. It was soothing, I guess you could say." He brought his cup and settled into the chair beside Ryder. "No one in that basement had a voice like that. The guy I guess is in charge, his voice was like a fork in a meat grinder. Grating, gravelly, harsh. It sounded evil."

Ryder wound his arms around Sidney and hugged him close. He kissed the top of his sleep-tousled head. "I love you, yeah?"

Sidney pulled back and smiled at Ryder, his eyes full of love and trust. "Yeah," he whispered. "Ditto."

"Gag." Michael coughed in mock disgust. "Get a room, would ya?"

Sidney turned and glared at him. "We had one until you so rudely came knocking. It's getting to be a habit of yours, Detective Hunter."

Ryder snorted into his coffee. "He has a point."

"Misery loves company. What can I say?" Michael was smiling, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Even if Matheson isn't the leader of this little operation, I think he's still involved." He went right back to being serious and brooding. "It won't hurt to talk to him either way. Maybe we should bring Sidney with us."

"Absolutely not!" Ryder was on his feet, leaning over the table and glaring down his best friend. "He is not going anywhere near that man, so just get it out of your head."

“Ry.” Sidney’s soft voice penetrated the red haze of anger. “Calm down before you give yourself an aneurism.”

As always, Sidney’s soft voice, his gentle touch, soothed the savage beast, and Ryder found himself slowly lowering back to his chair. It was amazing how the man calmed him like nothing else. That is until he spoke again.

“Ry, I want to go. I want to help. If Michael thinks it will help, then we should listen to him.”

“No. Fucking. Way,” Ryder snarled. “Do you have any idea how dangerous it would be for you out in the open like that?”

“No more dangerous than it is for you, I’d assume.” Sidney voice remained calm, pleasant. Ryder wanted to throttle him.

“Yes, but I’m a cop!” he shouted. “I even have this nifty little shield that proves it. Plus, I have a gun that I am well trained to use. I’m going to go out on a limb and say the most dangerous thing you carry in your pocket is lipstick.”

Ryder breathed hard, his chest heaving, his eyes narrowed into slits. No words either of them could say would convince him the plan would end well. “I love you, Sidney,” he said softly, his features relaxing. “I can’t lose you, and this is too dangerous. Please, promise me you will not do anything risky.”

Ryder expected a quick agreement from Sidney. He expected Sidney to promise, to say he loved Ryder as well, that everything would be all right. What he didn’t expect was for Sidney to jump to his feet and start yelling.

“You stubborn, mule-headed, overprotective jackass!” Sidney’s hands landed on his hips, and he pierced Ryder with angry eyes. “You would throw away this entire case, let all those poor men’s deaths go unpunished, risk not saving Gavin, all to keep me safe?”

“Yes.” Short and simple, it was the only answer that mattered.

“Ugh!” Sidney yelled, throwing his hands up. “That is completely ridiculous! You are a better cop than this, Ryder Ward! I swore to you, and to myself, I would do anything I could to help catch this pig,

and I damn well intend to do it.” He pointed his finger in Ryder’s face, biting off the rest of his words. “I. Will. Help!”

“Michael. Get out.” Ryder had never seen Sidney so angry, so vehement, so...fucking sexy.

“I was here first!” his partner exclaimed indignantly.

“Get out,” Ryder repeated, never taking his eyes from the tempting sprite before him. He rose slowly from his chair and crept forward, stalking his prey.

“Ryder, what are you doing?” It pleased him to hear the slight tremble in Sidney’s voice. The smaller man took a step back for every one of Ryder’s steps forward.

“You are breathtaking when you’re pissed. I want you.”

“What?” Sidney yelped. “Here? Now?”

“Right now,” Ryder agreed. He let his lips curl into a feral smile before pushing his lover up against the counter.

He covered the man’s body with his own, pressing against him, and rocking his swollen shaft against Sidney’s stomach. He didn’t know if his partner had left the room, and he didn’t much care either. Crushing his mouth down on Sidney’s he reveled in the lush warmth, the delicate taste of his lover’s lips before jerking away and whirling Sidney around.

With a desperation born of need and hunger, he gripped the waistband of Sidney’s shorts and yanked them down his thin legs. Squeezing and kneading, he grasped his lover’s rounded ass in both hands, separating the twin globes to reveal the beautiful entrance he sought.

Biting and licking at the back of Sidney’s neck, he fumbled with his own sleep pants, releasing the knot in the drawstring and pushing them down his hips until his steel hard cock popped free, bobbing and straining toward his lover.

“Gonna make you feel so good, baby. Gonna bury myself inside you and never leave.” He pulled open the junk drawer beside Sidney’s

hip and rummaged through, looking for something—anything—to ease the way.

He encountered a small tube and pulled it from the drawer, grinning in relief at the travel-sized bottle of hand lotion. Not his first choice, but better than nothing. Squirting a generous amount into his palm, he stroked his needy shaft, coating his length. He parted Sidney's cheeks again, gliding his fingers along the crease, down to the twitching entrance he craved. Ringing the muscles, he caressed his lover gently, nibbling at his earlobe and stroking his soft skin with the palm of his unoccupied hand.

Sidney shook and moaned, his fingers clutching the counter in a white-knuckled grip. His flushed skin glistened damply in the overhead florescent lighting. "You are so beautiful, baby. Look how you shake. You want me. You want my cock, balls deep inside you, fucking you until you scream my name."

Before Sidney could answer, Ryder pushed a slippery finger into his opening, twisting his wrist and drawing a strangled cry from Sidney's panting mouth. He didn't want words anyway. He wanted his baby mindless with pleasure, unable to form coherent thoughts, let alone intelligible words.

Working in a second finger, he continued to stretch his love, sliding his other hand down Sidney's bare stomach to palm his engorged prick. Breathing hard against Sidney's neck, he stroked him from base to tip, dipping his thumb into the pooling drops of pre-cum and smearing them over the spongy crown.

Vibrating with desire, Ryder couldn't wait any longer. Removing his fingers from Sidney's clutching channel, he lined up the head of his cock, and paused.

"Tell me this is what you want, Sid. Say the words. Tell me you want me."

"But the condoms," Sidney protested around a whimper.

“We’re clean. We both have the results to prove it. You’re always going to be mine, Sid. Always.” His voice dropped to a rough growl on the last word. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes, but—”

Sidney’s word cut off, his loud cry of pleasure echoing around the kitchen when Ryder pushed into the hilt in one hard push. He stilled, giving his lover a chance to relax and grow accustomed to the invasion, but also himself a moment to reclaim some control.

* * * *

Sidney cried out again, swallowing convulsively as he gasped for air. Damn, he felt so fucking full. He loved the feel of Ryder’s huge cock pounding into him, making him soar.

“Tell me who you belong to.” Ryder’s fingers tangled in his long locks and pulled his head back sharply. “Say it.”

“You.” Sidney barely got the single word out before Ryder started pounding into him, pulling on his hair and gripping at his hip with the other hand. He plowed into Sidney’s body, plundering, claiming, and laying siege to his innermost depths.

“No one else, Sid. Never again.” He punctuated his demand with quick hard jabs, his heavy sac slapping against Sidney’s ass. “Say it.”

Sidney didn’t know what had come over his detective, but he fucking loved it. If losing his temper sent his lover into alpha-mode, Sidney decided he’d do it more often. No one had ever spoken to him in such a way. The possessiveness, the desire, the raw need in Ryder’s voice had him trembling as molten lava churned in his balls, the pressure building toward explosion.

“Just you, Ryder. Only you.”

Ryder roared, his hold becoming bruising on Sidney’s hip as he pounded into him, jerking him back to meet each primal thrust.

Then everything stopped.

Sidney growled in protest. His dick ached, his balls burned, his gut tightened painfully. He was so damn close. Before he could demand to be fucked into tomorrow, he was spun away from the counter, and his back pushed roughly up against the refrigerator.

Ryder lifted him into his arms, his arms hooked under Sidney's knees as he held him easily. Sidney clutched at Ryder's damp shoulders, his eyes wide and stunned. His lover grunted, pushed back into him, and claimed his mouth in an earth-shattering, soul-searing, knock-you-on-your-ass kind of kiss.

His hands, his lips, his tongue were everywhere. Licking, kissing, touching, and pushing Sidney closer to the brink of orgasmic euphoria.

Ryder's chest and belly pressed against his, trapping his leaking cock between them and creating the most glorious friction.

Sidney vaguely heard the contents of the fridge clanking and rattling around inside as Ryder continued the assault to his ass, plunging into him relentlessly.

"Come for me, baby." Ryder's breathy growl in his ear sent shock waves zipping down his shaft. "I want you to come so fucking hard you pass out." He rested his forehead against Sidney's and stared into his eyes. "Show me how much you love me."

That did it. Sidney's entire body stiffened, his muscles locked down, and he threw his head back and screamed as heart, soul, and mind seemed to mingle with the creamy ropes of semen that erupted from his pulsing cock.

"Yes, fuck yes," Ryder murmured against his lips as wet, scorching heat coated Sidney's velvet walls and leaked from his convulsing hole.

"Mine." He had just enough mobility to wrap his fingers around the back of Ryder's neck and pull him into a soft kiss. "Mine," he repeated.

"Yours." Ryder licked at Sidney's lips as their breathing slowed and heart rates lowered. "I'm yours, baby."

“I’m going with you,” Sidney breathed into Ryder’s still open mouth before kissing him again.

“M’kay, but you can’t bring your lipstick.”

Sidney buried his face in Ryder’s neck, trying desperately to keep from laughing. “Okay, big guy. I promise no lipstick.”

Chapter Fourteen

Ryder looked at his partner with a raised eyebrow when he pulled into the parking lot of St. Joseph's Catholic Church. "I thought we had an appointment?"

"Three o'clock." Michael gestured toward the clock radio. "There's a support group for rape victims beginning in ten minutes."

Ryder nodded and exited the vehicle. He had to swallow back a growl when Sidney emerged from the backseat. How he had ever allowed the man to talk him into this was beyond him.

"Stay close to me and keep your eyes open. If anything or anyone looks suspicious, I want you to run." He held Sidney's shoulders, staring into his eyes. "Yes?"

Sidney brushed a kiss over Ryder's lips and smiled. "Yes, Detective."

Ryder sighed, wrapped an arm around his love's waist and led them through the door to the communion hall.

Several women were already there, and even a couple of men. Ryder spotted Dr. Henry Matheson immediately. Sidney hadn't lied. The man was very handsome.

If you were into that kind of thing.

"I'm going to say hello," Sidney whispered, stepping away from Ryder.

"Not on your life, cupcake." Ryder wrapped his arm around Sidney's waist again and began walking to where the doctor spoke with a young woman near the front of the room. "We stick together, remember?"

Sidney's lips pursed and his nose crinkled, but he gave no argument. Ryder knew he was being overprotective and just a tad possessive, but oh well.

"Sidney, my dear, it's so good to see you." Dr. Matheson beamed as he stepped forward and held out one perfectly manicured hand to Sidney. The smile slipped from his face, his features becoming somber. "How terrible that you are back again, though."

Sidney smiled shyly, pulling his hand back from the doctor's grip. "Thank you, Dr. Matheson. How have you been?"

"I can't complain, young man. I'd much rather talk about you. How are *you*?"

Dr. Matheson's voice was gentle and soothing. Smooth and cool like clear water in a stream. He gave Ryder the creeps.

"Oh, well, you know..." Sidney stated vaguely. "I have my rough days, but Ryder helps me through them."

"Oh, please forgive my rudeness." Matheson held his hand out to Ryder. "I'm Dr. Matheson, and it's a pleasure to meet the man that can put such an angelic smile on Sidney's face."

Ryder resisted the urge to roll his eyes. The doctor sure laid it on thick. He wondered if there would be any wine to go along with all the cheese.

He shook hands, letting his fall away quickly. "Ryder Ward."

"Are you here for moral support then, Mr. Ward?"

Wouldn't you like to know? Ryder didn't miss the way the doctor's eyes continued to flicker back to Sidney. The heat and longing in his gaze was genuine. He desired Sidney, wanted him for his own.

He wasn't their guy.

Though he made Ryder's skin crawl, and he wanted to smash the doctor's nose into his brain for the way he stared at the man he loved, he wasn't the guy. He held no fear, no contempt, nothing to indicate that there was some reason Sidney shouldn't be roaming around, completely healthy and completely alive.

Not even a tiny speck of guilt covered the arrogant son of a bitch. Well, that wasn't totally fair. Ryder didn't even know the man's mother. She could be a very charming woman.

Still, if the creep didn't get his eyes off of Sidney's groin, Ryder was going to give them a permanent view of the inside of the good doctor's ass.

Suddenly remembering that he had asked him a question, Ryder shook his head slightly, not trusting himself to open his mouth. No telling what vileness would come spilling out.

He tugged on Sidney's waist, pulling him backward—away from the smooth dipshit in front of them.

Sidney, bless his heart, just smiled and nodded toward the doctor. "It was nice to see you, Dr. Matheson. I just remembered that we have somewhere to be. Perhaps I will see you at the next meeting."

Ryder pulled Sidney past Michael and right out the back door. He stomped across the parking lot, coming to an abrupt and painful stop when Sidney flung him up against Michael's extended cab pickup.

Before he could hiss out a breath in pain, Sidney's hot, searching tongue plunged into his mouth, twisting, twining, and caressing every inch he could reach. He fisted Ryder's hair in both of those slim hands and pulled his head back sharply.

"You are sexy as fuck when you get jealous," Sidney purred against his throat. "But I assure you," he added with a sharp bite over Ryder's collarbone, "there is no reason to be jealous. I am yours, Ryder Ward. You are stuck with me."

Ryder felt so stunned by the abrupt assault, the vulgarity pouring from his lover's mouth, he almost missed the last part. When his brain finally caught up with his body, Ryder smiled like an idiot.

Ryder didn't know what had gotten into his man, but he wasn't about to complain. To see Sidney coming out of his shell, asserting himself, initiating and even dominating aspects of their sexual relationship was such a huge turn-on, he couldn't help but wish for a flat surface.

“What the hell has gotten into you two?” Michael came strolling up to them, his hands in his pockets, face red and flushed.

“It’s not him,” Ryder said with as much dignity as he could scrounge up. It wasn’t much considering Sidney still nibbled at his neck, grinding himself against Ryder’s hips.

“You are such a cock block.” Sidney sighed as he pulled away from Ryder to glare at Michael. “I hate you sometimes. You know that, right?” He flung open the door and climbed into the backseat.

Ryder threw his head back and laughed at the look of complete shock on Michael’s face. “He’s a pistol, that one. You better watch yourself, Detective Hunter.”

Michael could only nod. He looked like someone had clobbered him over the head, which only caused Ryder to laugh harder as he pulled open his door and climbed inside. “Are we leaving now? Or, would you prefer for me to climb into the backseat and give you your money’s worth?”

Sidney’s soft giggle pulled Michael out of his stupor. He shook his head as if to clear it and walked around to join them in the truck.

* * * *

Sidney seemed sullen and withdrawn for the remainder of the day. Ryder tried to let the man have his space and work through whatever bothered him. When he snapped at Frank for eating too loudly, Ryder decided it was time to intervene.

“Okay, I’ve given you time to sulk. Now, we’re going to talk. What is going on with you?”

Sidney glared at him, then turned his head and began stabbing violently at his salad. Ryder said nothing. If he knew his lover, Sidney would crack eventually.

He didn’t have to wait long.

“I remembered something,” Sidney muttered after a minute.

“And what did you remember, Sid?”

“The chain Dr. Matheson wears?”

Ryder thought back to their earlier encounter with the doctor. He had been so busy trying not to rip his throat out that he hadn’t paid much attention to what he was wearing.

“What about it?”

“Well, it has a charm on it. I never really noticed it before. It’s a ruby, I think. It’s red anyway.”

Ryder bit his tongue and tried to reign in his impatience. He nodded for his lover to continue.

“One of the guys that took me that night had something that looked just like it.”

Ryder sat up a little straighter, but refused to get his hopes up. They had hit too many brick walls, too many dead ends. “Rubies are pretty common,” he said casually. “Why do you think they were the same?”

“It’s cut in the shape of a triangle. The edges are round though, almost like a tooth or a fang. There are three black lines in the middle of it, kind of like claw marks. The other man wasn’t wearing a stone, though. He had it tattooed on his wrist.”

Ryder could barely breathe. “Claw and Dagger,” he whispered hoarsely. “Oh fuck, fuck...Michael!”

Michael came hurrying into the room. “Is it safe to enter now?” He eyed Sidney with great trepidation.

“Claw and Dagger.”

Michael’s brows formed a shallow V as he scowled at him. “I don’t really think that’s your scene, Ry. If you want a drink, there’s a wet bar in the other room.”

“What’s Claw and Dagger?” Sidney asked.

“It’s a BDSM club on the boardwalk,” Michael answered. “We’ve been called in a few times when things have gone too far.” He turned to Ryder. “What’s going on?”

Ryder gave his partner a rundown of what Sidney had told him. “Who owns that club?”

Michael grinned evilly. "Don't know, but I can sure as hell find out." He was gone in a heartbeat, pulling his cell phone from his pocket as he walked.

Ryder stood from his chair and moved over to his lover, mentally preparing himself for the argument he knew would come, but Sidney cut him off before he could speak.

"I guess it's going to be a long night for you. I'm bushed. Do you mind if I just grab a shower and go to bed?"

Ryder placed a kiss on the top of Sidney's head. How did he ever manage to get so lucky? "Yeah, baby, that sounds good. I'll be up as soon as I can. Michael and I may have to go out for a bit, but I'll let you know before we do."

Sidney nodded and smiled sweetly. "I love you, Ry. Be careful, okay?"

"Always," Ryder answered. "Thank you."

Sidney didn't bother to act confused. "I know you work better when I'm not around. I really am tired, though. Promise you'll come get me if I can help."

Ryder promised and sent the man on his way with a kiss.

Chapter Fifteen

“Hold on to your hat for this one,” Michael exclaimed as he walked back into the kitchen ten minutes later.

“You got a name?”

“Marshall Dean,” Michael said as if that meant something to Ryder. He rolled his eyes at his blank expression. “Dean!” As if saying it louder would suddenly make everything clear.

Michael blew out a frustrated sigh. “Kenneth Dean’s grandfather.”

That, Ryder understood. “Holy shit! He owns Claw and Dagger?”

“Not only that, but apparently he had a bit of an accident during a scene about three weeks ago. Some Dom worked him over pretty good. He was released from the hospital this morning.”

“I guess that would explain why I haven’t received any more phone calls.”

“And, it gets better.” Michael smirked. “Guess who the officers were that took the call to the club that night?”

Ryder just widened his eyes in question.

“O’Dell and Denton.” Michael was all smiles. “They’ll be here in twenty minutes when their shift ends.”

Ryder nodded. “Start some coffee. I’m going to let Sidney know what’s going on. Do you think he needs to sit in on this? Do we have a photo of Marshall Dean? Maybe he’ll recognize him.”

“I’ll call Officer O’Dell and see if he can get a photo. We’ll leave it up to Sidney if he wants to listen in or not.”

Ryder hurried up the stairs and quietly slipped into the room he had been sharing with Sidney. His lover sat up in bed, his hair damp

from his shower, the soft glow of the bedside lamp illuminating his soft skin.

Sidney put aside his book and smiled when he noticed Ryder. “Hey, you. Done already?”

“No, baby.” Ryder slid into bed and rested his head on Sidney’s soft belly, draping an arm over his waist. “O’Dell and Denton are coming by, and we think we have a lead. Did you want to sit in and listen? We might have some questions, but they can wait until the morning if you’re too tired.”

Ryder burrowed in closer to his lover’s body. Sidney was so warm, so soft, and Ryder was exhausted. He could easily curl around his baby and fall asleep. Especially with the soothing way Sidney ran his fingers through his hair.

“I want to help,” Sidney said after a moment. “Just let me change and we can head down.”

* * * *

O’Dell and Denton already sat at the kitchen table with cups of steaming coffee by the time Ryder and Sidney made it down the stairs.

“Rayce, Jasper, it’s good to see you again.” Sidney smiled brightly. He meant what he said. The officers who had been in charge of guarding him were wonderful people. They had kept him from going insane during the lonely hours when Ryder was out fighting crime. He had felt a little abandoned when they had to go back to their regular duties and stop hanging out with him.

Rayce O’Dell rose from his chair and hugged Sidney hard. “You’re looking much better. How do you feel, Sid?”

Sidney continued to smile as he nodded. “Much better, though Detective Overprotective here doesn’t let me do much.” He motioned to Ryder.

Jasper Denton laughed as he moved around the table to hug him as well. Sidney rolled his eyes when he heard the huff of breath escape his lover. He hugged Jasper back and stepped away quickly.

"It's good to see you," he told him honestly. "Don't mind Ry. He's territorial. I'm shocked he hasn't peed on me yet."

Ryder had the decency to look properly censured. He stepped forward and held out his hand to each officer in turn. "He's right, and I apologize. Thank you for coming."

Rayce just laughed and shook his head. "Don't apologize. If I had someone like him on my arm, I'd want to hold on tight with both hands. We," he gestured between himself and his partner, "are not about poaching though, so relax."

"So, our relationship doesn't bother you?" Ryder asked cautiously.

Rayce rolled his eyes. "Dude, we're both as queer as a football bat. Why do you think we make such a great team? We have to watch each other's backs from more than just the bad guys."

"And I don't make it a habit of trying to convert straight men, either." Jasper spoke for the first time, eyeing Michael's nervous fidgeting.

Michael blushed and laughed anxiously. "I wasn't worried about that. I just feel kind of like an outsider."

"Ridiculous," Sidney purred. He wrapped his arms around Michael's neck and kissed him full on the mouth. He winked and giggled as Michael flushed a deeper red.

Taking his seat beside Ryder at the table, his lover rewarded him with a quick kiss and a mischievous smile. "You are a brat, Mr. Kessler," Ryder whispered in his ear.

Yeah, he knew it, but it felt too good to let loose and be happy that he didn't care.

Everyone got straight down to business. "Did you bring the photograph of Marshall Dean?" Michael asked from his place at the head of the table.

Rayce nodded toward the manila envelope on the table. Sidney's palms started sweating, and his stomach knotted. He didn't know if he was ready to look into the eyes of his attacker yet.

He had promised to do anything he could to help, though. It wasn't like the picture could do him any harm. There were a lot of young guys out there counting on him, and Ryder would be at his side, protecting him as always.

"You ready?" Rayce asked. His voice held sympathy, but Sidney didn't want the man's pity.

"Yes," he stated firmly.

"Wait." Ryder held up both hands and looked around the table. "You said Dean was injured during a scene?"

Sidney didn't understand much about the lifestyle, but he read enough about it in books to be able to follow along.

"Right," Rayce answered with a frown.

"So, he's a submissive?" Ryder probed.

"Right," Rayce said again. Sidney could see the confusion wrinkling the officer's brow.

"Okay, so why would a submissive be kidnapping men and forcing them to submit? I mean, I don't know much about the lifestyle, but that seems a little counterintuitive. Don't they crave the rules and dominance of their partners?"

"Normally, I would say yes," Rayce said after a few seconds of thought. "It makes sense though, in a rather convoluted way. In his mind, I think he believes who better to train a submissive than another submissive."

Sidney observed the heavily muscled blond across from him. Rayce was gorgeous, though he'd never tell Ryder that. Short-cropped hair, smooth ivory complexion, and the whitest teeth Sidney had ever seen. The man's brown eyes held steel, and his body language definitely had the air of *don't fuck with me*. He had a commanding presence and a take-charge attitude that made people take notice when

he spoke. Luckily, he also seemed to know a great deal about the BDSM scene.

“Marshall Dean is a small man, five-foot-six, slender, and he looks much younger than his fifty-three years. I’m not positive, but I don’t think he’s a true submissive. I believe he probably ended up in the role because of his small stature.” Rayce rubbed his forehead as if trying to iron out a headache from the outside in.

“He’s also not a Dom. In fact, I don’t think the lifestyle is really for him. He’s crazy as bat shit,” he added after a pause.

“Why don’t you think he belongs in the scene?” Ryder studied Rayce, his eyes narrowed in concentration.

“Well, he’s obviously not very good at it, is he?” Rayce sounded as if the answer should be obvious to everyone. “He doesn’t feel like he’s a sub, yet he doesn’t have the control or authority that it takes to be a Dom. If he did, those boys wouldn’t have ended up dead.”

“Are you a Dom?” Sidney blurted out. He hadn’t meant to say it, but the thought had been whirling around in his mind since Rayce had started speaking.

“Yes,” Rayce stated simply. “And, because of that, I think I could be a great help in this case. Assholes like Marshall Dean give the lifestyle a bad name. I want to help bring this guy down.”

Sidney was impressed with the way the officer answered unabashed and unashamed of his choices.

“And you?” Michael asked Jasper.

“No, I’m not in the scene, but I do know quite a bit about it. These boys didn’t deserve what happened to them.” He looked pointedly at Sidney and dipped his head. “I want in.”

“We’ll talk to the Chief in the morning,” Ryder replied.

Sidney was so proud of his man he could burst. He flung his arms around Ryder’s neck and crushed their mouths together. “You are amazing,” he breathed.

Ryder looked stunned for a moment before he smiled and nodded.

“Are you ready to take a look at the picture?” Ryder was back to serious, all business.

“Are you going to turn into the Ice Bitch again?” Sidney didn’t want to appear weak, but he was nervous.

“I’ll be right here,” Ryder answered softly.

Sidney nodded his head and held out his hand. Rayce withdrew a glossy five-by-seven and passed it across the table to Sidney’s waiting hand.

As soon as his eyes landed on the face, he dropped the photograph and gasped. Ryder’s arms were around him immediately as he whispered words of comfort and encouragement in his ear.

Sidney stared into the eyes of his tormentor, paralyzed. His heart raced and tremors shook his body. He clutched at Ryder’s hand, trying desperately to breathe.

“Get him some water,” Ryder ordered.

“Sidney, man, are you okay?” Rayce reached across the table and removed the photo quickly. “You look really pale. Do you need to lie down?”

Sidney shook his head quickly. Closing his eyes, he took deep breaths and willed his heart rate to return to normal. He felt like such a loser. How could he let a simple photograph make him fall apart like some sniveling wimp?

“Stop it,” Ryder whispered harshly in his ear. “You are strong, Sidney. You are my brave little sprite, and there is nothing weak about your reaction to that picture.” He reached out and took the bottle of water Michael handed to him. “Drink this and just breathe.”

“So, I guess that’s our guy,” Jasper said softly. His voice was low, but it held an underlying rage that startled Sidney out of his near hysteria.

“Yes,” he answered loud enough for everyone to hear him. “That man is the one that oversaw my...training.”

“Did he ever administer any of the...uh...training?” Michael asked hesitantly.

Sidney nodded numbly, but didn't have enough moisture in his mouth to speak.

"How does Kenneth Dean fit into all of this?" Michael stood from his chair and began pacing around the kitchen. "I know that he's Marshall's grandson, but what was his part in all of this?"

No one seemed to have an answer.

"I have other pictures here," Rayce tapped the envelope in front of him. "Bouncers, bartenders, and a couple of the regulars from Claw and Dagger."

"Not tonight," Ryder spoke before Sidney could accept. "Come on." He stood and held his hand out.

Sidney took it gratefully. He felt like he had just run a marathon. His muscles ached and his stomach cramped. "Thank you," he mumbled to his lover.

Ryder led him up the stairs and tucked him into bed. "I have to go back down, but I'll be up to check on you in a little while. If you need me, just call my cell phone, and I'll come running."

Sidney nodded, but he couldn't drudge up a smile. Closing his eyes, he let the exhaustion claim him.

Chapter Sixteen

“I think the judge would grant us a search warrant for the club,” Rayce was saying when Ryder walked back into the kitchen. “I don’t know if we have enough to search his residence, but we can talk to the DA and see what he thinks.”

“Then we’ll just have to find something at the club to get that warrant,” Ryder replied as he took his seat. Damn, he was tired.

“I’ll talk to District Attorney Bryce first thing in the morning,” Michael said. “We should have a warrant by tomorrow afternoon.”

“I’ll go with you.” Ryder yawned. “We need to talk to the Chief about getting these two on the case.”

Michael’s cell phone rang, causing everyone to jump. He dug it out of his pocket and flipped it open. “Hunter.” He listened for a few seconds, frowning. “We’re on our way.” His eyes held a haunted look as he snapped his phone shut, and Ryder didn’t even need to wait for him to speak the words.

“They found another body,” he said flatly.

Michael nodded.

“Which one?” Jasper asked quietly.

“Landon Marsh,” Michael whispered. “Fuck!” he suddenly screamed. “He was only nineteen!”

“Let’s go,” Ryder said, rising from his chair. He hardened his heart and schooled his features. “You two come with us.” He looked at the two officers and jerked his head toward the door. “We’ll talk to the Chief tonight.”

When everyone was up and moving, Ryder headed for the stairs and took them two at a time. He slid into Sidney’s bedroom and stood

over the man's sleeping form, a knot forming in his throat. What if it had been Sidney they found in the harbor? Cold, without a breath of life or that soft sparkle in his eyes.

He bent and placed a soft kiss against Sidney's temple. "I love you, baby."

"Be careful," Sidney whispered sleepily.

He kissed his love again and hurried out of the room and down the hall to tap lightly on his grandmother's door. "Nana? It's Ryder."

The door edged open almost immediately, and Claire looked back with red-rimmed eyes. Ryder's heart broke as he pulled his nana into his arms.

"I'll take care of Sidney," Claire sniffled. "Those poor boys."

"I know, Nana, but I think we've finally got the bastard."

"Then go." Claire eased away and patted Ryder's cheek. "I know," she said with a smile, "lock the doors and don't answer for anyone."

Ryder nodded and kissed his grandmother's forehead. He turned without a word and hurried down the stairs to find everyone gathered around the front door.

"Jefferies and his partner are on their way over," Michael started speaking as Ryder approached. "They're off duty, but they agreed to come keep an eye on the place until we get back."

"Inside?" Ryder asked.

"No, they'll park across the street and watch things from there." Michael grinned knowingly. "They're the good guys, Ry. They were almost eager to help out."

"A little too eager," Ryder mumbled. Still, he had no choice but to trust them.

"They'll be fine," Rayce soothed, dropping a hand on Ryder's shoulder.

He sighed and gave a curt dip of the head. "Let's go."

* * * *

“This doesn’t fit.”

Someone had dumped Landon Marsh in the harbor, but he hadn’t drowned. They would need to wait for the autopsy report, but it appeared the kid had bled out before he even made it to the water.

Multiple deep lacerations covered Landon’s mutilated body. His skin was pale and gray, ice cold to the touch.

“He’s angry,” Rayce said as he sidled up next to Ryder. He looked down at the body with a mix of anger and revulsion.

“Which makes him even more dangerous,” Ryder added. “We have to get that warrant.”

“Or sloppy,” Rayce said. “Thanks for bringing us in on this, Ward. I want this guy bad.” The muscles in his jaw jumped as he spoke.

“You’re good,” Ryder complimented. “Why aren’t you a detective?”

Rayce smiled. “I like working the beat.”

“Think about it,” he coaxed. “You’d make a hell of a detective.”

“We’ve got another missing person,” Michael called as he stepped up beside the two men.

Ryder groaned. “Name?” He didn’t know why, but it was important for him to know the name.

“Lucy Zimmmler.”

Ryder’s eyebrows arched and his mouth hung open. “A woman?”

“Barely.” Michael scowled. “She’s eighteen years old, high school dropout, working as a stripper down at Hard Times.”

“How long has she been missing?” Ryder had a sinking feeling in his gut.

“Four days,” Michael answered promptly.

“And we’re sure she fits the profile?” Rayce asked, playing devil’s advocate.

“Other than the fact she doesn’t have a dick, yes.” Michael shoved his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders against the wind blowing off the harbor.

Ryder looked down at his watch and groaned. Only ten o’clock, but it felt much later. “Think we have time to ask some questions tonight?”

“I’m sure of it. One of her coworkers reported her missing. No family that I could find. She spent twelve years in the foster care system before being reported as a runaway at sixteen.”

“This sucks.” Looking at his partner, and then to O’Dell, he frowned. “Where’s Denton?”

* * * *

Ryder shuffled up the stairs and undressed quietly. His mind was exhausted and his body felt like it would shatter at the slightest touch. How in the hell did someone just waltz in and snatch a two-hundred-pound, fully trained officer from a working crime scene?

“Ryder?” Sidney’s voice floated to him, soft and drowsy. “What time is it?”

Ryder slid into bed beside his lover and pulled the man close. “A little after two, go back to sleep.”

“What’s wrong?”

Ryder never could hide from Sidney. He seemed to be hardwired to Ryder’s emotions. “Another missing person,” he mumbled.

“Oh, no. What was his name?”

“Her name,” he amended. “Lucy, around eighteen, and...” Ryder trailed off. Sidney considered Jasper Denton a friend. Ryder knew his lover was going to take the news hard. “Jasper,” he finally whispered.

As expected, Sidney broke into quiet sobs. “This is all my fault,” he whispered brokenly.

“No, it’s not. None of this is your fault.” Ryder pulled him closer, resting his chin on the top of Sidney’s head. “Jasper knows how to

take care of himself. He's going to be fine, and we're going to get him back."

The tears dried and the sobs quieted. A wet tongue licked its way up the column of Ryder's throat, flickering at the sensitive skin just behind his ear. "I need to feel close to you."

"You're always close to me." Ryder skimmed his fingers up the inside of Sidney's thigh, delighted at the feel of bare skin. His fingers slid under the leg of Sidney's impossibly short shorts and tickled the soft flesh just under his smooth sac.

Sidney reciprocated, cupping Ryder's growing erection and shoving his tongue deep into Ryder's mouth. "I want your mouth," he breathed over Ryder's lips.

"Flip around and lay on top of me."

Sidney stripped his shorts off and did as directed. Straddling Ryder's face, he eased his body over Ryder's midsection and tapped on Ryder's hip. "Lift up," he instructed.

Ryder planted his feet and arched his hips off the bed. A pillow slipped under his ass, before Sidney pushed him roughly downward, and his hot mouth closed over the head of his cock.

Ryder wasted no time returning the favor. He licked at Sidney's dripping slit, jabbing his tongue in and collecting the clear drops of pre-cum. He gripped the base of his lover's shaft, sucking him in and working his hand in a steady rhythm.

The pace intensified, building until Ryder humped into Sidney's mouth, groaning around the heated erection sliding down his throat. It didn't take long before the pressure in his balls exploded into a mind-numbing orgasm, spilling his seed over his lover's tongue.

Sidney stiffened, pushing further into Ryder's mouth as hot ropes of sticky cum flooded Ryder's mouth. He swallowed down his lover's essence, loving the taste of his man, then licked him clean and slumped back on the mattress, limp and exhausted.

Sidney rolled to his side, breathing heavily, and placed a quick kiss on Ryder's thigh. "Love the way you taste," he mumbled. He

stagged from the bed and into the bathroom, coming back seconds later with a warm cloth. He lovingly cleaned Ryder before tossing the rag to the floor and climbing back into bed.

“Love you,” he slurred.

Ryder smiled. “Love you, too, baby.”

Chapter Seventeen

Pounding on the door woke Ryder from a peaceful sleep. “Ry! Get up!”

Groaning, he rolled over to make sure both he and Sidney were covered. “Come in, Michael,” he said around a yawn.

Sidney blinked open his eyes and smiled up at Ryder before turning to Michael as he stepped into the room. “Good morning, Detective Hunter.”

Michael smiled back. Sidney just had that effect on people. “Good morning, Mr. Kessler.” His smile slipped a notch, and he turned to Ryder. “We’ve got the warrant. Move your ass.”

Ryder jumped out of bed and raced to the closet, pulling clothes out at random. A soft gasp and a loud groan had him whipping around. Michael stared resolutely in the opposite direction, his cheeks and ears burning scarlet. Sidney was staring wide-eyed at him, a sensuous grin on his sleep-swollen lips.

“Get dressed, sweetheart, you’re embarrassing him.” Sidney winked and crawled out of the bed to find his own clothes.

Another pain-filled groan hit Ryder’s ears, and Michael turned even redder if it were possible. Ryder swung back to his lover, taking in the clinging top and...nothing. He growled, pushing Sidney behind him, internally promising the man a flogging if he kept giggling like that.

“Out!” he barked.

Michael nodded and hurried from the room.

Sidney just laughed. “Oh, get over yourself, Ryder Ward. The man isn’t even gay. We just embarrassed the hell out of him.”

Ryder deflated, the anger rushing out of him on a sigh. "You are rotten."

"I know." Sidney winked again. "Get dressed. The bad guys don't wait until after breakfast."

A few minutes later, they were both dressed and headed toward the kitchen. Sidney bounced forward and placed a soft kiss on Michael's cheek. "Sorry," he whispered.

Michael just waved a hand, a goofy smile on his face. "You're a hot little piece, I'll give you that. If my gate swung that way, Ryder would be watching his back."

"And what am I?" Ryder huffed indignantly. "Leftover Spam?"

Michael blinked once, threw his head back, and laughed. "You're a riot, asshole. Now, let's move."

"I'm coming, too," Sidney announced, pulling on his boots.

"No you're not," both detectives responded in stereo.

"Why the hell not?" Sidney demanded with a fist on his hip.

"It's too dangerous," Michael answered before Ryder could speak. "We can't do our jobs if we're worried about you getting hurt."

"And I need help around the house today." Claire yawned as she strolled into the kitchen. "This place is a sty, and I just simply can't stand it a moment longer." She pinched Michael's cheek before patting it lightly. "You should be ashamed, Michael Hunter."

Ryder didn't miss the quick wink his nana aimed at Michael before she brushed past him and headed for the coffeepot. Apparently, neither did his partner.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered affectionately.

"Now, go on you two. Sidney and I have work to do today."

Sidney obviously didn't like the idea, but he was smart enough not to argue with the woman. Self-preservation and all that.

Ryder bit his lip to keep from grinning. He placed a quick kiss on Sidney's head, jumping back to avoid the elbow to his gut.

He was still laughing as he climbed into Michael's huge pickup and buckled his seatbelt.

* * * *

The back door of Claw and Dagger swung open and a mountain of a man towered over him. Ryder didn't think anyone would be in the club at ten o'clock in the morning.

Michael showed no such qualms. He held up his shield to the man and shoved the search warrant into his massive paw before pushing past him roughly.

The giant placed himself in front of Michael, halting him with a hand to the chest. "I'm sorry, but you can't come in. We open at six, if you'd like to come back then."

Ryder was amazed at the soft, gentle voice coming from such an enormous man.

"I'm Detective Ward, and this is my partner Detective Hunter. That paper you're holding in your hand is a search warrant. We are quite within our legal rights to be here, I assure you."

The man looked over the warrant, nodding several times. "Very well then, but please explain the meaning of this. Does this have to do with the incident of several weeks ago?"

"Something like that," Michael answered.

"You will find nothing here." The threat was implied.

"Then, you won't mind us looking around," a voice called from behind them.

Ryder turned and nodded a greeting to Rayce. Turning back to the huge man, he said, "This is Officer O'Dell. What's your name?"

"McArthur Rhymes," he said clearly.

"How's your boss?" Rayce asked amiably.

"Mr. Dean is still recovering from his ordeal."

"I have some friends on their way to visit him." Rayce winked at Ryder.

The threesome moved into the club, looking over the black and red interior, shaking their heads at the clichéd decorating.

“Do you have viewing rooms?” Rayce asked.

Thank heavens for Rayce. Ryder didn’t have the first clue about the BDSM lifestyle.

“In the back.” MacArthur nodded his bald head toward a door on the other side of the dance floor.

Rayce walked determinedly toward it and pushed through. Ryder followed, close on his heels. His eyes widened briefly as they stepped through the door before he schooled his features into a look of calm dispassion.

The cavernous room, decked out in plush couches and chic accents, held eight doors and eight ceiling to wall windows. Ryder stepped up to the first window and peered inside.

The room was small, the walls, floors, and ceiling painted black. A pegboard hung on the back wall, displaying several different types of whips, floggers, gags, masks, and a few items Ryder didn’t think he wanted to know the names for.

A large metal contraption stood in the middle of the room, leather restraints hanging limply from the top and bottom. “What is that?” he hissed in Rayce’s ear.

“The rack,” Rayce answered calmly. “It holds the submissive in place by the restraints.” He pointed to the leather cuffs. “They are completely helpless, totally bound, giving their trust to the Dominate to take care of them.”

“You said there are rules.”

“Yes, the rules and boundaries are clearly set before the scene begins. If the Dominate and submissive are relative strangers, they may agree upon a safe word so as the submissive maintains some control over the scene. With an experienced Dom, a safe word normally isn’t needed.”

“What’s a scene?”

Rayce motioned toward the room in front of them. “Just what you think it is, Detective. Two willing partners engaging in a little

bondage and pain to induce and heighten pleasure. Which ultimately leads to sex.”

“Search these rooms,” Michael called as he entered behind them.

They divvied up the rooms and set to work searching every inch of each. When they met back in the viewing room, Ryder read disappointment on his colleagues faces. He was undeterred.

“Sidney said he was held in a windowless room, damp like a basement.”

“You don’t seriously think he would be stupid enough to hold them here do you?” Michael shook his head. “I guess we have to check, though.”

“Mr. Rhymes,” Ryder addressed the man as he stepped out of the room. “Is there a basement here?”

“Yes,” he nodded, “we store beer and such down there.” He led them to the back of the bar and through a swinging door. He stopped inside what appeared to be an employee lounge of sorts. “Just there,” he motioned toward the door at the back of the room.

Ryder went first, taking the steps slowly, squinting into the darkness below him. He inwardly breathed a sigh of relief when a light flickered on at the bottom of the stairs. He turned to look up into Rayce’s smiling face.

“Thought I’d shed some light on the situation.” The officer chuckled.

The basement was exceptionally ordinary. Concrete, damp and drafty, no windows and only a few crates of beer and couple of cardboard boxes. An extremely ugly and rather large painting leaned against the wall beneath the stairs.

Ryder growled out his frustration, upended one of the cardboard boxes. “Motherfucker!” he yelled.

“Ry, calm down,” Michael tried to coax.

Ryder just glared at him. They were so close! His gut knew Marshall Dean was the guy they were after, but without proof, they may as well have been running in circles.

“Cocksucker, piece of shit, son of a bitch!” Ryder let the profanity spill from his lips. He picked up a roll of packaging tape, channeling all of his rage and frustration into the small spool, and flung it at the hideous painting.

The room went completely silent when the tape ripped through the offending canvas and a hollow thud sounded as it hit the wall beyond.

Rayce came out of the stupor first, rushing over to the painting and heaving it aside. A small wooden door, painted gray to blend in with the cinderblocks greeted their combined gaze.

“I’ll be damned,” Michael breathed. “O’Dell, call dispatch and get some backup over here. I want this place locked down. No one leaves, and I mean no one!”

“You got it.” Rayce grabbed his shoulder mic, speaking quickly as he bounded up the stairs.

“Ryder, you—”

“Not a chance,” Ryder interrupted. “Let’s go.”

He pulled out his service revolver and eased open the door as Michael took his place to the side, his own gun trained on the entryway.

When no shots rang out and no one jumped from the shadows, Ryder eased around the door and stared inside. It appeared to be a long, stone tunnel, dimly lit by a string of lights along the center of the low ceiling.

He crept through the tunnel, his back against the wall, his partner keeping pace with him on the opposite side of the narrow space. He could see the light on the other end, and it didn’t take them long to reach a large, circular room. Peeking around the corner, Ryder swept into the room, his back to the curved wall, his body low to the ground.

It was empty other than four doors embedded in the smooth stone walls of the room. Before Ryder could decide which door to try first, the two in the middle banged open, and five very large, very muscled men barged into the room, guns drawn.

“Police! Drop your weapons!”

Shots rang out, echoing around the vast room.

Ryder fired, his first shot catching one of the men in the chest. He squeezed off a second shot, hitting the man behind the first in the kneecap. Before he could pull off a third shot, blinding pain slammed into his midsection, dropping him to his knees.

He doubled over, clutching at his stomach, blood pouring much too quickly through his fingers. The sounds of continued gunfire echoed throughout the domed room, men shouting, cries of pain.

Looking up to find his partner, Ryder blinked to focus. Everything was blurry, darkness closing in around the edges. He thought he heard someone call his name, but it sounded far away. His body felt cold to the bone, numb, his eyelids too heavy to remain open.

Crumpling to the floor and landing on his back, his breaths came slow and shallow.

He barely registered a hand wrapping around his own. He looked up and tried to grin at a very fuzzy looking Michael.

“Ryder! Stay with me! Open your eyes! Open your fucking eyes!” Ryder wanted to do what his partner asked. He wanted to reassure him that everything would be okay, but illogical optimism had never been his thing. That was Sidney’s specialty.

Sidney. Ryder felt his heart break. Not at his impending death, but at the sadness that it would cause his lover. “Tell S–Sidney I l–love h–him,” Ryder managed through chattering teeth. “T–Take c–care of h–him.”

Knowing Michael would do everything in his power to grant his last request, Ryder closed his eyes and slipped into the welcoming void.

* * * *

“Oh, Ryder,” Sidney whispered as he looked down at his pale and unconscious lover.

There were so many tubes and wires, machines whirling and beeping around the bed. He let his tears fall freely, not bothering to wipe them away. He pulled up a chair, setting it by Ryder's bedside, and dropped himself into it, taking his detective's hand, petting it lovingly.

"He'll need physical therapy when he wakes up, so make sure you get that set up," he murmured softly to Michael. "And he'll need something to wear home. Nothing too tight around the stomach, maybe those raggedy old sweats he's so fond of."

"Sidney..." Michael began.

Sidney shook his head. He knew what the doctors said. He knew Ryder's condition was critical, and they hadn't given him much chance of recovery. Thirty percent, one of the doctors told him gravely. But, thirty percent was better than zero. They had a chance, and Ryder was a fighter.

"He's going to come back to me," Sidney whispered. "I'm staying with him. I know they won't like that here in ICU, but I'm staying. Make it happen, Detective Hunter."

Michael stood staring at him for a long time before he nodded and left the room.

Sidney sat by Ryder's bedside day after day. He talked to his lover until his voice gave out. He assured Ryder Frank was doing well, and he missed him. He told Ryder how Rayce had taken great interest in Gavin Hart, and he thought the two would make a striking couple if Gavin would stop being such a self-important dickhead.

Michael and Nana took turns sitting with him, but had given up on getting him to leave for such mundane things as eating and sleeping. Instead, they brought him food and clothes, even some toiletries so that he could shower at the hospital.

Rayce came, spending his hours off work alternating between sitting with Ryder and Sidney and visiting Jasper and Gavin down on the second floor. According to him, Jasper had suffered a broken leg and a mild concussion, but he would be out of the hospital the next

morning. Gavin had severe bruising and some superficial lacerations, but he'd be good to go the next day as well.

Sidney nodded his head, smiling when appropriate, listening, but never offering reciprocal conversation.

Twelve days passed without any signs of Ryder waking up. His vitals had continuously improved, but he remained unconscious. The doctors insisted Sidney not worry, saying it was a good thing, and Ryder's body would do what came naturally to heal itself.

Then, two and half weeks after Ryder's admittance, his hand twitched inside Sidney's hold. Sidney paused in his ramblings about one of the soap operas he had taken to watching during the long hours at Ryder's bedside.

When the twitch turned into a weak squeeze, Sidney immediately launched into his story again. He talked and talked, not hearing the words or registering their meaning, just letting Ryder hear the sound of his voice.

Ryder's eyelids began to flutter, and Sidney couldn't contain his excitement. He stood beside the bed, leaning over his lover, encouraging Ryder to open his eyes.

"That's it, Ry. Come on, open up those eyes and let me see those baby blues. You know I've missed those eyes of yours. Miss you, sweetheart. It's been lonely without you. I really need you to wake up now, Ry."

Slowly, almost painfully, Ryder's eyelids pulled back, and he blinked up at Sidney. His eyes were glossy, dazed looking, but they were open. It took several seconds for recognition to light the eyes that Sidney loved so much.

"Hey, baby," Ryder rasped. His voice sounded weak and hoarse, but it was the sweetest music Sidney had ever heard.

"Hey back, Detective," he whispered. He felt the tears well up in his eyes and let them fall. "It's about time you woke up. Michael is driving me insane, and Nana insists you always were a lazy ass."

The corners of Ryder's mouth twitched as his eyes closed again. "Love you," he breathed before falling asleep.

Sidney grinned, leaning forward to kiss his lover's forehead. "Love you, too," he sniffled. "Love you, too."

* * * *

"When the fuck am I going home?" Ryder demanded.

"You've only been awake for eight days. Would you please calm down before I get someone in here to sedate you?"

Ryder sighed and nodded. "Sorry, baby."

"Yes, well, Michael is coming to see you today and if you want any details on the case, I suggest you not bite his head off."

Ryder nodded again. "I'll behave." He winked, settling back into the bed.

Minutes later, there was a soft knock on the door, and Michael stepped inside. "Hey, Ry. How ya feeling?"

"Like warmed up dog shit."

"Ryder," Sidney warned.

"Right, sorry. I have felt better, but I suppose that I should be thankful to be alive." He smiled icily at his lover. "Better, darling?"

Sidney rolled his eyes and stood from his chair, heading toward the door. "He's all yours." Ryder thought he detected a hint of apology in his man's voice.

"So, tell me what happened," he demanded immediately. "No one will tell me shit."

"Can't imagine why," Michael muttered under his breath.

"I heard that, asshole." Ryder smiled. "I just hate being laid up in this bed. I can see Sidney is exhausted and hurting, but he won't leave. We fought about it yesterday. I need to get out of here so I can take care of him."

"Ryder, you were shot. You almost fucking died. Get off your pedestal and let people take care of *you* for a change."

"I don't want to argue with you, too." He waved a hand in surrender. "Just tell me what I've missed."

"Marshall Dean is dead," Michael stated bluntly. There wasn't a hint of remorse in his voice.

"How?"

"Blew his brains out the minute he heard the sirens. Fucking coward." Michael growled.

"MacArthur?"

"Awaiting trial. He confessed to everything." Michael shook his head slowly. "He's a strange guy, and he apologizes a lot. I think he's protecting someone, though. He's not giving any names, but I have a feeling Dean wasn't at the top of the food chain on this."

Ryder nodded. "And Matheson? What part did he play in all of this?"

"He didn't. We've brought him in for questioning, but so far we don't have anything on him, and he's not talking."

"Sidney said Jasper and Gavin were okay. What about the others?"

"We found seven people in all—Gavin, Jasper, three boys, and two women. They're all recovering."

"And Kenneth Dean?"

Michael shook his head. "We're guessing he was training to take over the family business, so to speak. He disappeared. We're still working to find Dean's contacts and his buyers."

"We did okay," Ryder said with a smile.

"Yeah, but something tells me this isn't over. I can't put my finger on it, but something just doesn't sit right."

"One step at a time, partner."

"Don't scare me like that again, Ry," Michael said, startling him with the emotion in his voice.

"Well, it's not like I planned to get shot." Ryder's bravado melted under Michael's sad eyes. "I'm sorry I worried you," he whispered.

"I have to go. Take care of yourself and do what Sidney tells you. I'll be back later tonight."

“Thanks, Michael.”

He nodded wordlessly and exited the room.

Chapter Eighteen

Sighing, he turned to pass the drink to his customer.

Turning, his toe caught on the rubber mat beneath his feet, and he stumbled, reaching out to steady himself on the bar.

“Whoa, easy there, sweetheart.” Strong arms wrapped around his waist, pulling him back against a solid chest.

Sidney stiffened, and his muscles tensed. He bit his tongue to keep from screaming when the arms began pulling him backward toward the end of the bar. Eight months since Ryder had rescued him, and he still had moments of panic when people invaded his personal space.

This definitely constituted personal bubble invasion.

“I think you need to take a little break. Come on, I’ll take you to the backroom, and you can sit down for a while.”

He recognized the voice of one of the other bartenders. *Brock? Beck? Beckett!* Remembering the name of his would-be knight didn’t make him any less afraid.

“No.” He tried to pull away. “I’ll be fine. Really, Beckett.”

“You say my name real sweet, ya know? I like that. Come on and let me take care of you.” His voice dropped lower, becoming husky and gravelly.

Sidney’s heart tripped into a gallop and sweat beaded across his forehead. “Please, I’m fine. Let me go.”

“Oh, sugar, don’t be like that. I just want to help.”

“I said no!” He doubted his voice had even carried over the heavy bass blaring from the wall of speakers.

Beckett didn’t argue, nor did he release him. He continued to drag him from behind the bar to the swinging doors at the end.

“Stop!” he screeched again.

“I believe the man said no.”

Sidney sagged in relief. He’d know that voice anywhere.

“Well, hello there. You wanna have a little fun, too? You know I don’t mind sharing.” Beckett laughed, proud and cocky.

“Well, see, there’s the thing. That man you’ve got your hands all over happens to be mine. And I *don’t* share.”

Sidney couldn’t see Ryder, but he could picture the look on his detective’s face. Oh, the big ape groping him was about to get his ass handed to him.

“Ah, don’t be that way. He’s a hot little thing, and I’d love to have a go at that sexy ass of yours. Think about it.”

“Well, maybe you’re right.” Ryder spoke slowly, as if considering Beckett’s proposal. “Tell you what. How about I get him warmed up, and we’ll see where it goes from there?”

“I knew you’d see it my way.” Beckett chuckled and released Sidney, pushing him toward Ryder. “I want to watch a little anyway.”

Ryder pushed Sidney behind him unceremoniously. “Then watch this, asshole.” His fist swung out, plowing right into the big brute’s nose.

Sidney let out a very undignified squeak and took several steps back. Before Beckett could recover from the blow to his nose, Ryder rammed a knee into his midsection and shoved him to the ground. Cheers and applause erupted from the patrons sitting around the bar.

Craig, the manager, came rushing over, waving his hands wildly and yelling at Ryder. “What the fuck is going on here?”

Before Sidney could explain, Ryder rounded on the man. “Take this garbage out and maybe I won’t file a sexual harassment suit against you. Or better yet, how about attempted rape?” Ryder glared at Craig, daring him to argue.

Sidney almost felt sorry for the manager. His eyes looked as though they’d pop right out of his skull as he glanced between the felled Beckett, the murderous Ryder, and the pale and shaken Sidney.

I'll take care of it," he finally muttered. His face turned red and the little vein at his temple pulsed.

"Oh, and he quits. Pay the man."

Though Ryder looked mad as hell, Sidney couldn't find it in him to be afraid. Pure, animalistic lust raced through his body, boiling his blood and leaving him panting. He had never been more attracted to anyone in his life. Ryder was a warrior, and Sidney was lost. No one else would ever be good enough.

Craig hurried to the register and pulled out a handful of twenties, shoving them in Sidney's hands. He began to refuse, but Ryder wrapped an arm around his waist, thanked the manager, and steered him toward the exit.

Once outside, he placed Sidney in the passenger seat of his SUV and slammed the door. Ryder was pissed, and crazy or not, Sidney found it hot as hell. He'd just have to see what he could do to improve the man's mood.

Ryder climbed into the driver's seat and buckled his seatbelt without a word.

"Ryder, you really have t—"

Ryder held up a hand, cutting Sidney off. He shook his head, but still didn't say a word.

Oh-kay.

They rode home in uncomfortable silence. Sidney knew the shit would hit the fan when they made it there, but he couldn't tame his lust. Seeing Ryder like this had him wanting to lick, bite, tease, kiss, and suck the rage right out of his angry detective.

"Ry." Sidney tried again when they pulled into the driveway.

Ryder didn't even look at him as he got out of the vehicle and slammed the door.

Sidney jumped out of the car and raced after him. Catching up just as Ryder unlocked the front door, he grabbed the taller man by the forearm and pulled him around.

“What the hell is your problem?” Ryder had every right to be upset, but he didn’t need to take it out on Sidney. “Answer me!”

“Oh, I fully intend to answer you, but not out here.” He finished unlocking the door and swung it open. “After you, princess.”

Sidney huffed as he pushed past Ryder and into the house. He turned, hands fisted on his hips, and glared at his lover. “This is the third time in four months, Ryder. How am I ever supposed to keep a job if you keep punching out my coworkers, managers, and even that poor customer last month?”

Ryder didn’t even look ashamed. “Maybe you need to stop working in gay bars.”

“Where else would you have me work? Look at me!” Sidney held his arms out wide. “Do you think I’d last ten minutes in one of those redneck joints?”

His eyes darkening, Ryder sidled forward and placed his hands on Sidney’s hips, pulling him closer. “I love the way you look, but so does everyone else.” His fingers trailed across the patch of bare skin exposed between Sidney’s waistband and shirt hem, causing him to shiver.

Sidney’s breath caught his throat when his lover leaned forward and ran his tongue up the column of his throat. He should probably be used to Ryder distracting him this way.

“Yes, definitely love the way you look.”

* * * *

Nibbling at Sidney’s neck and slipping his hands under his lover’s shirt, Ryder still couldn’t believe how fate had smiled on him. Six months to the date since he’d nearly lost his life, and he thanked the powers that be every day for another chance to love Sidney.

Nana, being the kind woman she was, had decided Sidney and Ryder needed space of their own and moved to a swank retirement home down the street. Ryder and Sidney had both argued vehemently

against the move, but as always, Claire won. She seemed happy, had made some new friends, and much to Sidney's delight and Ryder's dismay, had even found himself a new beau.

"Pick something else, Sid. Anything else. I don't like you working in these places."

Sidney sighed and took a step back. He twisted his hands together, looking up at Ryder nervously. "I have my GED now, and I was thinking I might give college a try. They have grants, and I'm sure I would qualify for financial aid. I can always take out student loans if I need to."

"Nonsense. I have more than enough money to help you pay for college. We are partners remember? What's mine is ours, baby." Ryder narrowed his eyes at his lover when the little man started to argue. "Just accept and say thank you."

Sidney sighed, "Fine and thank you." He kissed Ryder's lips. "I love you, you big jerk."

"What time are our reservations?" Ryder didn't relish wearing a suit and tie, but he did look forward to their weekly dates.

"Ten o'clock, same as always." Sidney slipped his hands under Ryder's T-shirt, running his hands over Ryder's flat stomach. "Just enough time to make love to my man. Maybe twice." He winked and gripped Ryder's shirt in his fist, pulling him toward the sofa.

"Mmm, I like couch sex," Ryder purred.

"Uh-huh." He pulled Ryder's shirt over his head, tossing it carelessly behind him.

Kissing and licking his way around Ryder's chest, drawing the hardened nipples into his mouth and biting them lightly, Sidney set to work driving him insane. He continued downward, sucking and nipping, until he knelt on the floor.

Reaching up, he undid Ryder's jeans and pulled them down to his ankles in quick and determined movements. Ryder's straining cock sprang free, bobbing and straining toward his lover. Sidney moaned,

burying his nose in the curls and snaking his tongue along the crease where groin met thigh.

“Love the way you smell,” he whimpered. “Love the way you taste.” His tongue swirled around the tip of Ryder’s prick as his long fingers fondled Ryder’s balls.

A deep throb started in Ryder’s shaft, a sweet and much desired ache, leaving him hard and wanting. Sidney pushed him roughly until he splayed out on the sofa, and then tugged his jeans off, tossing them aside indifferently.

Then he dove in like a starving man, lapping and sucking, swallowing repeatedly around the crown pushing against the softness at the back of his throat. Knowing Sidney desired him so much was a heady feeling and set Ryder’s lust to boiling, his body burning, his heart pounding rapidly inside his chest.

“Come here,” he demanded hoarsely.

Sidney paused in his ministrations, looking up at Ryder with his head cocked to the side. A slow smile spread across his face, and he slowly rose to his feet and disrobed. Crawling into Ryder’s lap, Sidney ground his hips around Ryder’s, locking their mouths and tongues together in a heated dual.

Ryder pulled back only when the need for oxygen made his lungs burn. “Turn around.”

Sidney looked confused for a moment, but he quickly repositioned, sitting in Ryder’s lap, his back pressed against Ryder’s chest. He reached behind him, slipping a hand between their sweaty bodies, unerringly finding Ryder’s straining cock and gripping it in a firm hold.

Ryder moaned deeply, kissing the sensitive skin at the back of Sidney’s neck. His arms wrapped around his lover, touching and caressing every inch of skin he could reach. He swept his hands over Sidney’s chest, pinching at his nipples, stroking the skin along his soft stomach and round hips. Running the tips of his fingers up the inside

of Sidney's thighs with a feather-light touch, he reached the man's jerking erection and grasped it tightly.

He arched his hips, humping into Sidney's hand as his lover squirmed and moaned above him. "Wanna taste you," he breathed into Sidney's ear before sucking the lobe into his mouth.

Sidney leaned forward, showing off his flexibility, wiggling around until his knees rested on the back of the couch, and his leaking cock bobbed before Ryder's glazed eyes.

"Oh, fuck yeah." Ryder wrapped his arms around Sidney's thighs and went to work, sucking his lover's turgid flesh to the back of his throat as Sidney returned the favor, lavishing attention to Ryder's own aching length.

The wet warmth of Sidney's saliva dribbled down his shaft, along his crease, and over his tight hole. A slim finger quickly followed, swirling around Ryder's entrance before pushing in fast and deep.

Groaning around the glistening rod in his mouth, Ryder inched down on the sofa, spreading his legs further to give his lover more room to play.

Then the finger disappeared and a blunt pressure at his opening gave him pause. Too far lost in his pleasure to care, Ryder spread his legs even wider, releasing Sidney's cock with a wet slurp and diving in between the rounded hills of his upturned ass.

Holding the cheeks separated with one hand, he reached between Sidney's spread thighs with the other and began stroking him quickly. He lapped at the tight muscles of his lover's opening, then pushed inside, intent on reaching Sidney's throat with his tongue.

Sidney groaned, the sound muffled around Ryder's cock, and something cold and unyielding slid inside his wet hole as Sidney swallowed around the head of his swollen shaft. His muscles clamped down on the unknown object as it began pumping in and out of his contracting sphincter, hurdling Ryder over the edge.

He continued to jerk Sidney almost roughly, sliding a finger into his ass and zeroing in on his pleasure button as he threw his head back and groaned his release.

Sidney followed seconds later, crying out Ryder's name, his velvet walls clutching at Ryder's finger, and hot lava spilled over his hand to land on his chest.

Sagging against the cushions, he released Sidney's legs and helped him shimmy down to the floor. "Holy damn."

"Oh, yeah." Sidney lay heaped on the floor, panting and flushed.

"What the hell did you put inside me?"

Sidney smiled sheepishly and held up a slim, tapered candle.

"You fucked me with the candle from the end table?" Ryder threw his head back and laughed, the sound coming deep from his belly. "I'm never going to be able to smell vanilla without getting hard again!"

"Same here." Sidney nodded solemnly, pulling more laughter from Ryder.

He slid to the floor, gathered his little man in his arms, and poured all of his love and joy into a passionate kiss. "Life will never be boring with you."

Sidney just smiled. "I need a shower." He hopped to his feet and bounced up the stairs, pausing halfway to the top to blow a kiss over his shoulder.

Ryder sighed, happy and content. Eyeing the candle on the floor, he thought about the bath sponge with the long, rubber handle in the shower. Grinning wickedly, he made his way up the stairs to find the man he loved.

Sidney had mentioned something about loving him twice, after all.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabrielle Evans grew up in a small town in southern Oklahoma. We are talking one red light that may or may not work depending on the day of the week. She married her high school sweetheart and the rest is pretty much history. They have two very active boys and one high-strung wiener dog that keeps her constantly on the go. For now, she parks her car in north-central Texas, but who knows what tomorrow will bring.

Gabrielle believes in love at first sight, falling hard and fast, taking chances, and grabbing your happy-ever-after with both hands. She also believes that a great cup of coffee can cure anything.

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