



Bittersweet

MAURA ANDERSON

Aspen Mountain Press

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Erotic chocolatier Brandon makes all sorts of tempting and tasty creations that celebrate love and sex. Too bad he's given up on finding love for himself after his last lover and told he wasn't worthy of a real relationship just before he dumped him.

When David picks up an order of chocolates for his best friend's wedding, he wonders if the muscular, tattooed Brandon will taste sweet or bittersweet... After David finds out that Brandon is gay, he needs to step up and let the sexy chocolatier know he's interested, but can he screw up the courage to do it?

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Aspen Mountain Press
PO Box 473543
Aurora CO 80047-3543
www.AspenMountainPress.com

Published by Aspen Mountain Press, July 2009
www.AspenMountainPress.com

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ISBN: 978-1-60168-234-5
Released in the United States of America

Editor: Raven McKnight
Cover artist: Amanda Kelsey

Dedication:

As usual, many people have helped this story come to life. In particular, I'd like to thank Laura Baumbach, Raven McKnight, Jet Mykles, Kimberly Gardner, and Luisa Prieto for their immense patience and forbearance as it took me next to forever to get this story completed. My husband is also to be commended for his immense patience with endless fussing, complaining about non-cooperative characters, and somehow managing to NOT say "I told you so" when I gave up and just let Brand and Dave do what they wanted to.

Chapter One

Dark chocolate and sex — a perfect combination. Too bad he had a lot of the first but none of the second; at least none that involved a second person. Maybe his X-rated treats would inspire the recipients to have a good time, though.

With a sigh of satisfaction, Brand carefully tucked the remaining dark chocolate box in its nest of crimson waxed paper and set it inside the heavy delivery box. One last check to ensure that there was enough space to allow the fragile boxes to travel without sticking or breaking and he closed the container. A few pieces of tape secured the elegantly printed lid, and he set it on the long steel table behind the counter with the other three he'd already filled.

Done. Not that he should have taken an order this large with this short a deadline to start with. If his staff had agreed to it, he'd have chewed them out. But the bride had been difficult to say no to, and it made a convenient distraction from his own thoughts. Work filled that bill, and he liked the added bonus of making someone's day.

Shirlee planted herself within his field of view and just stood there until he looked her in the eye. Her crossed arms nearly made him laugh. If you discounted her youth, the pierced eyebrow, the Doc Marten boots, and the multiple skulls and crossbones that littered her clothing, the strict schoolmarm expression might have been a bit more effective. Instead the raised eyebrow and grumpy, chastising look made him bite his tongue—hard. He took a few steps back to his large work area for the clipboard with the order information and held it out to her.

“Here’s the order form, and they’ve already paid. Pickup is supposed to be by six today.”

“Umm, Brand, has it escaped your notice that we closed at four? That would be an hour ago?” Now she looked downright annoyed. “Why do you keep letting people talk you into nearly unachievable rush orders and weird pickup and delivery options?”

“Umm, because I don’t want to turn business away in this economy?”

One heavily penciled eyebrow lifted, and Shirlee stared at him in blatant disbelief. She clearly wasn’t buying it, not even for a moment.

“Okay, because I like to make people happy?”

Yes, the rush order for twenty-five sex-toy candy boxes had kept him late at work for a week, but it’s not like he had anywhere else to be. The weather had been too drizzly and rainy to make him want to go for an evening ride, and his cats were always happy to see him whenever he arrived. Hell, he didn’t even have to be home to catch his favorite television shows—TiVO had that covered. But work kept him from thinking too much.

This bride was the friend of a friend, too. He couldn’t help it that he still had a soft spot for love and lovers. Too bad it wasn’t mutual. His chest tightened with a deep ache. No, he didn’t have any time to think of that. Jason

and his betrayal were years in the past. Pushing the memories away didn't ease the ache at all.

"You might be a sucker for other people's romances, but boss, how are you ever going to get a date if you don't ever get out of here?" Shirlee shook her head, setting her currently shaggy green hair into motion. Then she gave him a mischievous grin "You could be sucking on something a lot more fun, after all."

"I don't need a date, Shirl. And do not set me up with any of your friends again. When I want a date, I'll find my own. And somehow I don't think discussions on what to suck are something I want to have. Especially at work. Thank you, anyway."

She rolled her eyes and stuck her tongue out before she turned to grab the army bandolier she used as a purse off the hook behind the counter. After a few steps toward the door, Shirlee came back to pick up the order clipboard. Damn, he'd have enjoyed teasing her about her OCD coming with a lack of follow-through. But she'd remembered in time. A few moments were all it took for her to tape one copy of the work order to the boxes, put the other copy in the filing basket, and hang the now-empty clipboard on a nail on the prep area's project wall, then head off toward her car.

Alone, Brand flipped the lock on the store's front door and treated himself to a mocha. The richly scented steam hit his lungs, and he sighed. How come he could smell coffee a mile away but he was almost immune to the scent of chocolate now? He could still smell it, but it didn't register unless he concentrated on it. It seemed to have lost its allure. Ah well, maybe it was just one of the greater mysteries. He was too exhausted to ponder it for long.

He loved his store and his edible art, but he needed to sit for a while. He reached one booted foot out, hooked the tall counter stool, and dragged it

closer. A groan escaped him at the tight ache that consumed his back and legs when he sat down.

It made for a long day when he'd come in at three a.m. Again.

Maybe he did need a good fuck. The insomnia had grown worse, and when he managed to get to sleep, he kept waking up again and again, thrashing around in bed and thinking far too much. Why the hell couldn't he sleep, even after he worked himself into a near stupor? For that matter, why did he keep working so hard?

He'd finally succeeded. The business his relatives thought would fail in its first year was making a nice profit now. His income was good without having to sell his soul to the corporate world or work in someone else's space. Even in the growing uncertainty of the recession, he managed to see a small increase.

Too bad Jason couldn't see him now.

No. That was the past, and it needed to stay in the past. The future needed his attention, and he had a great idea for a pomegranate and dark chocolate truffle addition to the aphrodisiac candy series.

He drained the rest of his coffee and refilled it before going back to his work area. Selecting ingredients from his huge storeroom, he focused on the treat he wanted to create instead of what might have been.

* * * * *

Aha! A parking spot right on the street in Fremont. That was rarer than three dry spring days in row. David pulled his little Mazda into the open space with a sigh of relief. Chris had said she'd promised to be there to pick up the X-rated chocolates at six, and it was already a little after that. He'd rushed out of the office as fast as he could after getting her frantic reminder

phone call, but being waylaid by a coworker along the way had cut things very close to the designated pickup time.

He hopped out of the car, taking advantage of a brief gap in the street traffic, and raced over to the ominously quiet-looking shop. A glance at the hours listed on the glass door showed that they closed at four p.m. on weeknights. The lights were still on, but no one seemed to be inside.

“Dammit!” How was he supposed to pick up something at six when the shop closed at four?

Ripping his cell phone out of its holster, he stabbed the keys to call Chris. Just as he heard the phone begin to ring through, he saw movement in the back of the shop. A powerfully built man stepped out of a back room and came around the display case, wiping his hands on a towel. David couldn’t help staring as the man walked toward the door.

A long-sleeved black t-shirt clung to the heavy muscles that bunched and flexed beneath it. Worn black jeans snugly fitted lean hips and thick thighs, with black harness boots finishing out the other man’s outfit. Everything that turned David on, wrapped up in one bad-boy package. Not at all what he’d expected to find working in a chocolate shop.

David glanced back up the sexy man’s body again and looked through the glass door into the most amazing pair of steel-grey eyes edged with the lines of a man who knew how to smile and did so often. Goosebumps erupted on David’s arms, and he swallowed convulsively. Holy crap, this was every wet dream he’d ever had, come to life. The white paper hairnet wasn’t quite in keeping with the rest of the fantasy, though. Not that it deterred David’s now-throbbing cock.

Hell, if his luck ran true to form, the sexy-as-hell man would be decidedly straight, and David didn’t want to get on Chris’s bad side by risking her

chocolate fix. She might be his best friend, but she had a temper he'd rather not run afoul of.

When a tanned hand reached out to flip the door's deadbolt, the edge of a colorful tattoo peeked out from under the black shirt cuff. If possible, David's cock got even harder. Just what ink lay under that dark cotton? He forced himself to stop staring at the man and pasted a shaky smile on his face as the door swung open.

"Hi, I'm David Sterling, here to pick up an order for Chris Mortenson? I hope I'm not too late—if I can't get her chocolate, Chris will kill me. And she'll make sure it hurts."

The amazing smell of chocolate seemed to explode over him in a rush through the shop's doorway. He savored the rich smell. One deep breath, then another, and his eyes drifted closed in ecstasy.

A laugh, as dark and rich as the smell of the shop, sent a shiver up his spine, and David's eyes snapped back open. His cheeks grew hot with the blush he'd never learned to stifle.

The other man tugged off the hairnet to reveal curly black hair in a riot of disarray, as if fingers had been run through it over and over.

"Come on in. I'd hate to be the cause of your death." The husky voice was laced with humor. "I'm Brandon Williams, the owner. Sorry you had a scare, but the shop was closed and I was working in the back. I don't like to leave the door unlocked if no one's out here."

David stepped into the chocolate shop, still savoring the smells, and tried to will his hard-on away, without much success. The shop was bigger than he'd expected, with a bit of bordello in the scarlet and black décor, but the huge variety of chocolates in the display cabinets was impressive.

Stepping past him, Brandon tossed the hairnet and towel on a table behind the counter and gestured toward three large boxes in the same scarlet and black as the shop's décor.

"Here's the order for Chris. Twenty-five dark chocolate sex toy chests, with toys." He pulled off the piece of paper taped to the lid of the top box and set it on the counter with a pen. "Can you sign that you've picked them up, please?"

David scrawled his name at the bottom of the form, distracted by the smear of chocolate he'd seen on the other man's hand. Damned if he didn't want to lick it off...slowly. Obviously it had been far too long since he'd gotten laid, or even gotten close to being laid. Helping Chris with her wedding had taken a lot of his time the last several months, and it was longer than that since he'd found a man he wanted to get close to. Most gay men he met in the normal course of his day were more prissy and metrosexual than he was attracted to. This man was anything but.

He looked up and saw Brandon's grey eyes staring at him with what looked like interest, but as soon as the other man saw he was being watched, he hurried to take the signed form and toss it into a tray with some similar forms.

Hmm. Very interesting reaction. Maybe the hunky candy man wasn't straight after all.

"I'll put these in the car for you." The chocolatier picked up the three boxes with no effort at all and nodded for David to precede him to the door. David held the shop door open for Brandon, then clicked the remote to unlock his car. Thankful for his spacious trunk, he popped it open and made sure the boxes were settled in, flat on the trunk floor so they wouldn't tip or fall over while he drove to the party.

Once the trunk was shut again, Brandon held out his large tanned hand to shake David's. "Hope you and your fiancée have a great party and enjoy the chocolates."

Stunned, David stood motionless for a moment. Talk about the wrong idea completely. Where did candy man get the idea he was the groom?

He reached out for a solid handshake, and as Brandon released his hand and turned to go back into the shop, David called out, "You know, I'm not Chris's fiancé. I'm the man of honor. I love Chris, but she's my best friend. I'm just not into dating women."

Laughing at the stunned look on Brandon's face, he waved as he drove away.

Chapter Two

Brand stared after the car as David drove it away. What the hell was a man of honor anyway? Certain the smartly dressed blond was Chris's groom, he'd tried to distract himself from the lust racing through him, but had failed miserably. He'd told himself the other man was off limits, but his cock refused to listen.

Of course, groom or not, Brand was being true to type – drooling after a guy in a suit and tie, again. Another person that was sure to be out of his league, who would only be interested in him as a way of flirting with the wild side. Maybe looking for a touch of danger, or a bad boy to add some spice to his life.

He'd assumed David was straight from the start. Despite the assumption of some of his straight friends, he'd never discovered the secret gay handshake of legend. Too bad – it would make some things a little more convenient and less prone to failure if it actually existed.

Brand cleaned his workroom and stored the completed test candy for sampling the next day. Finally he zipped on his leather riding gear and turned

out the shop lights. Alarm set, he locked the back door and fired up his Harley.

The ride home seemed to pass in a flash. Usually he could rely on a ride to clear his mind, to only let him think of riding itself. Not tonight. Instead he wallowed in the realization that he wasn't just alone, he was lonely. He missed coming home to someone, to another person who was glad to see him, wanted to know about his day and to relate his own. Someone to share a simple dinner with and, yes, even hot, sweaty sex.

His demanding mistresses would be thrilled to see him and would be waiting for dinner, but somehow two spoiled Russian Blue cats were just not the same.

Brand pulled his motorcycle up into his driveway and pressed the garage remote. When the door opened far enough, he pulled the bike inside and parked it. As soon as his helmet was off, he could hear Ana and Tatiana's demanding meows.

"I'm coming already."

He smiled at their antics, happy to have given in to the urge to get the cats he'd always wanted once Jason and his objections had moved out. Under no illusions that it was anything other than stomach love on their part, he still loved the two elegant grey cats and appreciated their love in return. At least they never judged him unfairly and were honest with him.

Leathers hung on their hooks, he opened the door into the kitchen while using one foot to shoo Ana away from the door with practiced ease so she wouldn't escape into the garage or get stepped on. Both seemed to be talents she'd been born with. Far too good for such a gauche display, her sister was already sitting on the floor near their porcelain food bowls, licking a paw while she patiently awaited her overdue dinner delivery.

“And how was your day, ladies? Did you see any squirrels out the window today?” Brand opened a can of expensive – and equally stinky – food and split it between the two dishes. True to form, Ana stuck her head under the can as he was dishing it up and got a bit of food on her forehead.

“Sheesh, Ana. You have no table manners at all. Now you’ll have to get your sister to groom you or get a bath from me again.” He flicked the food off her head with a forefinger. “Try to remember you’re Russian princesses, not Mongol barbarians.”

Cats fed, Brand pulled a plate of leftover lasagna from the fridge and stuck it in the microwave to heat while he took a quick shower.

Damn, he was tired and sore. Too much time spent bent over his cooling table and too few breaks made his back ache. He reached into the shower enclosure and turned the shower on as hard as possible, then swung it to very hot. Steam began to billow over the glass shower wall while he stripped and tossed his clothes into the hamper.

His breath caught at the heat of the water on his skin when he eased himself under the spray. A few seconds of gradual adjustment and he could feel the muscles of his shoulders and back start to ease, the knots created over the course of the day releasing in the pounding impact of the hot water. Hands braced on the far wall, he arched and flexed his back. His spine popped, adjusting in response, and Brand groaned.

Wet hair tossed back from his face, he fumbled for the bar of unscented soap in the shower wall’s recess and worked up a thick lather before he set the soap back on its shelf. Eyes closed, he savored the feel of his own hands rubbing the slippery suds over his shoulders and chest. Fingers trailed through the hair on his chest and abdomen, simple washing slowing into caresses and strokes.

Skin tingling, he imagined David's hands were washing him instead. The other man's long, clever fingers stroked up his abdomen to his chest, then grazed his nipples. His breath caught at the light pinches that made his nipples tighten and engorge. Firmly rolled between index fingers and thumbs, they seemed to send electric shocks directly to his now-hard cock.

The almost painful rolling and pinching drove his lust higher and higher. Head thrown back, his hips thrust forward and back, forward and back. He imagined David standing before him in the big shower, his sky-blue eyes watching Brand's face as he learned his body. Unable to resist any longer, Brand trailed his hands down his soapy chest and belly to his weeping, neglected cock.

"Ahhh." He gasped as the phantom David traced his fingers lightly up and down his erection. The barest touch was enough to make his balls draw up and the sizzling sensation of an impending orgasm settled in the base of his cock. One hand wrapped around his balls, stroking and fondling the contracted skin and tugging them gently away from his body.

The feel of imminent explosion eased slightly, and he allowed the hand on his cock to move. He ran one hand up, circled the head of his cock, then moved back down the rock-hard shaft. Up and down, up and down. Stroke after stroke, flames seemed to lick up his spine and wrap around his balls until he came so hard he saw stars.

The force of his orgasm made him shudder and brace one hand against the opposite side of the shower enclosure, other hand still milking his cock as white, ropery cum erupted. What would it feel like if David were drawing out his orgasm, pushing him as far as he could stand to go?

Once the shudders eased and he caught his breath, he quickly finished his shower and turned to open the shower door, only to see two pairs of golden eyes fixed on him in seeming fascination. Oh, jeez, now his cats were voyeurs.

“Girls, didn’t anyone tell you it’s not polite to stare?” They merely watched him towel himself dry, with an attention to detail they usually reserved for the laser pointer or the squirrels outside his house.

“You know, I can lock you out. You don’t know how to turn a doorknob.” Yet. He should know by now to not challenge them. They seemed to love a challenge, and Brand typically lost, as evidenced by the child latches now installed on most of the cupboards after the debacle with the container of cake flour they had somehow managed to pry the lid off of.

With a disdainful flick of an elegant grey tail, Tatiana stalked off into the bedroom with her sister following in her wake. The faint jingle of their tags told Brand they’d probably taken over his bed again.

What would they think of him bringing a man home? They weren’t that fond of men, and their foster family had been amazed that they’d accepted him as quickly as they had. Would they like David?

He shook his head at his own thoughts, hung up the towels, and tidied the bathroom. It’s not like David would meet them. What was his sudden fixation on the mysterious “man of honor”? Hell, he needed to get real and get on with life. Maybe someday he’d find someone who honestly wanted him for himself and with whom he could share his life and heart as well as his body.

The purring cats on his bed did little to ease the lonely ache in his gut, and Brand headed back to the kitchen to eat his solo dinner.

* * * * *

Was he dead? No, if he was dead, it would surely be a lot quieter. Even if he'd been consigned to the Hell his Pentecostal relatives regularly assured him was waiting just for him, it would have to be quieter. What was that horrendous thumping, anyway?

David started to open his eyes, only to cringe at the bolt of pain that lanced through every nerve ending above his neck at the merest sliver of light. Moving slowly and carefully, he draped one arm over his eyes and moaned in pain, then cringed again. Crap, his own damned voice made him hurt worse. Every square inch of skin seemed to ache and throb. What the hell had happened?

Through the fog clouding his brain, he dredged up a few memories of Chris's wedding shower. Oh no. Had he really gotten *that* drunk? He couldn't think of any other reason for the vague memory of his letting Chris dress him in the bustier she'd gotten as a present and then doing an incredibly uncoordinated stripper dance around the room.

Thank God she'd put the bustier over his work clothes and he'd been too drunk to be able to undo it. If the universe had any mercy, he could bribe her fiancé, Shawn, to delete any pictures or videos he could find, and maybe, just maybe, she'd forget about it after a few years. Or decades.

Oh, who was he kidding? Chris never forgot good blackmail material. She still gave him shit about being caught kissing the boy she'd had her first major crush on in high school.

Another fuzzy memory surfaced of her trying to get him to kiss Shawn, and his head throbbed even more at the thought of that. Not that Shawn wasn't attractive, but he was strictly into pussy. And he had a mean right hook.

Eyes clamped shut, Dave ran his fingers gingerly over his face and sighed heavily when he didn't find any traces of swelling or tenderness. Hallelujah. At least he'd escaped that. It probably meant he'd not actually tried to kiss the groom-to-be.

Oh so slowly, he groped around until he located the edge of the bed and gradually made himself sit up. His head pounded with every movement, but he didn't seem to be nauseous. His bladder, however, was close to bursting. Before he could decide whether to try to walk or just resort to crawling to the bathroom, he heard the sound of keys in the front door and then the way-too-cheerful sound of Chris's voice.

"Wakey, wakey, sleepyhead!"

Dave cringed. Man, that woman's voice could carry.

Footsteps came down the hardwood hallway, echoing painfully.

"Are you still passed out in there? It's almost noon, you know."

She was far too perky, even for Chris. Red flags went up instantly. A too-cheerful Chris meant a plotting Chris. God, he could only hope that she wanted to plot with him instead of making him the victim of her latest plan.

He cracked his eyes open, just enough to see her silhouetted in the bedroom doorway. "Have you no mercy for the dying, woman?"

Peals of laughter rang out. He cringed again, and only the fear of tumbling over if he let go of the bed kept him from clamping his hands over his ears.

"I had more mercy than you deserved, since I had to have Shawn help me drag your drunk ass home. I even put you in your own bed, alone. Trust me, I really had to resist temptation to do that."

At least she'd lowered her voice to a more moderate level. She rustled around in her enormous purse, and he saw her pull a small bottle out before heading into his bathroom. Just the sound of the water running made his

bladder spasm painfully. Hell, if he didn't get in there soon, he was really going to be embarrassed.

Chris appeared before him again and held out a glass of water and several small pills. "Here, take some aspirin before your head falls off. I couldn't believe how much you drank last night, but you certainly gave me a bridal shower to remember."

That smile was evil. Pure evil.

Dave took the aspirin and gulped them down with the offered water, draining the glass before he handed it back.

"Before you start telling me all about what a fool I made of myself and who you mailed the evidence to, I have to pee. And shower. In that order."

"Okay, but only because I love you. Just hurry up, I don't want to have to start running the washing machine or something to get you to come out again."

He groaned. "Okay. I'll hurry."

Twenty minutes later, he felt decidedly more human. His head still seemed several times its normal size, but he could fully open his eyes and even walk without fear of falling over. A definite plus, in case he had to run away from his best friend.

Ratty sweatpants loosely tied around his hips, he walked out into his living room to find Chris flopped on the couch, flipping through the channels on his satellite receiver. Unlike him, she didn't seem to have suffered any aftereffects of the wild shower party. Bitch.

Ignoring her squawk of protest, he shoved her feet off the couch to make room for himself to sit.

"So, do I want to know why you're here or not?"

"Probably not. But don't expect me to let you off the hook." She grinned that evil grin again. "You do know you talk way too much when you decide to drink scotch, right? I don't know why, but it's almost like a truth serum for you; even better than tequila."

He took a deep breath and reminded himself that there wasn't much Chris didn't already know, so it couldn't be too bad. Right? He tried to hold on to that thought for everything he was worth.

Chris patted his arm almost maternally. "Don't worry, you didn't really start to blab until everyone but Shawn and I had left. I'm afraid you did make Shawn blush when you referred to the owner of Sensual Chocolates as 'lickable, suckable, and fuckable,' then wondered if he'd even taste like chocolate."

Dave felt his face grow instantly hot, but just her mention of the hunky candy man made his cock rise to instant attention. He groaned and buried his face in his hands, hoping against hope that Chris would drop the subject for now.

"Chris, do not play matchmaker for me. I'm more than capable of getting my own dates, and if I want to ask Brandon out, I can do it myself."

"Aww. You're no fun at all."

The pouting tone of voice told him his suspicions had been correct. Now that she was so happy with Shawn, she seemed determined to find him the perfect partner. Just over the last few months, he'd fended off her matchmaking attempts more than a couple of times. Now she seemed to be escalating her campaign.

"You'll see him again, won't you? It really is the first time I've seen you that interested in a long time." Chris's voice was suddenly serious. "You're alone too much, and I want you to be happy."

Dave looked up. When he saw his friend's teary eyes, he reached out to gather her to him. Hugging her close, he rocked her back and forth gently.

"I know you do, hon. Really. It's okay."

Muffled by his chest, she mumbled something he couldn't make out, then pushed back a little. "My shower was the most wonderful party ever. Thank you so much for your hard work."

"Hey, what's a man of honor for? Just remember your promise that I don't have to dance with Shawn's best man, okay? He's scary, and his wife keeps giving me funny looks."

Chris gave a weepy sob and nodded before she buried her face against him again.

Chapter Three

“Hey, boss.” Shirlee called out from the front area of the shop.

Brand shook off his persistent daydream and walked the few steps out into the showroom. He was only working at half-speed as it was, so a few minutes away from his current project wouldn’t hurt.

“What’s up?”

“Someone named Chris on the phone about the order of toy boxes you did last week. She doesn’t sound upset, but she wants to talk directly to you.” Shirlee handed him the cordless handset and turned back to the counter to help the next customer in line.

A familiar pang of nervousness made him pause for a moment. Was she unhappy, even a little? Had something gone wrong? Despite years in business, he still hated the thought that any customer might be disappointed with his work. One deep breath to steady himself and he lifted the handset to his ear.

“This is Brandon Williams. Can I help you?”

“Oh, Mr. Williams, this is Christine Mortenson. I wanted to thank you so much for the amazing chocolates you made for my shower. Everyone just loved them.”

Despite his fears, this was actually a very happy customer. The tension released from his shoulders and back in a rush.

"I'm very happy to hear you were satisfied with your order."

"I was thrilled. And thank you so much for staying late so we could pick up the order. I didn't know you were supposed to close long before Dave got there." There was a slight scolding tone to her voice. "If I'd have known that you closed earlier, I would have gotten him to pick the order up at lunch. He's an HR manager and works downtown, but he could have made some time.

"But I'm actually calling to see what you'd suggest as treats for my wedding rehearsal and the wedding itself. I'd really like to have something special for everyone. It's in just three weeks, though, so I thought I'd better call right away."

"The more notice we have, the better, especially since it's wedding season. What are you considering?"

They spent a while discussing different options, and she finally settled on small, elegant boxes of his exotic chocolate truffles for the rehearsal and relatively sedate hollow chocolate hearts filled with hard candies for the wedding—things that fit in both the budget and the timeframe available.

Happy to have talked her through to a decision, Brand pulled two blank order forms from the stack kept ready by the phone and filled in the new orders.

Would David pick these up as well? The stray thought popped up from nowhere.

Just the thought of seeing the handsome man again made Brand's cock stir to attention. He bit back a groan and shifted on his feet, trying to ease the restriction of his jeans. It didn't matter if David Sterling picked up the order or not; he was not Brand's type.

Why didn't that seem to matter?

"Is it possible to arrange delivery for both of these orders, Mr. Williams? It would help so much to not have to worry about someone getting there in time to pick them up and then worry that it would get too hot or something would happen to ruin them."

Brand heard himself agreeing before he thought about it. He didn't normally do deliveries, but it was a hefty order with a price tag that made the trouble worthwhile. But why did his mind immediately conjure an image of a sexy-as-hell, tuxedo-clad David?

Stifling a groan, he took the rest of the information he'd need for the order and deliveries, then hung up the phone and shook his head. It was pitiful for a grown man to be this hung up on someone he'd met one time and who wasn't his type anyway. Or at least wasn't the type he should be hung up on.

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For the third time in only a week, Dave found himself driving by Sensual Chocolates and craning his neck in a vain attempt to catch a glimpse of the handsome and sexy owner through the front window as he drove by. Not only did this annoy the other drivers, but he was starting to lose patience with himself. Surely he was too old to keep trying to convince himself that the twelve-mile detour was somehow on his way to anywhere. Anywhere except a case of sexual frustration, that is.

Why was he so enamored of a man he'd only met once? Suddenly his peaceful condo had become too quiet. He found himself working later and later so he didn't have to go home to a lonely house. He'd even called Chris two nights ago and attempted to invite her out to dinner on the pretext of

discussing wedding plans, but she'd only laughed and offered to set him up with another friend of hers instead.

He needed to grow a pair, obviously.

On a complete impulse, he turned onto a side street near the shop and found a parking spot. After feeding some quarters to the meter, he buttoned up his wool coat and made his way back up the street. The wind was a bit strong today, swirling around the buildings and blowing down the main street. At least it was warming up, and he'd heard rumors of a dry weekend coming up. Thank heaven. He could use a nice long ride, and it was always a lot nicer to not get soaked. The Pacific Northwest really lived up to its rainforest reputation this time of year, with a heavy emphasis on "rain."

He could smell the rich aroma of chocolate before he reached the door of Brandon's shop, but it didn't do anything to calm him. His gut clenched and his mouth felt dry. Would Brandon even be working today?

With a grimace, he pulled the shop's door open and walked into the warm interior. Despite the economic downturn, there was a line of customers waiting to be helped by the two women behind the counter. The shop's scarlet and black décor was even richer-looking in the daylight, elegant even, but Dave almost laughed when he saw the goth-to-the-max woman behind the counter. She seemed quite young, especially with the eyebrow piercing and the hair in pretty much every shade of purple imaginable. He'd never actually seen hair that managed to clash with itself before. Despite her appearance, she was quickly and expertly serving customers and offering suggestions and information on the plethora of chocolates in the cases. The other woman looked older and was quite a bit more conservatively dressed, but the younger girl was clearly in charge.

\$Another great example of never judging a book by its cover.\$

Dave got into the waiting line and just watched the other customers as they made their purchases. If he put his mind to it, he might be able to ignore his own growing nervousness. The variety of customers was impressive, and he indulged his hobby of people-watching while the line slowly moved through.

Finally at the head of the line, he stepped up to the counter.

"What can I help you with?" The goth girl's nametag read "Shirlee," and her friendly smile gave a much-needed boost to his resolve.

"Hi, my name is Dave, and I picked up an order from Brandon last week. I wanted to see if I could talk to him for a few minutes. Is he working today?"

Shirlee laughed. "'When isn't he here' is a better question."

She tilted her head and seemed to look through him for a moment. Just long enough to make him feel uncomfortable. What was she thinking? Had Brandon said something?

"Are you the guy who picked up that rush wedding shower order?"

At his nod, she lit up with a huge grin. "Ahhh. You're the cute guy that got the boss all worked up, then."

Long practice kicked in, and he covered his surprise with a wink and a flirtatious laugh. "I don't know about worked up then, but I'm willing to give it a shot now."

She narrowed her eyes and seemed to examine him carefully, still smiling but clearly not amused by his play. "You should know, Brand is a really good man and deserves someone who cares about him, not just guys that are after his body and bad-boy image."

Even more amazed now, he snapped his mouth shut on the retort that leapt to his lips. Who was Shirlee to Brandon? She acted almost like a sister or guard dog.

No. She acts just like Chris does around me.

"Duly noted."

Shirlee seemed happy enough with his answer and pointed toward a small table near the counter. "Why don't you have a seat and I'll get the boss. Would you like a mocha or a latte?"

"Umm, can I just have a tall americano?" He pulled out his wallet to pay, but she waved him toward the table instead

"On the house." She gave him a wicked smile. "Can't have the boss's friend paying for coffee."

Wallet tucked back in his pocket, Dave took off his wool overcoat and draped it over the back of one of the chairs, then sat so he could see toward the back of the shop. Would Brandon be surprised to see him? Happy to see him? Were the signals he'd picked up a week ago correct? Was the sexy chocolatier at all interested in him? Was he single?

For a brief moment, he really wanted to snatch up his coat and run back to his office.

Too late—Shirlee set a big ceramic mug of fragrant coffee in front of him and another of what looked more like a mocha across from him. A small plate with three chocolates on it joined the coffee.

"I'll get Brand. Just a sec."

He nodded and covered his continued nervousness by methodically adding cream and sugar to his cup.

A few minutes later, Brandon appeared in the doorway to the back room. He stopped, giving Dave a chance to admire his sexy body. David's memory hadn't lied. Broad muscular shoulders filled the doorway and slimmed down to narrow hips. Thick thighs filled black jeans, and Dave licked his lips and wished he could see what lay under the black fabric. A few small smears of

chocolate marked the other man's clothes – would his warm skin taste like chocolate as well?

A hand reached up from behind and snatched the white hairnet off the dark, curling hair. Brandon jerked forward as if pushed. The other man said something back over his shoulder, then jerked forward again and finally started toward where Dave waited.

The instant the chocolatier's steel-grey eyes met his, he felt an electric tingle shoot through him. Holy moly, when was the last time he'd been this attracted to someone, had this strong a chemistry? He didn't know much about the other man, but he knew he wanted to know more.

Dave stood and held out his hand for the strong handshake. Did Brandon's hand linger a little longer than strictly required for politeness?

"Hi, Brandon. I was in the area and thought I'd stop in and see how your day was going." Why was he standing, looking like a teenager asking for a prom date? He sat back down in his chair and picked up his coffee to busy his hands. Hell, could he sound any more inane?

Brandon finally pulled out the other chair and sat down, sipping his own drink before he said anything. "It's nice to see you, but I have to ask why you're really here."

Before David could overcome his surprise at the blunt words, Brand took another sip of his coffee and continued.

"We have nothing really in common other than being two gay men. You're obviously from a different world than I am, and I'm not interested in being a bad-boy-toy for any suit."

What the hell? Where had Brandon gotten the idea that he was looking for some sort of toy?

"What are you talking about?"

"You're an HR manager. You live in suits, and appearance is everything in your business. I'm nothing that would go with your image, and hot as you are, I just don't think we'd mesh very well." Brandon sat his empty cup down and stared into it, refusing to look at him, but a light blush on his cheeks said he wasn't unaffected or emotionally distant.

As the full meaning of Brandon's words set in, David could feel the heat in his veins turn from lust to anger. Brandon was judging him without really knowing him and had decided he was so shallow that he would only seriously want someone like himself? What the hell? That was rich, coming from a gay man. Talk about reverse discrimination.

Reining in his temper, David silently finished his coffee. Slow sips of the rich drink gave him time to consider the other man's words.

"You know, as much as you think you know who and what I am, you really know nothing about me. I'm rather offended that you think so badly of me with no basis for it. Maybe you need to look inside yourself for why you think you're only worthy of being liked and wanted as a 'bad-boy-toy.'" He set down the coffee cup with a clatter.

Brandon looked up at him, eyes wide in surprise.

"You're sexy, hot, and seemed to have a fun sense of humor. Maybe that's why I came to see you. Or maybe it's because you're a successful businessman." David stood and reached over the small table to grab the front of Brandon's t-shirt and pull the chocolatier closer.

"Maybe I want to know what you taste like." He whispered the words against the other man's slightly parted lips before claiming Brandon's mouth with his own. There was no gentleness in this kiss, just raw anger, need, and hunger. Lips ground together, and his tongue demanded entrance, devouring

and taunting. The other man tasted of an addictive mix of coffee, chocolate, and sexy man.

Only after tasting every inch of Brandon's mouth did he slowly retreat and give a sharp nip to the lush, swollen lower lip before releasing him.

David gathered up his coat as the other man stared at him, seemingly frozen in place.

"Something for you to think about." He slipped the coat back on and waved at Shirlee on his way out of the shop, refusing to look back at Brandon to see what his reaction was. His exit might have been more graceful if he hadn't been fighting both a raging temper and a raging hard-on.

Chapter Four

Was it really something he did to himself?

For what felt like the millionth time since David had come to the shop and ended up kissing him like he'd never been kissed before, Brand played over the other man's words in his mind. No matter which way he tried to examine the encounter, he looked like an ass. David had been right that Brand had judged him without really knowing more than what he looked like and what he did for a living.

Wasn't that just as bad as Jason's friends judging Brand by his appearance?

He wanted to kick himself—hard. Especially when he caught himself dreaming of David's kiss and imagining where things might have gone if he'd given the other man a chance instead of giving in to the baggage he carried around and pushing David away. Hell, he'd not even been sure whether David was interested and had shoved him away immediately.

But that kiss had floored him completely. Every time he thought about it too much, his cock became a steel bar in his jeans and he ended up sneaking

away to jerk off before he could get back to work. It led to some strange looks from his staff, but he hoped they didn't realize just how bad off he really was. He woke up almost every night with an enormous aching hard-on and visions of driving his cock into David's cute ass. It had gotten so bad, Tatiana and Ana had started sleeping at the head of the bed so his thrashing didn't cause them to be accidentally kicked off the bed.

He was driving himself, and everyone around him, crazy. David hadn't come back to see him, and he had an ominous feeling that the next move was entirely up to him.

Shirlee poked her head in the door of the workroom. "Is it safe to come in, boss?"

He laughed at her exaggerated caution, even though it was probably only partially in jest. He'd been a bear lately and knew it. At least his staff wasn't afraid to call him to task for it. He'd always considered his staff part of his family, so they didn't tend to pull punches.

"Yeah, I'm not biting today."

"Oh, good, I don't need teeth marks." She carried a large brown box into the workroom. "This was just delivered. It should be more of the small truffle boxes. Didn't you say you might need more for the Mortenson reception?" She set the box down on the packaging table even before he could remind her not to put it on the chocolate table.

"I need another six boxes for that order. There should be twenty-two in all. Is it busy in the shop, or can you help pack them? They don't have to be delivered until tomorrow, but it would be one less thing to do, and I'm still finishing the two hundred hearts for their wedding on Saturday."

"It's dead out there for now. Amy can handle the counter for a while, and she'll call me if she needs me. She's really shaped up well and hardly ever

needs help anymore. I'm glad you hired her." Shirlee picked up the box again and carried it toward the storeroom.

"I'll open this and put the rest of these away while I'm at it. Wouldn't want the boss to get cranky if I mussed up his work area."

He rolled his eyes at the laughter. Okay, maybe he was a little picky about the workroom, but it came with his training. Scrupulous attention to cleanliness and hygiene was a basic skill in candy-making. Despite her teasing, Shirlee knew the rules and proved it again when she came out of the storeroom with her arms full of bright scarlet boxes and wearing her own hairnet.

"Can't you find a hairnet in a different color? Like black, maybe?"

They both cracked up at the routine request.

Soon Shirlee was quickly filling the small truffle boxes with four truffles each. A random assortment of his exotic truffle flavors nestled down in the scarlet paper cups, elegant and beautiful and just waiting to be savored. She placed the matching lids on the boxes and tied a black satin ribbon on each with an extravagant bow.

As she worked, Brand filled half a chocolate heart with hard candies in the shapes of hearts and lips, then sealed the other half of the heart on with a small bit of piped chocolate. Soon he had a line of the three-inch hearts along the edge of his table, waiting to be tucked into their cellophane bags and tied shut with a ribbon.

He'd already decided that he'd be the one to make both deliveries for this customer. Maybe he'd get a chance to see David and apologize. He'd already caught himself picking up the phone to call the bride at the phone number on her order and see if she would give him David's number. It did smack of

desperation, though, and he knew David was taking part in the wedding, so he might be able to find a less embarrassing way to contact him.

He needed to apologize, even if nothing came of it.

"Boss, are you okay?" Shirlee waved a hand in front of his face and looked concerned. "You seemed a million miles away there."

"I'm okay, just thinking for a sec."

"More like ten minutes. You've been staring at the wall with a funny look on your face. I finished the truffle boxes. Do you want me to start wrapping these for you?"

"Thanks. That would be great."

They worked in companionable silence for a while, Brand assembling the hearts and Shirlee packaging them before tucking them into the waiting delivery boxes.

"Shirlee, do you think I judge other people by their appearance?"

Pierced eyebrow raised, she looked surprised for a second, then thoughtful. "Do you want the truth?"

"Yes, I always want the truth. I wouldn't ask if I wanted you to lie to me." Surely he wasn't so pitiful he needed his employees to coddle his ego?

"Well, I think you don't most of the time, but you do when it comes to smartly dressed men, especially gay men. You never gave a second thought to hiring me, but the few times I've seen you help a customer who hits on you or tries to be friendly and is a man in business clothes, you turn into an ice cube at best, or downright unfriendly at worst. It's like a weird case of reverse profiling or something."

Stunned, he couldn't seem to say a word.

"I know you said your ex was in finance. If he's the reason you're like this, you need to get over it. He's controlling your life without being in your life."

She looked up from the ribbon she was tying. "That nice guy that came in a few weeks ago gave you a kiss that almost made *\$me\$* come, but he's not been here since. Are you asking because of him?"

He managed to nod, his mind spinning from Shirlee's too-close-for-comfort assessment. His breakup with Jason had been ugly. Hell, the last two months before the breakup had been ugly, too.

"Thanks for being honest with me. Maybe I do carry some baggage I need to find a way to let go of. Just keep being patient with me, okay?"

"Of course, boss. Just keep telling yourself that you're a good man and you deserve to be happy and loved. Don't let anyone tell you or convince you of anything different." Careful to keep her gloved hands clean, she bumped shoulders with him, and they returned to their respective tasks.

Was she right? Was Jason still winning, even now?

More importantly, was *\$he\$* letting Jason run the rest of his life?

* * * * *

The parking lot at the church was surprisingly full for a wedding rehearsal, but David found a spot close to the doors so he could get inside without getting too wet. The showers were supposed to last only until about midnight, then change to a cool but clear June day for the wedding tomorrow. It meant he'd need to get there really early tomorrow to make sure the tables, chairs, and awnings were set up for the outdoor reception and everything was set to go. Better than having to deal with rain, though.

Once through the doors, he shook off his overcoat and hung it on the coat rack off to the side of the hall. It really was a pretty church, and the pastor was quite accepting of Chris's unusual wedding party and outlook. A good thing,

too, or they would have had to resort to a location and officiant less suited to Chris's dream wedding. If it came to a choice between her dream and her friends, Chris would amend the dream first.

Family, whether by blood or by choice, always came first.

He walked into the sanctuary, only to see a weeping Chris barrel down the aisle and throw herself into his arms, barely giving him time to brace himself for the impact.

"Hey, what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"Happy...so happy..." Her words were nearly unintelligible through the sobbing. At least he got the gist that she was happy and not sad or upset and he didn't need to solve a last-minute crisis or beat someone up for her.

"I'm happy for you, Teeny. Shawn is a great guy, and he loves you so much. Just think, I can finally pass the job of being your keeper off to another man." He laughed, then winced when she hit his shoulder in retaliation.

"Teeny? No one told me about that nickname, Chris." Shawn's mellow voice held a hint of teasing laughter.

"No one calls me Teeny anymore. Not even David, dammit." Chris hugged him one more time, then pulled herself away and wiped her eyes with the tissue Shawn handed to her. The man probably had a box of them handy somewhere nearby.

"Don't you dare try to call me Teeny, Shawn. I'll hurt you, I swear."

He laughed and pulled her close to his side.

"I would never do that, sweetheart. I value certain parts of my anatomy far too much to take chances like that." He winked at David and tugged Chris gently toward the back of the church.

"Let's go see if your parents are here yet."

Distracted, she went willingly with her fiancé, and David had a chance to speak to the pastor for a few minutes before the last members of the wedding party arrived, and they all gathered to go over the stage directions and start the practice run.

A part of him felt very odd to be watching Chris get married. Until Shawn had entered her life, David had been her closest friend and male confidant. He didn't begrudge her the soul-mate she'd found, but a part of him felt a bit jealous and more than a bit lonely. No more calling her up whenever he wanted to do something but didn't want to do it alone — well, not if he didn't want to feel like a third wheel. Maybe if Shawn was traveling, but it still wouldn't be the same.

As he stood watching the rehearsal of the ceremony itself, he couldn't help thinking about Brand again. He'd kissed the other man to give him something to think about, but instead he'd given himself something to obsess about. As soon as the wedding was over and the happy couple had gone off on their several-week honeymoon, he was going to see just what this sizzle between him and Brand could become. If he didn't, he might regret it as one of the infamous "what could have been" questions. He had enough of those in his life.

Despite the number of participants, the rehearsal went off with only a small hitch here and there, and it wasn't long until they all headed off for the rehearsal dinner at Chris and Shawn's favorite seafood restaurant. The delicious smell of steak and seafood made his stomach growl, and he quickly located the private party room to join the rest of the party.

The tables were already set, and little red boxes with black ribbons sat on each plate with the place cards he'd helped Chris write out a week ago. He'd just found his own seat near the bride and groom when he realized the boxes

were from Sensual Chocolates. Chris had ordered more treats from Brand's shop, and this time she'd not told him.

He picked up the small box and sniffed it. The rich smell of the chocolate, underlain by a spice or herb scent he couldn't readily identify, filled his lungs, and he felt as if he were back in Brand's shop. The black silk ribbon was smooth and soft when he rubbed it between his fingers. Would Brand's skin be this soft, this tender?

With a start he realized someone was calling his name and turned to face Chris, who was dragging a large figure in her wake.

"David, I asked Brand to stay for the dinner, and he's trying to claim he's not dressed for it and doesn't belong. He's sitting on the other side of you, so you need to convince him to stay." The little imp looked up into his face, almost innocently enough that he'd have bought her story. Too bad he knew her far too well and she didn't have an innocent bone in her body. This was a setup for sure.

Brand's curly dark hair was mussed, and he was dressed in what David had always seen him in—long-sleeved dark t-shirt, black jeans, and harness boots. This time he'd added a black leather motorcycle jacket to the mix that looked well used and a bit shabby. He looked decidedly nervous but followed docilely behind Chris in her bull-in-a-china-shop mode.

"Hello, Brandon. I didn't know Chris had ordered more chocolates, or I'd have offered to come pick them up again." The other man's presence made David feel immediately less alone and less adrift.

"Brand. Just Brand." The lush, sexy lips curved in a hesitant smile. "Hi, David."

It was his turn to smile. "Just Dave, please. The only time someone calls me David is if they don't know me or I'm in trouble."

Chris had somehow disappeared, leaving the two men alone. Subtle.

"So Chris wants you to stay and even set aside a seat for you. I've known her since we were in kindergarten, so my best advice is to just do what the woman wants. She'll make you miserable if you don't, and her tears could melt a glacier."

Brand's smile broadened, and he gave a deep, baritone chuckle. "I have a few friends like that. Are you sure I'm dressed okay for this? I don't want to feel out of place or like a fool. I'm just the man who made the candy, not a friend or anything."

Somehow David could tell this was a hotspot for the other man. What made him so uncertain?

"You're fine. I think I saw the father of the bride wearing cargo shorts and sandals, so you more than fit in. Don't worry; no one here will care how you are dressed or what you do."

He gestured at Brand's chair as the rest of the party started to take their seats in response to Chris's urging.

"Sit down and enjoy the good food and company. Chris seems to have adopted you, so welcome to the family-by-choice." He laughed as the chocolatier's eyes grew wide at his words.

They both sat, and over the course of the dinner, their awkward chitchat turned to a more comfortable conversation. The few times he tried to turn and say something to Chris, she was turned away and seemed totally engaged in speaking to Shawn and both their parents. A little too engaged, actually. Even though all the signs of being set up were there, he couldn't find it in him to be annoyed. He wanted to get to know Brand better, and this was a welcome opportunity.

The dinner over, Chris and Shawn stood and tapped on their glasses to get the attention of the rest of the room. The ritual of thanking everyone involved started, and David tried to pay attention, at least enough so that he could clap at the appropriate times. When Chris called Brand's name and introduced him as the man responsible for the amazing chocolates at their places as well as the chocolates at the wedding tomorrow, David had to encourage him several times before he'd stand up to accept the applause.

More treats tomorrow, huh? He wondered if it was too much to ask that Brand deliver the chocolates then as well. Or maybe the chocolatier could be his treat. They turned out to have quite a bit in common, including a love of motorcycles and animals. In fact, the longer they talked, the more things they found in common. The other man's unpretentious nature made David want to get him alone, to pry more out of him.

A sudden poke in the shoulder made him realize Chris had called his name at least a couple of times.

"Umm. Sorry."

Everyone laughed, and Chris pulled him to his feet to hug him. He hugged her back and accepted her thanks, then passed her another tissue from the box Shawn had next to her place setting.

Shawn held a small box out to him. "A small thank you from Chris and myself. And she has sworn, on her life, that you and Mitch do not have to dance with each other at the reception."

The best man, Shawn's friend Mitch, stepped over and high-fived him.

When Chris finally released him, he sat back down so they could continue thanking others.

Brand leaned closer and whispered to him. "What's in the box?"

Hmmm. He'd been wondering just that, but opening it in public might not be too smart an idea. With Chris, you never knew. A small shake of the box told him it rattled. Maybe he'd just wait until he got home to open it. The possibilities were far too vast and, in some cases, too scary.

"Come on, open it." Brand was obviously not one of those people who were content to wait to open presents.

"Not right now. I have no idea what she put in here, and a long history of gifts from Chris has taught me it's better to discover the truth in private."

The other man cocked his head as if he didn't believe him and leaned closer to whisper, "What's the worst she could do?"

"Well, she decided it was a great idea to give me a cock ring one year at the family Christmas under the guise of it being jewelry. Is that bad enough?"

Chapter Five

Brand watched the rest of the guests at the rehearsal dinner finish eating and start to slowly leave, a few at a time. The truffles seemed to be a huge hit, with a few boxes emptied before people even left for the evening.

David still hadn't opened his chocolates or the gift the bride and groom had given him. Even though he understood why, especially after hearing the story about the cock ring Christmas present, Brand was dying to see what was in the box. He'd always been that way with presents—he was the first one to open his, the one who always shook the ones under the tree and even tried to peek before his parents caught on and started wrapping his presents with double-sided tape so he couldn't open and reseal them so easily.

He was dying to open the box himself, just to see what was in it. Unfortunately, David seemed to guess that it was driving him nuts and kept one hand on it while the dinner was concluding.

Eventually only the bride, groom, David, and Brand remained. His bladder was complaining, despite the distraction of his raging hard-on, and he excused himself to use the men's room while the other three talked about

tomorrow's wedding. The restroom was a nicely appointed room with several generously sized stalls, all of which were empty. Relieved to be alone, he went into the nearest stall, slid the latch to secure the door behind him and leaned back against it.

He'd been resigned to making the delivery and hoping for a distant glance at the man that so intrigued him, but he'd not planned on the machinations of the bride. She'd not only invited him to stay, she'd obviously planned it in advance since she had a place card made out with his name on it, just waiting for him next to David's seat.

David wasn't anything like he'd thought. He might wear a suit to work, but he was easily as down to earth as Brand and had a wicked, teasing sense of humor. They'd spent most of the dinner talking quietly, and he'd done nothing to make Brand think that he was somehow laughing at Brand or just using him. Instead he seemed just plain interested.

With effort, Brand pulled himself upright again and turned toward the toilet. After lifting the seat, he oh so carefully unzipped his fly over his erection. He tried to pee, only to have to spend a few minutes thinking about chocolate recipes before he could relieve his overfull bladder. Once his business was done, he went to tuck his cock back into his jeans but couldn't resist stroking himself once, then again. How would it feel to have David's hand—or mouth—on his cock? He was obsessed with the blue-eyed man. He wanted to rub his hands through David's short blond hair as the other man sucked his cock. He wanted to pound into that tight ass until he lost himself in David.

Arrgh. He groaned and forced himself to zip his cock away. He didn't have time for this right now, not when the others would notice how long he'd been gone and remark on it. It would have to wait until he got home.

Hands washed, he dried them before he took a deep breath and opened the restroom door. Time to head back. The door to the family restroom opened as he stepped up to it and David's face smiled out at him before the other man grabbed his arm and pulled him inside.

"What....?" This couldn't be happening. Could it?

David pushed him away from the door and reached around him to lock it.

"Have you thought about what I said last time I saw you?" David's blue eyes seemed hot, like the heart of a flame, and just having him so close made Brand's libido go nuts. If his cock got any harder, he'd ruin the zipper on his pants or cripple himself. Pent-up lust overwhelmed what little common sense he had with this man, and he lost control.

He pushed David back up against the door and pressed his heavier body against the blond man, pinning him in place. Palms against the door on either side of David's head, he stared straight into those mesmerizing eyes.

"Oh, yes, I've done nothing but think about you and what you said." Now so close he could feel David's breath against his lips. "And I've obsessed over that kiss."

On the last word, he grabbed David's face between his hands and devoured the other man's mouth. Spice, sex, and a hint of exotic chocolate. He must have sampled the box of chocolates before he came after Brand. Twining his tongue with the other man's, Brand tempted and teased until David groaned and began to stroke Brand's sensitive tongue with his own.

Brand released the other man's face and grabbed his hips to rub his hard-on against David's, grinding their cocks together until he couldn't stand it any longer. Gasping, he threw his head back. "Want you now, dammit. Say you're with me." He choked out the words, hoping he wasn't the only one so hot he felt like he'd catch fire.

"Need you. Need you so much." David thrashed his head back and forth as if seeking Brand's mouth again.

Fingers fumbled with the button on David's slacks in response, and he mixed warm, wet kisses and tender bites down the other man's throat while he struggled with the zipper before finally yanking it open. He stroked the long, hard length of David's cock through the thin knit fabric of his boxers, relishing the groans and moans as he learned the sexy body by touch.

Unable to resist any longer, Brand dropped slowly to his knees in a full-body caress. One yank, and David's dress pants and boxers were around his ankles and his eager cock was standing completely erect and weeping before him. The scent of hot, musky male hit Brand's senses with a rush. God, he smelled so good. If David tasted as good as he smelled, he'd rival the best bittersweet chocolate.

Brand's tongue lashed out and gathered the milky-white pearl of fluid from the tip of David's cock, and he groaned, savoring the rich, sinful taste of the handsome man. Long, narrow fingers curled into his hair and tightened almost painfully, urging him on. Wickedly, Brand wrapped his lips around David's cock and oh so slowly swallowed him down to the root. He winced when the fingers in his hair spasmed in time to the long, low moans from the writhing man.

Blond curls tickled his nose and lips, musky and smelling slightly of soap. He slid his mouth up and down while tracing the tip of his tongue along the veins of the swelling shaft held steady in his hand. David's hips began to rock back and forth in time to Brand's suction. Just when David was about to come, he pulled away from Brand and shoved him back, only to grab at the button on Brand's jeans with frantic fingers.

"Not alone, dammit."

Brand helped David undo the jeans and pushed them down along with his boxers. His eyes almost crossed when David's fingers traced feather-light touches around his cock and cupped his balls before he dragged Brand closer and rubbed their rock-hard cocks together. Slippery from Brand's saliva, their cocks slid together in David's tight fist. Both men moaned and thrust, so close it only took another few strokes for them both to erupt in jets of hot cum.

Panting, it took a moment for them to recover. Finally David sniffed the hot, musky smell of sex and laughed.

"Guess you put a lot of thought into what I said."

Brand pushed himself fully upright again and stared at the mess they'd made. "I did, but I have to admit I'd not thought this far ahead. We made a real mess out of this poor restroom, didn't we?"

They took turns washing up as best they could, then cleaning up the stray drops of cum they could find. Even a liberal spray of room freshener didn't do much for the lingering smell of sex, though. David reached for the door, but before he could turn the handle to open it, Brand pushed one hand against it to stop him.

"I know tomorrow is taken up with the wedding, but would you like to go out for breakfast on Sunday?" The answer was surprisingly important to him.

"Are you sure?" Blue eyes stared searchingly into his own. "Only a few weeks ago you told me we weren't at all suited for each other, remember?"

Brand's cheeks felt suddenly hot, and he knew he was blushing. "I might have been wrong. At the very least, I want to find out. Please?"

"Only if you come to the wedding as my date and promise to protect me from Chris's bouquet-tossing plans. And make sure she keeps her promise that I don't have to dance with the best man."

"Deal."

"It's a date, then. We can decide on where and when tomorrow."

David cracked the restroom door open and peeked out, then opened it all the way so they could both exit. No one was in sight, thank heaven. It would have been a difficult thing to explain with any amount of dignity intact.

"Do you think Chris and Shawn are still waiting for us?" He hoped not — they wouldn't have any doubts what had been going on.

"No, I told them goodnight before I went to look for you."

* * * * *

David woke with a groan to the sound of the phone ringing on the bedside table. Caught halfway between a sexy dream of being fucked by Brand and reality, he didn't check the caller ID before he pressed the button to answer the phone.

"Hello?" His voice sounded raspy and hoarse even to his own ears.

"Good morning, sunshine." Chris's voice was way too perky for this time of day — for any time of day.

"Oh, God, Chris. What the hell time is it anyway?"

"It's eight o'clock. I thought you'd be up already."

"Liar. You couldn't stand the suspense of not knowing what happened after you left last night, could you?"

The long silence on the other end of the line was answer enough.

"Don't you have a fiancé to pester? Maybe to seduce or something?"

A trill of laughter made him wince and collapse back onto the pillows, arm over his eyes.

"I'm at my parents' house. It's bad luck for him to see me before the wedding today. I'm lonely...and bored."

"So you decided to pick on me? I don't have to get up and start making sure things are ready until ten, and I'd planned to sleep in for a bit, you know." He had to laugh, though. This was his friend to a tee. It was probably costing her every ounce of patience she had to not immediately pump him for every iota of information he was willing to give up on the events of the previous night.

"Please? Did you and Brand get a chance to talk after Shawn and I left? Maybe a kiss or two?" There went the last of the patience.

He couldn't resist teasing her a bit. "Well, we did talk a little. But I'm not sure what will come of it. We might still be too different."

"Aw, damn. But he'll be at the wedding today. Maybe you can sit with him at the reception and have another chance."

"Maybe. I did find out something fascinating about him. But I don't think it's something you'd care about."

"Oh, tell me. I need to hear something interesting. Please?"

Tempted to let her stew for a bit, he relented instead. "He's got real talent with his tongue."

He winced and pulled the phone away from his ear when she squealed.

"That's all I'm saying, and you better not say anything. If you do, I'll make you so sorry. I'll tell Shawn all your secrets."

"Okay, I won't say anything. But if you and Brand end up together, I get to take credit for it. If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't have met him."

Laughing, he gave in to the inevitable and told Chris goodbye. He might as well get up and moving since he was completely awake now. He needed a shower, but part of him regretted having to wash the scent Brand's cum off his skin.

Chapter Six

Brand groaned at the wolf whistle as he picked up the last of the boxes of chocolate hearts for Chris and Shawn's wedding to load into the van for delivery. He was running right on time but didn't have any extra time to spare if he wanted to watch David in the wedding itself. Chris had called him early that morning to ask him to come to both the wedding and the reception as her guest, and he wasn't about to turn down a chance to see David again, no matter the bouts of self-doubt that still plagued him.

"Wow, boss. You're sure dressed to kill today. Got a hot date?" Shirlee grinned at him from the back door of the shop.

"Actually, yes." He couldn't help laughing when her jaw dropped in shock. "And I'm not planning to be back today. Make a list for me of whatever we're running low on, and I'll deal with it tomorrow."

"You've got a hot date and you're taking a day off? Wow."

He placed the last box in the back of the van and turned to push the cart back into the shop, only to be met with a huge hug from Shirlee.

"I'll mind the fort, boss. I'm so happy for you." She sounded almost like she'd break into tears, and he patted her on the back awkwardly.

"Thanks. When we're both in on Monday, we need to discuss some changes in the shop. Good changes. You do more than you were ever hired to do, and I want to make sure I give you a chance to go as far as you want to."

She pulled away from him and wiped her eyes, at the same time giving him a huge smile.

"It's a deal, boss. You have fun with your date. You know I'll want a report, though." Shirlee took the cart and waved before pushing it back into the shop for him.

He shook his head. He'd gotten amazingly lucky when he'd hired her. What was it David had called himself? Family-by-choice. Shirlee was definitely part of his family-by-choice.

A short drive later, he pulled up at the church where the wedding was scheduled to take place. It was still too early for most guests to have arrived, but he drove around to the side of the building so he'd be out of the way of the guests. The day was sunny already, the previous day's light rain cleared up and the ground mostly dry. There were tables set up under large awnings in the church's gardens, and caterers were busy setting out chafing dishes and glassware. It looked like one huge awning was set up over a dance floor, and speakers were being tested near it.

Quite the production for what the bride had referred to as a simple wedding.

No sign of David, but he couldn't really expect that, given that he had his "man of honor" duties to fulfill as well.

After asking directions of one of the caterers, he made sure he had the latest version of the plans before he started setting out the chocolates. While

setting out the treats on the tables set up for the bridal party, Brand discovered that his name was on a place setting next to David's again. It had to be Chris's fine handiwork.

The rest of the preparation flew by as Brandon finished the setup on autopilot. He couldn't seem to stop being distracted by thoughts of the handsome blonde. It only took him a few minutes to put away the boxes and check his dress shirt for chocolate before tugging on his suit coat and joining the arriving guests in the church for the wedding itself.

The highlight of the ceremony was seeing David walk up the aisle in a tuxedo with red cummerbund and tie. He carried out his unconventional role with unflappable solemnity, other than the wink he gave Brand on his way by. The only minor disaster was Shawn dropping the wedding ring before he could get it onto Chris's finger. All in all, things went really well.

When the ceremony was concluded, the guests all filed out to the awnings to enjoy the reception. The wedding party disappeared for a while to have the wedding photos taken but soon joined the guests, and the food was served. Once most of the guests had been served, David managed to make his way through the food line and sat down next to Brand with a tired sigh.

"One step closer. This wedding is going to be the death of me, I swear." David loosened his bowtie a bit and shrugged out of the tuxedo jacket.

"You know you're happy for them."

"Oh, very happy. But I think we've been through an entire box of tissue and two make-up redos already. And we haven't gotten to the speeches or dancing yet." He shook his head in mock exasperation.

Brand couldn't help laughing. "You sound like the mother of the bride instead of the man of honor."

"I might as well be; her mother is almost as much of a wreck."

The food was delicious, and they chatted a bit as everyone focused on the meal. In the lull after the meal, Brand couldn't resist leaning close to David and whispering, "You look hot as hell in that tuxedo, by the way. Almost too good."

A blush bloomed over David's cheeks, and it took him a half a second to reply. "You look equally tasty in that suit, candy man. Good enough to suck."

Damn. Brandon squirmed on his chair to try to ease the pressure in his crotch and willed the bride and groom to hurry the hell up.

* * * * *

Brandon looked amazing in the tailored suit he was wearing. Even his curly hair had been mostly tamed, but David longed to muss it up again. The contrast between the tattooed biker and the formal suit was intriguing.

David realized he still hadn't actually seen the tattoos on Brandon's arms he'd glimpsed just below the edges of his sleeves. Maybe he could talk the handsome chocolatier into stripping for him after breakfast tomorrow. He wanted to lick and bite him from head to toe.

Arrgh. He had to think of something other than sex. There was still plenty of the wedding reception to make it through before he'd be free to escape. Hell, maybe he could persuade Brandon to come home with him and they could get an early start on their date.

As soon as the cake cutting was done and the bride and groom cleaned up from the mushed cake, it was time for the garter and bouquet. David cheered Shawn on as he maneuvered to pull the garter off Chris's leg with his teeth. A group of single men gathered, and after some jostling, the garter was duly

caught by a friend of Shawn's, who proudly waved it over his head and smack-talked the others.

"Remember, you swore to protect me from the bouquet."

Brandon looked startled for a moment. "You really think you'd get stuck with it?"

"Oh, yes, it would be completely Chris to make sure I caught it."

When the single women were gathered, Chris spent a good five minutes trying to cajole and persuade David into joining the gaggle of women. He steadfastly refused, so she eventually gave up and turned her back to toss the throwing bouquet over her shoulder. At the last second, she turned and threw it with a dead-on overhand wind-up straight into Brandon's hands when he held them up to fend it off his face.

What the hell? Nice aim, at least. David saw the satisfied look on her face before Shawn motioned to her. It must be time for the garter toss.

At a seeming loss for what to do with the flowers, Brandon tried to hand them to David, who shook his head violently and put his hands behind his back. Finally Brandon set them on the table near the centerpiece.

Despite the fact things were actually moving along pretty quickly, it seemed to take forever for the toasts to be done and the music to start up. As soon as David heard the first notes of the bride and groom's first-dance music, he made sure to stay far away from the best man, just in case Chris got some other bright idea to make him suffer. Thankfully, Mitch didn't want to be forced to dance with him either and was doing his part to stay a long distance away.

When the music died away and the next song started up, Chris and Shawn headed toward him, and a jolt of adrenaline shot through him. Before he could

find a place to disappear to, Brandon took his arm and pulled him onto the floor.

"I get to lead." A smile spread across Brandon's face, and David found himself smiling in response, especially once he caught sight of Chris's boggled face. Brandon had trumped her move and kept his promise to make sure he wasn't forced to dance with Mitch.

Relaxing against the other man, David followed his lead and ignored the few strange looks they were getting from some other guests.

"Chris seemed to be heading your way and had a look I'm starting to recognize on her face. I thought I'd better intervene so I could be sure to keep my promise. I'm not about to give up my breakfast date because of a dance." A deep chuckle vibrated Brandon's chest.

"I think she was about to do something evil, honestly. So thank you for the dance. I love Chris, but she's a bit like a pesky sister sometimes."

"She loves you, though."

"I know." Silent for a few moments, he looked up at Brandon's strong face. "I'd love to come home with you tonight and get an early start on our date. Would that be okay?"

Brandon smiled down at him and captured his lips in a kiss full of heat and promise before responding. "I'd really like that. I'd better tell you about the two females that live with me, though. They can be almost as pesky as Chris."

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Author Bio:

As the oldest child in a family of hugely prolific readers, I was hooked early on the wonders of worlds unknown and information at my fingertips. When I discovered Johanna Lyndsey in my teen years, I was hooked on romances as well.

Though there have always been stories winding their way through my thoughts with the constant refrain of “what if...”, a few bad experiences with school creative writing classes caused me to never give them voice beyond my own daydreams for many, many years.

My profession is in the software industry testing. I spent thirteen years as a tester, part as a Software Test Engineer (STE) and part as an SDET (Software Development Engineer in Test) for a major software company. In January 2009, I moved from testing to technical writing and now work as a Programming-Writer, which pays my bills and provides a lot of challenge and technical work, even if it does eat into time I might like to spend writing fiction.

I have a lot of hobbies – my geeky day job seems to demand a creative craft outlet to balance it and it’s often joked by my family (at least I think it’s a joke) that I need to found a 12 Step program for craft-a-holics. I knit, crochet, bead, make chainmail and beaded jewelry, quilt, make stained glass, and cross stitch. This is only what I currently do!

In 2004, after I had sold a non-fiction book (on software testing, fancy that!), I decided to actually try my hand at romance and erotic romance writing. So now my spare time is filled more with writing projects than with crafts, but I’ve sold my first erotic romance to Aspen Mountain Press and am working away on more. I currently write for Aspen Mountain Press, Manlove Romance Press and Ellora’s Cave.

I live in a wonderful rural community outside of Seattle, Washington with my amazing husband, Chuck, and our son Morgan. I also have an adult son, Jonathan, who is a soldier in the United States Army Infantry. I’m proud of him but I worry, like every relative of a soldier in any branch of the Armed Services. We share our home with 7 indoor cats and an African Grey parrot as well as our backyard with a feral cat colony that we care for.

Adding to my rather diverse background, I am also a Wiccan High Priestess, an elder in my spiritual community (Mohsian Trad, for those who are curious).

Even with all the draws on my time, I still manage to read about a book every day to two days. I believe reading is my lifelong addiction.

You can contact Maura at: <http://www.realmsoftheraven.com>