

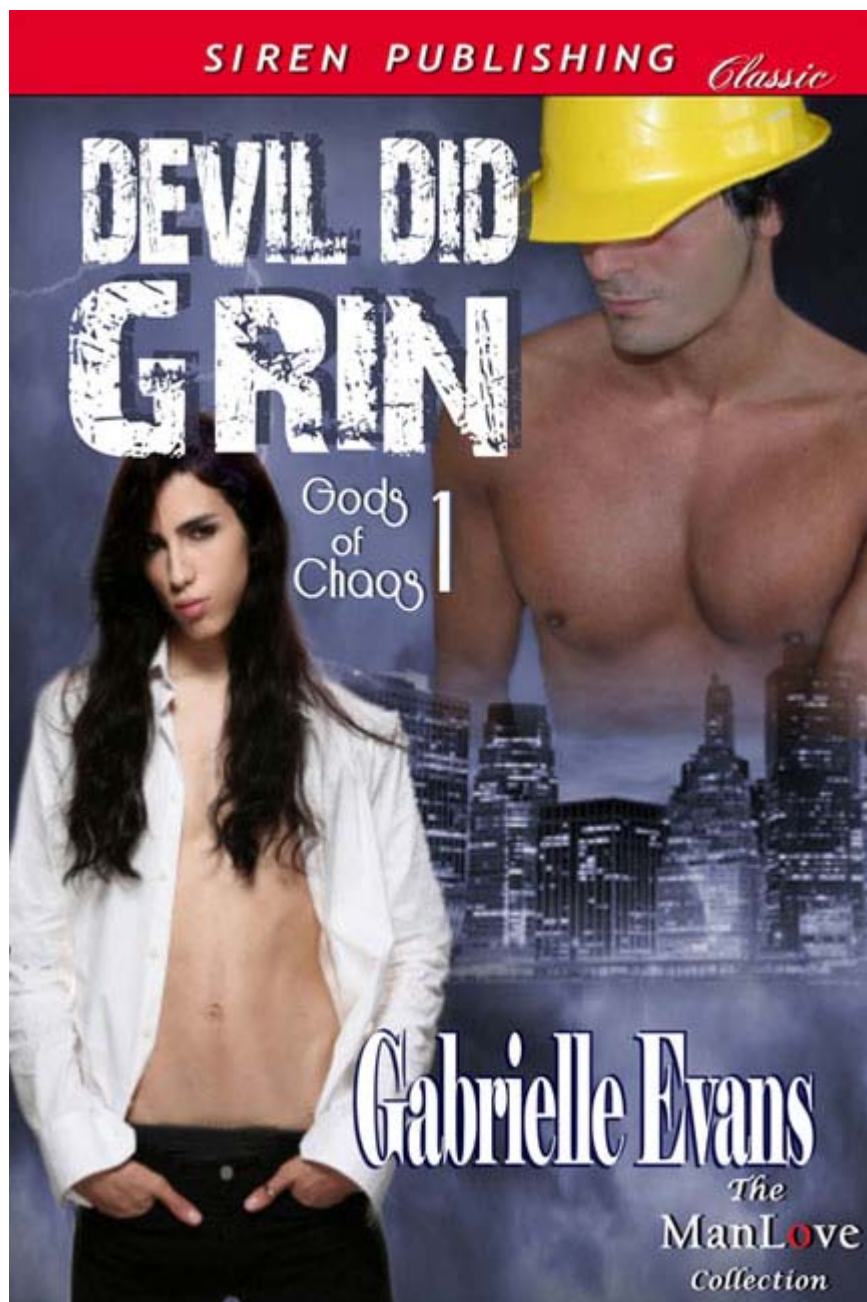
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DEVIL DID GRIN

Gods
of
Chaos 1

Gabrielle Evans

The
ManLove
Collection



Gods of Chaos 1

Devil Did Grin

A top male model, Rayne Everest lived a life anyone would envy. Letting his arrogance get away from him and slapping one of the nine Gods of Chaos probably wasn't his smartest move. His beauty and wealth taken from him, he's dumped on the streets with no idea how to survive on his own, and only thirty days to learn his lesson.

When Dante Luca finds him hiding on a construction site, Rayne only intended to use the big Italian for a place to stay and food in his belly. When he finds himself falling hard, he's faced with a whole new set of problems, though. He doesn't intend to give up his luxurious lifestyle—a life Dante wants nothing to do with. Rayne has never had so much to lose, but how will he choose between the man he loves and the life he desires?

Genre: Alternative (M/M or F/F), Contemporary, Fantasy

Length: 40,143 words

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**EROTIC ROMANCE
MANLOVE**



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK
IMPRINT: Erotic Romance ManLove

DEVIL DID GRIN
Copyright © 2011 by Gabrielle Evans
E-book ISBN: 1-61034-480-4

First E-book Publication: April 2011

Cover design by Jinger Heaston
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DEDICATION

To everyone who has ever taken the long road to finding love. It's not always easy. It takes work and dedication. But in the end, when you have that happy ending in your grasp, it's always worth it.

DEVIL DID GRIN

Gods of Chaos 1

GABRIELLE EVANS

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Chapter One

The lights, the music, the crowd of surrounding admirers, Rayne Everest had it all. A national icon, his choice of any man or woman to bed, good looks, and a killer smile, he needed only to crook his finger for people to fall to their knees before him.

Standing on the third-floor balcony of his home, he looked out over his Olympic-sized pool and smiled. Yes, he lived the dream that most envied while swilling away at their tedious lives. Rayne took a sip of his Cognac and sighed as the smooth brandy slipped over his tongue and down his throat.

Only twenty-four and already a highly sought after model with millions of screaming fans, his main dilemma rested in whether or not to take the cute little redhead with the ample breasts, or the sexy blond guy with big blue eyes, back to his room. Hell, he could have them both if he chose.

A gentle breeze blew through his raven hair, sweeping the strands back from his face. He imagined he looked like the hero on some romance novel—only more handsome. Six feet of tan, sculpted muscles, sea green eyes, and blue-black hair, he was much too good-looking to appear on some trashy book cover.

Small, slender fingers landed on his wrist, just a soft brush of fingertips, and Rayne jerked away, whirling around to face the person who'd dared to touch him. A willowy man, small in stature and demeanor, stood in front of him, his eyes wide and frightened, but a goofy grin on his lips. Rayne hated him immediately.

"I'm sorry to have startled you. You looked so lonely out here by yourself. I thought you might like some company."

Rayne's top lip curled over his teeth. "I am not lonely. Do you even know who I am?"

The little man dipped his head. "Yes, Mr. Everest. I know who you are. That doesn't mean you can't be lonely. I thought we could talk."

"And what would I possibly have to say to you?" Looking over the man's baggy jeans and threadbare T-shirt, he guessed the guy wanted money. Well, he wouldn't get it from Rayne. He didn't know who was in charge of security this week, but they were already fired. Who the hell would let some vagabond into his home?

"I'm sorry I bothered you." The little man tucked his chin close to his chest, his eyes downcast, and turned to leave.

"Keep going until you're out of my house. I don't know who let you in, but I will have to have the place sterilized once you leave." Rayne stuck his nose up in the air and sniffed.

"You want me to leave? I haven't done anything. I was given an invitation."

"I would have never invited someone like you. A miscreant and a liar. Now leave, or I'll call security."

"You think an awful lot of yourself, Mr. Everest. Do you have no humility?"

"Humility?" Rayne waved a hand to indicate his multimillion-dollar home. "I see no reason to be humble."

"How about compassion? Do you lack that as well?"

"Everyone has the same opportunities as me. If they choose to forsake the gifts they've been given, I don't see why I should care."

The man nodded. "I'm sorry I bothered you."

His hand extended, and Rayne reacted by slapping the guy right in the mouth. "Do not touch me!" he hissed indignantly.

Anger flashed in the man's eyes, and his face became a mottled red. "You will regret this."

"I regret nothing," Rayne scoffed.

"Oh, believe me, by morning you will regret your hasty actions. Your pride and arrogance have blinded you, given you a false sense of entitlement. You cast down others you feel are not worthy simply because they do not possess your wealth and notoriety." The man took a step backward and grinned wickedly. "Good evening, Rayne Everest."

Then he simply vanished.

* * * *

Rayne groaned as he rolled over and sat up on the side of the bed without opening his eyes. His head throbbed, and his eyes felt gritty. He needed aspirin, coffee, and a shower in no particular order.

Opening his eyes, he kicked his feet out, frowning when they didn't brush across the carpet. Looking over the edge of the bed, he noticed his feet dangled several inches off the floor. Not only that, but his feet appeared much smaller, much daintier. Maybe he was still drunk.

Shrugging, he inched to the edge of the bed and stood, arching his back and stretching his arms over his head. His head swam, and it felt like a jackhammer beat inside his brain. Okay, aspirin first.

Plodding into the bathroom, Rayne went directly to the medicine cabinet and screamed. He stumbled backward until the back of his knees collided with the edge of the bathtub, and he tumbled over into it.

Oh, shit. No. He was definitely still drunk. Or sleeping. Yes, that was it. He had to be dreaming. Slowly climbing out of the tub, he

approached the mirror over the sink with trepidation, his eyes squeezed closed, and his hands extended in front of him.

When his fingertips brushed against the porcelain, Rayne gripped it tightly, taking several deep breaths to calm his racing pulse, and opened his eyes.

He screamed again. His hands went to his face, patting it frantically and pulling at the skin. Gone was the chiseled jaw, proud cheekbones, and sun-bronzed skin. Though his long ebony hair remained unaltered, the face that looked back at him in the mirror was ordinary to the extreme.

Soft lines, creamy skin, a weak chin, the only thing distinguishing were his green eyes. They hadn't changed at all. Still the soft sea green they'd always been—somewhere between aqua and sage, with specks of gold around the pupil.

"It's a good look for you, if I do say so."

Rayne spun quickly, dropping into a defensive posture even as he backed away until he bumped into the sink. The man from the balcony the night before stood just feet from him, smiling brightly. Straightening slowly, Rayne's body vibrated with anger. "You!"

The man spread his arms wide and bowed slightly. "Gordost, one of the nine Gods of Chaos, at your service."

"What happened to me?"

Surveying his fingernails, Gordost sighed. "You are so concerned with your appearance, you aren't even surprised to hear I am a god? What is wrong with the world?"

"You're saying you did this to me?" Rayne didn't know whether to scoff or punch the asshole in the face.

"That I did. Remember our little chat about humility?"

"Well, if you did this, then change me back, Oh Great Mystical God."

"It's not really that simple you see. Obviously, you have not learned anything from this. I think a little chaos in your life is just what you need."

"I'm dreaming. This is all just an alcohol-induced dream," Rayne muttered under his breath.

Gordost chuckled. "Oh, this is no dream. There is a bag packed for you, and one thousand dollars in cash near the front door. My little gift to help you start your new life." Gordost dipped his head as though he had provided a great favor.

"One thousand dollars? That isn't even a fraction of what I have in my bank accounts."

"You have nothing in your bank accounts. Now, I will give you a head start before I call the police."

Rayne's eyes widened, and he stepped forward angrily. "Fine! Call the police. This is my house!"

In the blink of an eye, Gordost transformed from a little blond shrimp into an identical clone of Rayne's former self. "Would you still like me to call the police?" Even the man's voice sounded like Rayne's.

Shaking his head, he put his palms to his temples and groaned. "This is not happening. You can't do this to me!"

"I can, and I have." The god—Rayne had to believe it after the transformation he'd just witnessed—pulled a cell phone from his perfectly tailored slacks and held it up. "Ten minutes, and I'm calling the authorities. I suggest you move quickly."

"Wait!" Rayne took another step forward, but still maintained distance between him and the intruder. "You said I had to learn a lesson. So, I might not be like this forever? I can get my life back?"

The god nodded. "Yes. You have thirty days to learn humility, compassion, and to change your wicked ways." He laughed maniacally at this. "If you can find those things inside all that callousness, then you will be granted your life back."

"Or?" Rayne wasn't stupid. There had to be more.

"If you fail, nothing will happen. You will continue to live out your days as you are now." He smiled again as though this were a great gift. "See, we gods are not unreasonable."

Rayne almost choked. Not unreasonable? Thirty days to mold himself into something resembling humble. He could fake it.

“Seven minutes,” Gordost spoke in Rayne’s former deep, sultry voice.

Seeing no other alternative, Rayne raced into his bedroom, tugged on a pair of sweats—a secret indulgence of his—pulled the drawstring tight, and slipped a cotton T-shirt over his head.

“Oh, and if you try to take one of your cars, I will report it stolen.”

Rayne glared at the man and growled. Still, he had no choice. Dipping his head in grudging consent, he left the room, hurried down the stairs, and grabbed the black canvas bag in front of the door.

Nowhere to go, no one to call for help, he marched down the long drive and through the iron gates into the unknown.

Chapter Two

The sun beat against his bare back as sweat trickled down his neck beneath his damp hair. Dante Luca sat atop the freshly shingled roof, guzzling water as he stared down at the street below.

“Hey, Luca! Lunch, boy-o!” Davey Hudson called up to him from the sidewalk in front of the house. He waved a footlong sub, grinning like a madman while he shielded his eyes from the glaring sun.

His stomach grumbled, approving the tempting morsel waved at him like shaking a bone at a dog. “On my way down,” he yelled back. “Don’t fucking eat it before I get there!”

“Then you better hurry!”

Chuckling, Dante flipped his friend off, climbed to his feet, and hurried across the sloped roof to the ladder propped against the side of the house. He may not make a grand living working construction, but he loved his job. Using his hands, smelling the sweet breeze, feeling his muscles bunch and flex in the sunlight sounded like his idea of heaven.

He scurried down the ladder, jumping the last few rungs to land nimbly on his feet like a cat. He wouldn’t put it past Hudson to make good on his claim and devour the sandwich he had offered.

Jogging around the side of the house, he met his friend, snatched his lunch from the man’s hand, unwrapped it quickly, and bit into it. Oh yeah, he definitely needed this. “Thanks, man,” he mumbled around a mouthful of pastrami.

Hudson chuckled and slapped him on the back. “Let’s move inside. I think the sun has fried your brain.”

Elbowing Hudson in the ribs, he took great pleasure in the man's grunt. "Come on, I want to see how much they got done on the kitchen yesterday." He led the way in through the open front door and inhaled deeply, loving the smell of sawdust and fresh plaster.

Owning his own construction company, most people would expect him to sit inside an office, filling out paperwork, making phone calls, and delegating tasks. While true he did his fair share of paperwork and handed out less enjoyable tasks, he couldn't imagine being cooped up in some office day in and day out.

Thank heavens for Ms. Kramer, who had taken over running the main office like a champ. He suspected she enjoyed bossing around the big apes on his crew, but they all adored her. Sweet as punch, people just couldn't help but fall in love with the aging woman.

Dante continued to wolf down his sandwich, barely taking the time to chew, as he sauntered through the house, admiring the workmanship of his men. They were the best in the business, and he rewarded them accordingly with the highest salary in the state. Happy workers equaled happy clients, but more than that, Dante felt they earned every penny he paid them.

Stepping into the kitchen, he smiled at the newly installed granite countertops. Yes, his men did outstanding work. He ran his hand over the smooth surface, his smile growing wider.

"Uh, boss?"

"Hudson, how many times have I told you not to call me that?" Dante turned to his friend of several years and glared playfully.

Hudson just shook his head, and Dante followed his gaze to the open space beside the sink where the dishwasher had yet to be installed. His playful glare slipped from his face, and a look of pure confusion covered his visage.

The smallest man he'd ever seen, or possibly even a young boy, lay curled in the tiny space, his waist-length black hair falling to one side of his delicate face. His head rested upon a canvas tote, his palms pressed together and placed beneath his cheek.

“Fucking squatters,” Hudson spat.

“Calm down.” Dante moved closer, crouching down to better see the young man. His eyebrows drew together and his lips thinned when he spotted the bruising peeking out around the delicate skin of the eye partially hidden beneath the silky strands.

Reaching out slowly, he gently brushed the hair back from the wounded cheek, wincing as he revealed more livid bruising, a split lip, and light swelling. Someone had worked the little guy over pretty good.

“I’m calling the police.”

Dante looked over his shoulder and shook his head. “No. He’s hurt. He needs a doctor, not a pair of fucking handcuffs.” Where was the man’s compassion? “He has to be exhausted if he didn’t wake up through all the pounding I was doing on the roof.”

Returning his attention to the young man, he reached over again and gripped the frail shoulder, giving it a light shake. “Hey. Wake up, son.”

It took a few shakes and words of coaxing, but eventually those impossibly long lashes began to flutter against his soft cheeks, and his eyelids drifted open. The most unusual shade of green pinned Dante in place, stealing the breath from his lungs. He had never seen anything more beautiful.

“Hey,” he said lamely.

The man’s eyes rounded, and he scrambled into a sitting position, pushing back into the corner of his makeshift shelter. Not retreating, but also not advancing, Dante kept his voice calm and quite. “You’re safe here, son. No one’s going to hurt you. Can you tell me your name?”

The boy continued to stare at him, his eyes wide and frightened. Then slowly, he dipped his head, an almost imperceptible nod. “Rayne,” he whispered. His thin arms crossed over his chest, and he trembled as he stared back at Dante.

“Are you hurt anywhere else?” Dante motioned toward the blackened eye.

Rayne shook his head, again, only a small, almost imperceptible movement.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Dante repeated his promise. “Please, come out of there so I can see you.”

* * * *

Rayne pushed himself farther into the corner, pulled his knees to his chest, and wrapped his arms around his shins. The man blocking his escape spoke kindly, but in the four days since he’d begun his new life, Rayne had learned not to trust big men. And damn was that guy big.

Cold, tired, hungry, and beaten, he’d almost sobbed in relief when he discovered one of the windows open to the house under construction. He’d curled into the smallest space he could find, too weary to think past the pounding in his head. If he got out of this, he’d need to remember to plan an exit strategy before passing out in the future.

“Are you hungry?”

Rayne eyed the man suspiciously, but nodded his head. His stomach cramped and snarled, demanding food and soon. He couldn’t even remember the last time he’d eaten. Once he’d left his mansion in Highland Park, his plan had been simple. Find a place to stay, food to eat, and someone to help him.

Within hours of roaming the streets of Dallas, he’d been jumped, beaten, his bag turned inside out, and his money stolen. He’d called his agent, hoping to gain an ally, only to have her call him names for playing practical jokes and insist she was having an early dinner with Rayne Everest as they spoke.

He’d spent the first three nights sleeping in alleyways or on park benches. Finally, hunger and cold had driven him into a small pub to

seek shelter and sustenance. In hindsight, demanding the patron seated at the bar buy him a meal may have been considered rude.

He'd never had to ask for a thing in his life, and certainly never beg. He didn't like it, and it made his stomach turn in revulsion. Or maybe that was just his gut eating itself. Still, he felt the three sharp jabs to the face were a bit of an overreaction. Just because he'd called the man a shallow, selfish pig unworthy to lick the dirt from his boots didn't mean the guy had to haul off and punch him.

God, he was bad at this. He just wanted to go back to his life where people fell at his feet, bent over backward to give him what he wanted, and any comfort in the world could be gained by a snap of his fingers. How did regular people survive?

"Oh, fuck this. I'm calling the cops."

Rayne's eyes darted past the handsome man kneeling in front of him, to the man standing behind him glaring back at Rayne. "Please. Don't. I'm sorry. Please, just let me leave." The streets were tough, but Rayne had an idea someone of his small stature wouldn't survive long inside a jail cell.

"Would you knock it off?" The big man looked over his shoulder, growling at the other. Then he returned his focus on Rayne, surveying him with gorgeous chocolate-brown eyes. "No one is going to call the cops, and no one is going to hurt you. I just want you to come out of there so I can see how bad you're hurt."

The man still spoke quietly, his eyes soft, and a small smile played at the corner of his lips. He had no way of knowing if he could trust the man, but Rayne didn't have many options. He couldn't remain in his hole forever. Eventually, they would get tired of trying to coax him out and just drag him from his shelter.

Hesitantly, he unwound his arms, and slowly, cautiously, crawled forward until his head peeked out of the opening. The man smiled and nodded, easing back to give Rayne more room as though he were a startled kitten.

When he'd finally wiggled himself out, Rayne gingerly climbed to his feet, watching as the other man did the same. Damn, the guy was even more massive on his feet. Rayne gulped, taking a hasty step in retreat and colliding painfully with the hard countertop.

"Easy." The man held his hands up, palms out, but made no move to reach for Rayne. "I'm Dante Luca, and this is Davey Hudson, but we call him Hudson." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder to the man who wanted to have Rayne arrested.

Nodding, Rayne offered a tiny smile, trying for shy and charming. His heart thundered beneath his breastbone, sending blood roaring in his ears. His head swam, and he reached out blindly to grip the counter as a wave of dizziness threatened to drop him.

"Whoa." Dante stepped forward, catching him under the elbow with a gentle, but firm grip. "When's the last time you ate something?"

Resisting the urge to jerk his arm away, Rayne bit his lips and shrugged. He honestly couldn't remember. "Two or three days ago," he mumbled under his breath.

Dante nodded, but his smile slipped from his lips. "Okay. Do you have any other injuries besides that shiner and busted lip?"

Crossing his arms over his midsection, Rayne gently rubbed at the ribs on his left side. "My ribs are a bit sore."

"Do you mind if I have a look?" Dante's hand still cupped his elbow, but he didn't grip him, allowing Rayne to pull away if he wanted.

Surprisingly, he found he didn't. The rough fingers against his sensitive skin sent little tingles racing down his spine. The kindness and obvious concern in Dante's eyes made him feel safe for the first time in days.

Rayne looked over the man, swallowing down the saliva that pooled in his mouth at the sight of smooth olive skin stretched over solid, rock hard muscles. Completely inappropriate to be ogling the

man considering the circumstances, but Rayne couldn't help himself. If the guy didn't want to be ogled, he should put a shirt on.

Glancing over Dante's shoulder, he eyed Hudson with trepidation. The man still glared at him, anger and distrust blazing from his eyes.

Dante followed his gaze and huffed out a sigh. "Hudson, go find Rayne something to eat."

Without a word, the man stomped out of the room and disappeared from sight.

"Don't mind him. Now, let's take a look at those ribs."

With shaking hands, Rayne slowly unwound his arms and began lifting the hem of his dirty T-shirt. His nose wrinkled, reminding him that besides eating, he also hadn't showered in several days. Damn, he smelled ripe.

He managed to raise his shirt just past his belly button when a sharp jab of pain lanced through his tender ribs, causing him to gasp and drop his arms.

"Here," Dante murmured. He reached for him slowly, allowing Rayne to see and react to his every move. His strong fingers pinched the hem of Rayne's shirt and gently lifted it until Rayne felt the warm breeze drift over his abused flank.

Chapter Three

Dante had to bite the inside of his cheek to stop his growl as he revealed the mottled bruising covering the creamy skin along Rayne's side. He didn't know why, but he felt oddly protective of the little runt standing in front of him. The idea that someone had deliberately hurt him left Dante seething.

He skimmed his fingertips over the soft skin, his nostrils flaring as pure, sweet lust slammed into him at the slight shiver of Rayne's supple body. Battling back his desire, he inspected the wounded area, pressing as gently as possible, trying to determine if the ribs were broken or merely bruised.

Rayne cried out hoarsely, jerking away from Dante's probing fingers. "Fuck, that hurts!"

Nodding, Dante dropped the man's shirt and took an unsteady step back. "I don't think any of them are broken, but you'll probably want to get them checked out just in case."

"Thank you," Rayne whispered, looking away and sniffing. "You've been very kind to me."

"Stop it." Dante didn't feel comfortable with the kid's gratitude. He hadn't done anything other than check his ribs and send Hudson for something to eat. "Do you have a place to stay? Parents who might be missing you?"

Rayne chuckled darkly. "I doubt my parents give a damn about me anymore." He turned, meeting Dante's gaze at last. "I'm not a runaway, if that's what you're asking. I'll be twenty-five next month."

Dante tried to hide his shock. The kid didn't look a day over seventeen. Well, at least the growing lust he felt for the guy didn't

leave him feeling dirty anymore. Still, Rayne needed a safe place to rest and recuperate, not some idiot pawing at him and trying to get in his pants.

“Do you need a place to stay?” The words slipped out of his mouth before he realized he intended to speak them. Snapping his mouth closed, he watched Rayne, trying to gauge his reaction to the offer. While part of him wanted desperately to help the scared and lost man before him, the other part argued he didn’t know this guy, this...vagrant.

“Why would you do that?” Rayne’s brows drew together, and he tilted his head to the side.

Yeah, his brain screamed at him. *Why the hell would you do that?*

Dante didn’t have a good explanation. Something about the small man called to him, drawing out every one of his protective instincts. The guy was just so little, looked so lost and scared. He needed a champion, and Dante wanted to be the hero to slay his dragons.

“You need a place to stay, and I have an extra room.” He shrugged, trying to act as though the answer didn’t matter to him. He knew he’d worry himself sick about Rayne if the man refused his offer, though.

Rayne considered him for a long time before he finally nodded. “I only need a place to stay for twenty-five days.”

Dante’s own eyebrows drew together, mirroring Rayne’s expression. What an oddly exact number. Still, Rayne had accepted his offer, and damn, if it didn’t make him giddy. He was seriously going to have to do some self-examination later. Obviously, he’d taken complete leave of good sense.

“Great. There’s a storm moving in, so I’m finished here for the day. Let’s lock up and head to my place. We’ll get you a shower, some clean clothes, and a hot meal. How does that sound?”

“Like heaven,” Rayne moaned.

Dante almost swallowed his tongue at the sexy sound. Oh, he wanted those sounds coming from Rayne's mouth over and over as the man writhed beneath him, begging for Dante's touch.

Whoa! Dante needed to get a firm grip on his desires before he sent the man running for the hills. What had come over him? He shouldn't be having those kinds of thoughts about someone he'd just met. Especially the broken and bruised man before him.

Still, all that beautiful peaches-and-cream skin, the small, willowy body, even the strange sea green eyes, sent Dante's head swimming with erotic fantasies of them both naked, sweating, and panting.

Clearing his throat to remove the gravel from it, he jerked his head toward the direction of the front door. "Let's go then."

Rayne nodded again and turned to reach beneath the counter for his bag. He gasped, a small grunt escaping his lips, and placed a hand over his injured side. Dante grimaced in sympathy, gently patting Rayne on the hip, and ducked down to grab the black tote.

"I've got this." He led the way toward the front door, mentally cursing Hudson for ditching out instead of bringing food like he'd asked. They'd been friends for a long time, but Hudson could still be a fucking prick. "What would you like to eat?"

"Just soup," Rayne whispered. "If that's okay." He rubbed at his throat, drawing Dante's attention to the red and raw abrasions just under his jaw.

Dropping the bag to the floor with a plop, he reached out and gripped Rayne's chin, tilting his head back to have a better look at his throat. It looked like someone had tried to strangle him.

A feral growl built in his chest and bubbled up through his snarling lips. "Who did this to you?"

Rayne jerked away, staggering backwards as he his eyes grew huge and frightened. "I don't know."

It only then occurred to Dante why the man had been whispering through their limited conversation. He had just assumed it was

because the guy was scared. "I'm sorry." Dante softened his voice and reached out again, wiggling his fingers for Rayne to come closer.

It took a little cajoling, but eventually Rayne stepped forward, allowing Dante to skim his knuckles over the abused skin on his throat. "We need to call the police, little one."

"I'm not so little, and I don't want to call the police. It's over and done with, and I just want to be left alone." The steel in Rayne's voice shocked Dante, and he dropped his hand.

"Well, I can't force you, but I hope you think about it." Reaching down to pick up the tote again, he slung the strap over his shoulder and continued toward the front door.

* * * *

Climbing into the passenger seat of the heavy-duty Ford pickup, Rayne didn't know what to think. Dante's generosity went against every principle he held close. You didn't offer a hand to the less fortunate. You stepped on them and crawled over them as you climbed your way to the top.

A part of him wanted to curl his lip and flog Dante for a fool. For all the man knew, Rayne could be a thief and a con artist. He'd certainly played the part of the helpless victim back in that kitchen. Yes, he had been terrified at first, but at Dante's offer of protection and a place to sleep, Rayne slipped into full manipulation mode.

Some little voice in the back of his head berated him for extorting Dante's giving nature, but he duct taped the little bastard and kicked him down a well. He needed food, a place out of the elements, and maybe someone to do his laundry until his thirty days of hell had expired.

If Dante couldn't see how Rayne played to his need to be the hero, well, that was his own damn fault. Rayne learned at an early age, the only person he could depend on was himself. The realization forged

him into the man he'd become, and never once had he questioned the means he used to gain what he wanted.

Until now.

While he wanted to laugh and jeer at Dante's ignorance, he couldn't help but melt at the gentle smiles, the tender looks, or the soft caresses the man bestowed upon him. Fire, heat, desire, passion, envy, jealousy, admiration, and awe were only a few of the looks he'd come to expect from people he met on the street.

They pawed at him, groped and fondled, but never had anyone touched him without demanding something in return. Leers, knowing grins, smirks, and beaming smiles were tossed his way on a daily basis. Not once had someone smiled at him without hidden motivation.

Fans wanted him and agents wanted a part of his prestige. His family and friends had faltered by the wayside, leaving him alone and colder than ever. He didn't need them, though. He didn't need anyone. He was Rayne-fucking-Everest, and people rolled out the red carpet and cued the music when he stepped into a room.

"There's a little place down the street that makes pretty decent soup." Dante closed his door and stared up the truck. "What are you thinking? Tomato? Chicken noodle?"

Rayne wrinkled his nose. He was thinking he wanted to be home in his warm, custom-made bed, with his five-star chef in the kitchen preparing him something fabulous. His stomach roared again, twisting painfully, and reminding him he had several days left before that dream would once more be his reality.

"What do you recommend?"

"The baked potato soup is my personal favorite. It should be pretty easy on a sore throat as well. What do you say?"

"Sounds good." He needed to watch himself if he hoped to remain in Dante's good graces until he could sort out the mess that had become his life. "I don't have any money, though." Of course the man

knew this, but Rayne felt it wouldn't earn him any sympathy to look like he expected Dante to just buy his meal—which he did.

“Don't worry about money.” Dante frowned and shook his head. “I want to help you.”

Rayne knew this. Dante had “caregiver” written all over his handsome face. While Dante was gorgeous, Rayne had no desire to spark up a relationship with a common construction worker. Still, he'd play nice for another three weeks.

Chapter Four

The warm, creamy soup slid down his throat, soothing the rawness of his esophagus. Rayne had to admit, it tasted wonderful, and it appeased his aching stomach. He hadn't even been able to wait until they arrived at Dante's place. Once the smell hit him, he had to have the treat that awaited him inside the little cardboard bowl.

Etiquette and manners be damned, Rayne dove into the savory broth, moaning quietly at the rich tastes of bacon, cheese, and sour cream. Who'd have thought the little mom and pop diner would have such a delicacy to offer?

Once finished and sated, Rayne replaced the lid and pushed the container into the paper sack. He sat quietly, staring out his window as they travelled down the highway. His eyes lit on the billboard in the distance displaying a beautiful man with impeccable muscle tone dressed only in a pair of low-slung designer jeans. The model's head dipped to one side, his dreamy green eyes the only color shining back from the black-and-white photo.

He could only imagine how many people had driven past the billboard and sighed wistfully at the image. "Do you know who that is?" Rayne asked casually.

Dante glanced up at the billboard and grimaced. He nodded once, returning his attention to the road. "I imagine everyone knows who Rayne Everest is." He said the name as though it left a bad taste in his mouth.

Rayne frowned, his hackles rising. "Do you have a problem with him?" He could only imagine jealousy hid behind the disdain. Why

else would Dante have that look on his face? Rayne had never met the man before today.

“He’s a selfish, pompous, arrogant, superficial asshole,” Dante ground out. “I’m sorry you share a first name with the prick.”

Rayne gapped at him. He’d been called all those things during his life, but never all lumped together and spoken with such anger. “Do you know him?”

“Not personally, no.” Dante continued to stare through the windshield, not even sparing a peek at Rayne. “I approached him a few months back during the opening gala at the new modern art museum about sponsoring the expansion of the children’s home downtown. I’d heard he grew up in an orphanage, and thought the cause might be close to his heart. He basically spit in my face.”

Rayne wracked his brain, trying to remember the conversation. Surely, he wouldn’t have forgotten such a beautiful face as Dante’s. Even now, it made him green with jealousy that an average working man could look almost as gorgeous as him.

He remembered being bored to tears at the gala. The ridiculous fawning over the uninspiring artwork made him nauseous. How anyone even noticed the horrible paintings and gross photographs with him in the room baffled him.

Several people had approached him that night, but he didn’t remember any encounter with the man next to him. Still, the reaction sounded like him, though. He despised people pushing charities and volunteering functions at him. It wasn’t about the money. He just didn’t want his name associated with the hopeless, depressed, or diseased.

“How do you know he grew up in an orphanage?” The news unsettled him. He’d worked hard to erase any traces of himself before the age of eighteen. Not even his agent knew he’d grown up alone and discarded in the rundown Catholic orphanage.

“I grew up in the same orphanage,” Dante whispered. “Me and my sister.” He chuckled softly, but without much humor. “You wouldn’t

know it now, but Rayne used to be the sweetest kid you'd ever meet. He'd give you the shirt off his back if you even hinted that you needed it."

Closing his eyes, Rayne felt his nose burn as the tears welled up in his eyes. He'd put everything he had into erasing any traces of that boy from the ghettos. How dare Dante bring up a past that left him cold and sickened?

"You were friends?" A flicker of a memory started inside his brain, but disintegrated too quickly for him to grasp it.

"Yeah, we were friends." The sadness in Dante's voice had Rayne opening his eyes and looking up at his companion.

He stared, narrowing his eyes and scrunching his nose, as he tried to connect the handsome man with one of the boys from the orphanage. He'd done such a good job of removing his past that he scarcely remembered anything about the twelve miserable years he spent in the children's home.

He hadn't had friends there. He'd been small for his age, scrawny, and much too pretty for a boy. Or so the boys who'd tormented him liked to taunt as they gave him wedgies, dunked his head in toilets, and knocked him around on the playground. Dante had to be wrong. Rayne had never had any friends.

"He was just a kid when I turned eighteen. Fifteen or sixteen maybe. I got the hell out and convinced the courts to let me take custody of my sister. I tried to go back and visit, but working two jobs, going to school, and caring for a twelve-year-old didn't leave much time for a social life."

"What's your sister's name?"

"Marcy."

Images of a little girl with long black curls and big, honey-brown eyes assailed Rayne. He remembered Marcy sticking up for him when James Dugan dumped his lunch tray. She'd been a spitfire, ranting and yelling, pointing her little finger right in James's chest as her face reddened with righteous anger. Smiling at the memory, Rayne

wrapped his fingers around the thin memory, trying to pull up thoughts of Dante.

Two bullies held him by his ankles, suspended over one of the filthy toilets in the boys' bathroom. He wiggled and screamed, yelling for someone to help him, for them to leave him alone. His face sank closer and closer to the disgusting water, his tormentor's laughter ringing in his ears.

Then a deep, rumbling voice demanded to know what the hell was going on. Strong arms wrapped around Rayne's waist, flipping him over and standing him on his feet as he sobbed and trembled. He remembered the huge satisfaction of watching the older boy yell at his attackers until they looked as though they'd wet themselves.

From that moment on, he'd been madly in love with Dante Luca.

"I was so mad at you," he whispered, the pain of Dante's abandonment tearing at his heart as though it had happened only yesterday.

"Excuse me?"

* * * *

Dante's head whipped to the side, studying the man sitting next to him. Maybe he'd heard wrong. "Excuse me?"

Rayne gaped at him, his mouth hanging open and his eyes bugging out of his head. "Uh, nothing."

"Did you say you were mad at me? When?"

"Nothing. I didn't say anything. Just forget it!" The vehemence in Rayne's voice gave him pause, but Dante was nothing if not persistent. The fierce denial only made him more curious.

"I'm not going to let it go, so you might as well tell me what you mean by that little comment. I don't think I've given you any reason to be angry at me."

"I'm not angry at you now."

"Ah, so you were angry with me."

Rayne growled. "Would you just drop it?"

"Nope. Spill."

"You are the most obstinate man I have ever met. Why can't you just leave it alone? I didn't say anything, okay?"

"Rayne, talk to me." Dante tried for soft and persuasive. It had worked once before, maybe he would have luck a second time.

"I was mad when you left," Rayne said so quietly, Dante almost missed it.

"When I left the orphanage?" Would they ever stop talking in circles? "You lived there? What's your last name?"

"Everest," Rayne whispered.

Dante blinked stupidly before he burst out laughing. "Sorry, man, but you don't look a thing like the guy."

"I did four days ago."

Dante just continued to chuckle. Obviously the guy was messing with him. "Oh, really? And what happened? Were you cursed by an evil witch?" Not that he didn't find the guy cute as hell, but this Rayne certainly didn't look anything like the top model billionaire. "So, why were you squatting on a construction site if you have that big, fancy house to sleep in?"

Rayne growled and looked away. "Never mind."

Dante couldn't contain his mirth. The guy was actually pouting. "Okay, Rayne Everest, tell me how we met."

"You stopped a couple of bullies from dunking my head in a toilet."

Dante's laughter cut off abruptly. No, that didn't prove anything. "What did you say to me after they left?" They had been completely alone in the bathroom, and no one except he and Rayne knew the words spoken between them.

"Thank you."

Dante sighed in relief. He knew the man had just been jerking him around.

“Then I threw my arms around your waist, sobbed all over your ugly pink shirt, and told you I thought you were cooler than Batman.”

“It was magenta!”

Then Rayne’s words sank in, and Dante nearly drove them off the road. His hands shook, and his heart beat rapidly inside his suddenly too tight chest. No one knew that—no one could. “Repeat that.”

“You heard what I said, Dante. It’s really me.”

Chapter Five

Dante sat on his sofa, staring straight ahead, but seeing nothing. This wasn't happening. Hudson had finally managed to get something right. The sun had definitely fried his brain.

Moving only his eyes, he watched Rayne chew on his lip as he sat with his hands folded in his lap in the chair across from him. An action he'd watched the kid do a hundred times at the orphanage. Even though he always wore a smile, his nervous fidgeting gave him away every time.

"So, you smacked some god of...chaos. You woke up the next morning looking like this. Said god showed up in your bathroom and basically took over your life. You've been on the streets for four days until you just happened to end up sleeping in the house I'm building. And you have thirty days to renounce your sinful ways, or you'll end up like this forever. Did I miss anything?"

"That's everything." Rayne looked him right in the eye and made a gruesome attempt at a smile. "I'm scared, Dante."

"No shit!" Dante exploded, shooting up from the sofa to start pacing the room. "This can't be happening. Things like this don't happen. I don't know who you are or what you're playing at, but this has gone on long enough." He whirled around and pointed a finger in the man's face. "Tell me the truth!"

"Ah, but he speaks the truth, Mr. Luca."

Whirling around in the opposite direction, Dante felt like a puppet, flopping around while someone else pulled the strings. A man no bigger than Rayne, with blond hair and baggy clothes, stood just behind his sofa. "Who the fuck are you?"

“Gordost.” The man bowed a little. “One of the nine Gods of Chaos.”

Dante blinked, and when he looked again, the man standing across from him could have been his twin. “Oh, shit!” Stumbling backward, he tripped over the coffee table and ended up on his ass, his head resting against Rayne’s knees.

“Told ya.” Rayne smirked down at him, brushing the hair away from his forehead. “Believe me now?”

Dante nodded stupidly. How could he not? “How did you get in my house?”

“Did you miss the ‘god’ part?” Then Gordost transformed again, and a Rayne look-alike strutted around the sofa to stand in front of them. Not the Rayne he currently rested against, but the Rayne he knew from social events, billboards, and magazine ads.

“I see you found some poor sucker to take you in, Mr. Everest. Just as well. I was beginning to worry about you.”

“I want my life back!”

“My dear boy, you have learned nothing. No, we had a deal.”

“I never made a deal with you. You just showed up and turned my life into total chaos!”

Gordost lifted an eyebrow and crooked one side of his mouth. “Hello! God of Chaos here!”

“So, what does he have to do to get his life back?” Dante pushed into a sitting position before climbing to his feet and facing the god toe-to-toe.

“His pride has made him a boastful and nasty little prick. He heralds himself a god, an idol to be worshiped and adulated above all others. I only wish for him to learn a little humility.” Gordost smoothed the lapels of his Armani suit and checked his watch. “Now, I have a photo shoot in twenty minutes. I’ll check in again soon.”

“Why do you need to check in?” Rayne stood to his feet and stepped up beside Dante. “Don’t you gods just smite us from up above and let it be?”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Gordost chuckled, shaking his head as though he found Rayne a complete riot, and then simply vanished.

Dante stood frozen in place, staring at the empty space where a fucking god had just showed up, changed shapes not once but twice, and then poofed out of the goddamn room!

“I need a drink.”

“I need two,” Rayne agreed.

* * * *

Showered, shaved, and dressed in clean clothes, Rayne sat on the sofa in the den, brushing out his wet hair. “So, what do we do?”

“You’re asking me?” Dante slammed his beer bottle on the bar in the corner, startling Rayne and causing him to jump.

“Well, I don’t have any ideas, and I don’t want to be stuck like this forever.” He went back to brushing his hair.

“What’s wrong with the way you are?”

“Just look at me!” Rayne waved his arms around in agitation, hissing when a sharp pain shot through his bruised ribs. Tossing his hairbrush on the cushion beside him, he dropped his face into his hands and sighed.

“I think you look sexy as hell.”

Rayne’s head snapped up, and he stared at Dante in shock. Was the man teasing him? Maybe he’d had too much to drink. He had a nice little collection of empty beer bottles piling up on the bar. “You’re drunk.”

“No, I’m not.” Dante surveyed the bottle in his hand and shrugged. “Much. Still think you’re hot.” He hiccupped cutely, and Rayne had to turn his head to hide his smile.

“Are you laughing at me?” Dante hiccupped again.

Rayne kept his face turned away and fought not to laugh out loud. “Nope. Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Whatever.” Waving a hand in front of his face, Dante staggered forward, almost tripping over his own feet. “I’m going to bed.” He took another step and crumbled to the floor, laughing like a loon. “Okay, I’ll sleep here,” he said around a giggle.

Rayne couldn’t hold it any longer. He threw his head back, laughing until his ribs ached and his stomach cramped as he gasped for breath. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed like this. Hell, he didn’t think he’d ever laughed like this.

Listening to the big, muscled, beefy Italian giggling like a little girl was too cute. Making his way over to his old friend, Rayne knelt beside him and grinned. “You are an idiot. Let me help you.”

“S’ good. I’ll jus’ here...yeah.”

Rayne snorted. “Come on, ya big lush. You’re so going to hate yourself in the morning.” Taking Dante’s hand, he rose to stand over him and pulled. “Son of a bitch!” His ribs protested, screaming at him for being a moron.

He yelped when Dante’s fingers squeezed his hand and jerked him down on top of a solid chest. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

Dante reached up to cup his cheek, the smile slipping from his mouth as he stared into Rayne’s eyes. Rayne stared back, completely mesmerized, everything in the room fading away but the man beneath him.

“So beautiful,” Dante whispered, slurring the words only a little.

His fingers slid through Rayne’s hair, sliding around to palm the back of his head, and pulled him forward with gentle pressure. It never crossed Rayne’s mind to resist. How many nights had he spent alone in the orphanage, fantasizing about the man? How many times had he imagined them in this same position?

“You’re drunk,” Rayne repeated, but his tone held little conviction.

“Not that drunk.” Then Dante pressed their mouths together, his tongue slipping over the crease of Rayne’s lips, tickling and teasing, coaxing them open.

Parting his lips and darting his tongue out to meet Dante's, Rayne moaned softly into his mouth, loving the feel of the wet tongue, and the slightly bitter taste of beer. God, the man was so sexy, so warm, so...so asleep.

Rayne felt the man's mouth go slack beneath his just before Dante's head dropped back to the floor with a loud thud. Groaning, he dropped his brow to Dante's chest, rolling it back and forth as he started to chuckle.

Who the hell just passed out while kissing someone? A soft snore drew another laugh from him, and he climbed off of the big man and stumbled over to the sofa. Flicking the raging hard on tenting his sweats, he rolled his eyes and grabbed a blanket from the couch.

He was being an idiot. Yes, he'd been in love with Dante as a child, but once Rayne had his life back, he'd return to forgetting all about the man. The middle class had no place in the world he'd built for himself.

Kneeling beside Dante, Rayne smoothed the blanket over him, tucking it around his shoulders, and grinned. He gently pushed the hair back from his rescuer's face, letting his fingers linger along the soft skin of his cheek.

Dante had been his savior, coming to Rayne's defense and befriending him when the rest of the world turned its back. At the age of twelve, Rayne had been enamored with the older boy. He'd looked up to him and developed a kind of hero worship.

As the years passed, and they each matured, so did his feelings. At sixteen, he'd been so deeply in love with Dante Luca, he felt he'd die if he couldn't have the eighteen year old. Then Dante disappeared. One day there, the next day gone, leaving Rayne heartbroken and depressed. How could Dante have just left him? He never even said good-bye.

His heartbreak festered and boiled until it morphed itself into a burning rage born of despair and abandonment. The one person he'd allowed into his heart had taken the gift and spit on it. Never again

would he allow someone that close. Never would anyone hurt him the way Dante had.

Now older, Rayne understood the full weight of the responsibility heaped upon the young man from his past. Eight years had passed, and they were both very different men now. A roll in the sheets, a quick slap and tickle, could be all they'd share.

Continuing to stare down at Dante, Rayne felt his eyes mist a little. He'd spent years erasing all memories of Dante Luca. Then, in one day, the man had broken through, and Rayne's old feelings beat against him like a tidal wave.

Maybe he could make just one little exception in his rigidly controlled world. He'd designed his life, after all. No one said he couldn't do a little remodeling.

Chapter Six

A sharp smack landed on his ass, and Rayne rolled over, sitting bolt upright in bed with a loud cry. Rubbing his bleary eyes to get them to focus, he groaned at the deep, throaty laughter echoing around the room.

“You are supposed to have a hangover and be a big grizzly bear this morning.” Looking up at Dante, he scowled, letting his irritation show on his face. “Why are you so happy? And what the fuck time is it anyway?”

“Five,” Dante said as he continued to laugh. “We’ve got a big day ahead of us, so get your lazy ass out of bed and get dressed. There’s coffee and toast downstairs.”

“Us? Big day? Dante, the sun isn’t even up yet,” Rayne whined as he flopped back on the bed and covered his head with a pillow. “Go away.”

The pillow disappeared from his head, and the blankets ripped off of him. Strong, callused fingers gripped his hip and shook him roughly. “We’ve got houses to build, my new apprentice. Shake a leg.”

Rayne covered his head with his arms, straightened his leg, and kicked a couple of times. “Leg shook. Now go away.”

Dante’s booming laughter put a smile on Rayne’s lips, and he was very glad he had his face hidden. No one should be that happy before sunrise. Then the rest of Dante’s words sank in, and he sat up quickly, his forehead banging into Dante’s.

“Oww!” Rayne rubbed his head, glaring at the man who continued to laugh as though the sudden concussion hadn’t fazed him in the least. “I hate to tell you this, but ‘we’ aren’t building houses today.”

Dante winked and shook his hip again. “C’mon, Rayne. It’ll be fun. Besides, you need something to do. You can’t just sit around here and get fat for the next three weeks.”

Rayne’s mouth dropped open, and his hand slapped at his flat stomach. “I am not fat!”

“Not yet.” Dante winked again, stood from the bed, and swaggered to the door. “Oh, and that’s my bed.”

Rayne’s cheeks heated, and he looked away. “Sorry, I didn’t know.” Lie. He’d known the moment he stepped into the room and smelled Dante’s intoxicating scent. It’s why he’d chosen to sleep here.

Jerking his head toward the hallway, Dante snapped his fingers twice. “We’re leaving in ten minutes, so get moving.”

“But...but,” Rayne sputtered. “I can’t...I have...my ribs! Surely, you wouldn’t put an injured man to work.” He poked his bottom lip out and rounded his eyes pleadingly.

This seemed to give Dante pause. His eyes softened, and his smile slipped a degree. “Are you always this big of a weenie?” Then he snickered and hurried out of the room.

Rayne stared at the open doorway in shock. He hadn’t done a day of manual labor since leaving the children’s home. He had breakfast delivered to his bed when he awoke. People pampered and catered to him.

He had a bad feeling he was going to hate the man before the day was over.

* * * *

Dante watched Rayne hammer away at the nails as he shingled the roof. Yeah, they had electric nail guns, but a little hard labor never

hurt anyone. Besides, he found it adorable the way Rayne kept sighing and wincing, or wailing every time he missed the nail and hit his thumb. The guy would probably kill himself with a nail gun.

"It's official," Rayne said icily.

"What's that?" Dante tried to keep the amusement out of his voice.

"I hate you. I thought it would take all day, but two hours into it, and I already hate you."

That did it. Dante threw his head back and laughed out at the morning sun. "But you're doing such a great job. Have a little pride in your work."

Rayne dropped his hammer and glared. "Pride is exactly what got me in this predicament."

"No." Dante shook his head, his face becoming serious. "Being a self-important fuckwad is what got your ass zapped." He tilted his head to the side and considered the smaller man. "The Devil did grin, for his darling sin is pride that apes humility."

Rayne stared back at him blankly. "Did you just call me a demon, a monkey, or darling?"

Rolling his eyes, Dante sighed. "It's a quote from Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Ape just means to imitate." When Rayne continued to look at him vacantly, Dante shook his head. "It's okay to have pride in a job well done, to feel productive or accomplished."

Scooting across the roof, he picked up the discarded hammer and held it at eye level. "When I finish a house, a building, whatever I'm working on, and I know I've done a good job, I feel proud. I put my heart, soul, blood, sweat, and tears into my job, and I know I couldn't have done anything differently to make it better."

Placing the tool gently back on the shingles, he reached out slowly and palmed Rayne's delicate cheek. "When your pride and confidence becomes arrogance and conceitedness, you miss out on the journey that leads you toward your goal. Your accomplishments shouldn't define who you are as a person."

Dante didn't know if he was explaining it right at all. Rayne's gaze deepened, and for just a brief second, Dante could see into the man's soul, see the frightened twelve-year-old boy beneath the cold, egotistical façade.

Then Rayne closed his eyes and rubbed his cheek against Dante's hand, nuzzling against it like a kitten seeking comfort. "I wasn't always like this, ya know." His whispered words were sad and heavy.

"I know, baby."

Rayne's eyes snapped open, and Dante clamped his mouth shut. Fuck! He hadn't meant to say that. Thankfully, before he could say something else stupid, Hudson yelled from down below, "I don't hear any work up there, assholes!"

Rayne wrinkled his nose and eased away from Dante's hand. "What's his problem anyway?"

Chuckling, Dante gained his feet and put his hands on his hips. "If I had to guess, I'd say he doesn't like you very much."

"Yeah, well tell him to join the club. There seems to be a lot of that going around."

* * * *

His muscles ached, his hands had blisters, and his shirt stuck to him, sweaty and dirty. Rayne wanted to cry by the time he descended the ladder and made his way to Dante's pickup. If he never had to do that again in his life, it would be too soon. Unfortunately, Dante had already started yammering away about installing hardwood floors the next day.

"Someone shoot me now," Rayne muttered under his breath as he climbed into the passenger seat and adjusted the air conditioner vents.

"It'll get easier, and we'll find you some gloves tomorrow," Dante said happily. Rayne wanted to hit him. He would have, too, if his body didn't hurt so much.

“So, do I get to eat now? I’m starving. No one fed the poor slave today.”

Dante snorted. “Slave my ass. You’re free to go whenever you want.”

His eyebrows pulled together, and Rayne shook his head slowly. Not only did he have nowhere to go, but he didn’t want to leave. The work sucked, but he enjoyed spending time with Dante, watching his eyes light up with approval when Rayne finally got something right. For some unfathomable reason, he didn’t want to disappoint the man.

“So, what do you want to eat? Pick something cheap and quick.”

Rayne had no idea what constituted “cheap.” He never paid attention to the cost of things. If he wanted it, he bought it—the end. “Uh, how about you choose a place.”

“How’s your throat today?”

Running his fingertips along the raw skin on his neck, Rayne nodded. “Definitely better.” He still didn’t know how he’d gotten away from the three goons in that alley. He just knew he would die, alone and broken, with a nylon rope wrapped around his neck. He didn’t remember passing out. When he came around, though, his money was gone, but he’d been alive.

“Cool. We’ll go to Nate’s.”

Rayne nodded dumbly. He doubted he’d be able to order a bottle of wine or fresh lobster tails at Nate’s. They probably even had paper napkins. The thought caused him to shudder. He’d been pleasantly surprised by the soup the day before, so maybe he’d survive this as well.

They rode along without conversation, Dante singing along with the radio and Rayne attempting to hide his giggles at the horrible off-key notes. Well, at least the man was pretty to look at.

When Dante finally pulled to a stop, Rayne looked out of the windshield and nearly choked. “You have got to be kidding me! I’m not eating here!”

Dante surveyed the building, looking completely bewildered. “What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s a bright pink barn!”

“It’s magenta,” Dante grumbled. “It’s not a barn...exactly. They have good seafood here. Get your silk panties out of a wad and be adventurous.”

Rayne perked up a little at the mention of seafood. So, what if the place looked like Barbie’s Hoedown. Not as though he’d see anyone he knew in there. His stomach barked at him, not caring about the sky blue trim or the enormous swordfish hanging over the entrance in the least.

Rayne kind of hoped the fish sang and flopped around when you passed under it.

Chapter Seven

“Okay, I have to admit, that was pretty good.” Better than good, Rayne had never enjoyed such a...fun meal. They’d laughed and talked about stupid things. His salad had been fresh and crisp, his shrimp steamed to perfection with just the right amount of seasoning. Still, he’d enjoyed the company more.

“See, it didn’t kill you to try something new.” Dante cast a smile over his shoulder as he led the way to his truck.

Just as they neared the front of the pickup, a grubby-looking man approached them, smiling widely to show off his less than perfect teeth. They weren’t yellow and dingy, and he actually seemed to have all of them, but they were a bit crooked. The smell of body odor and stale whiskey permeated the air around him, and Rayne had the urge to pull Dante away from the hobo.

“Silas!” Dante beamed as if the man were a long lost friend. “I haven’t seen you lately. How have you been?”

“I can’t complain.” Silas’s voice sounded as though he’d been gargling nails. “That storm passed over without a drop spilled, so I guess I’m doing just fine.”

Rayne scrunched his nose and stepped away as Dante patted the man on the shoulder. He made a mental note not to shake Dante’s hand any time soon.

“We’ve got to get back to work. You take care of yourself.” They shook, and Rayne distinctly saw a flash of green pass between their clasped hands. When the hell did Dante even pull out the money? *Sneaky bastard.*

Silas nodded his thanks, his eyes solemn, and shuffled on his way across the parking lot. Climbing up into his seat, Rayne wanted to beat his companion over the head. “You know he’s just going to use that to buy liquor right?”

Dante remained silent as he buckled his seatbelt and started the engine. Finally, he turned to Rayne, his eyes sad and disappointed. It made Rayne’s chest tighten. He didn’t like that look directed toward him—especially since it came from Dante.

“Do you know him?”

Rayne shook his head.

“Do you know what happened to him that he ended up on the street—alone, cold, hungry, and defeated?”

“Do you?” Rayne shot back.

“No.”

“Then why do you care? Why do you give him money? Obviously, this isn’t the first time. You work hard for what you earn. Why squander it on some loser just because he’s too lazy to work?”

“Do you know him?” Dante repeated quietly.

“No.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t judge him too harshly until you do.” He put the vehicle in reverse and backed out of the parking space. “Who are we to judge? Everyone is worthy of compassion, Rayne.”

Though the words held no heat, no anger, they cut Rayne to the bone. He settled back in his seat, his chest aching, his lunch turning to lead inside his belly, and tried to make sense of his whirling thoughts.

* * * *

Saturday morning found Dante paying homage to the porcelain god as his stomach heaved and twisted. Slick sweat coated his skin, his body shook violently, and his head throbbed with each beat of his heart.

“Man, I hurt in places I didn’t even know I had. Are you sure we can’t jus—” Rayne rushed over and knelt beside him, pushing the hair back from his face. “Holy shit, your face is on fire!”

“I’m fine,” Dante rasped. “Get dressed. We have to meet with the electrician today.”

“You aren’t going anywhere. The only meeting you have is with your pillow.”

Rayne moved away, and Dante heard the sounds of water running. His houseguest returned, swiping a cool, wet cloth over his face and down his neck. “Come on, big guy.”

“I’m fine,” Dante repeated as he wobbled to his feet. He felt weak, achy, and shivery, and he did not have time for this shit. “If I don’t meet him today, it could be another week before I can get the electrician back out to the site. We’ve got three houses to finish next week.” His head swam as he stumbled into his bedroom.

Rayne followed in behind him, steering him toward the bed and pushing him down on it. “Can’t Hudson or one of your other guys meet with him?”

“All the guys are off today. I got this guy to come in special today so I could talk to him without yelling around the noise.”

Rayne considered him for a long time, his arms crossed over his chest and his little foot tapping. “Okay, then I’ll go.”

Dante shook his head. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“In other words, you don’t think I can do it.” Rayne rolled his eyes and snorted. “I know how to be charming. I just follow the guy around, nod and smile, and then negotiate a price with him, right?”

Dante frowned but nodded. There was a lot more to it than that, but Rayne had the gist. It actually surprised him a little. Five days, and the man still complained regularly, threatened to join a labor union, and protested unfair working conditions. In the last couple of days, his tone had become more jovial, however, and Dante had a feeling Rayne just kept up the whining to poke at him.

“I promise I’ll call if I have any questions or negotiations start going south. A little trust, huh?”

Another cramp had him falling back on the bed and curling into a ball. Though hesitant about turning over the responsibility to Rayne, he didn’t think he’d last through the meeting. God, he just wanted to die.

Groaning, Dante pulled his pillow under his head and wrapped his arms around it. “Fine. Don’t fuck this up. I need this guy.”

Rayne tucked the blankets around him, kissed his forehead, and chuckled. “I’ve got this. I’ll pick up soup and medicine on my way home.”

“My wallet and keys are on the bar in the kitchen. Can I get that grapey medicine?”

“Mm hmm.” Rayne sounded as though he were trying not to laugh. Well, screw him. Dante didn’t like pills. They got stuck in his throat and hurt. And he liked the grape-tasting liquid the best. None of that nasty grown-up stuff.

Dante heard Rayne’s soft footsteps padding toward the door. He closed his eyes and prayed he’d done the right thing. Just before he nodded off he thought he heard Rayne whisper, “Damn, you’re cute.”

* * * *

Walking out of the pharmacy, Rayne couldn’t help but laugh. The pharmacist had looked at him as though he were nuts when he asked how much “grapey” medicine he should give to a two-hundred-pound man.

He hoped Dante was feeling better when he got home. He had so much to tell him. Rayne practically vibrated with excitement as he crossed the parking lot. He’d talked the electrician down by nearly twenty percent, and the man promised to have the job finished by the following weekend—an entire week ahead of schedule.

He felt so...accomplished.

Just as he unlocked the door to the truck, a heavy hand landed on his shoulder. Spinning around, he cringed when he saw the old hobo, Silas, standing behind him. Well, the man wouldn't get any money from him.

"You're Dante's young man, yes?" Silas smiled warmly, the effect lost a little by his scruffy beard and cracked lips. It irked Rayne to no end that the bastard was actually rather handsome despite the grime and general shabbiness.

"We're friends," Rayne offered.

"Dante is a good man. He deserves to be happy. He's been alone for a long time."

Curious against his will, Rayne tilted his head to the side. "Alone?"

Silas nodded. "I've never seen him with anyone. He seems lonely. I'm glad he has you now."

"We're just friends," Rayne repeated.

"Well, then I'm glad he has a friend. You take care." Silas turned to walk away, but Rayne put a hand on his elbow, stopping him.

"*Who are we to judge? Everyone deserves compassion.*" Dante's words assailed him, leaving him feeling like a gigantic asshole.

"Have you eaten today, Silas?"

"Not yet, son, but I'll be all right. The shelter opens at four." Silas gave him another genial grin as he patted Rayne's hand where it still rested on his elbow. "You're a good man."

Oh, if Silas only knew. "Don't move." Hurrying to open the driver's side door, Rayne leaned across the seat and snatched up the paper bag containing Dante's soup and bread. "Sorry, big guy," he whispered under his breath.

Turning around, he presented it to Silas, smiling like a dork. "It's not much, but maybe it will hold you until the shelter opens."

Silas nodded and his eyes actually looked a bit misty. "Thank you, son. It means a lot."

Swallowing around the lump in his throat, Rayne just nodded and climbed into the pickup.

Chapter Eight

“That’s it. I’m taking you to the clinic.” Rayne stood beside Dante’s bed, his hands on his hips, glaring down at him.

Dante hated doctors. Every time he went to the clinic or the hospital, they ended up giving him a shot. He hated needles more than he did doctors. “I’m fine.”

“You have a hundred and four temperature, and you haven’t eaten anything in three days. You’re dehydrated, pale, and you’re starting to smell. Plus, you’re a big whiner. I can’t take it anymore. My hair is going to start falling out!”

Rayne waved his hands around wildly as he spoke, pacing beside the bed, his voice rising with every word. If Dante didn’t know better, he’d think they guy was concerned about him.

Rayne plopped down on the edge of the mattress and pinned Dante with his gaze. “Please? For me? It makes me feel weird to see you hurting, and I don’t like it.” His lips pursed, and he cocked his head to the side.

Dante’s breathy chuckle turned to a moan before he began coughing. Rayne leaned over him, caressing his back with one hand and pushing his hair back from his face with the other. “Please, Dante?”

How could he resist such open pleading? The kid had always gotten to him. Though just over two years separated them, Dante had always been the bigger and stronger of the two. He’d made himself Rayne’s protector and had thought of him as a kid until sometime around Rayne’s fifteenth birthday.

He still remembered the day he'd caught a glimpse of Rayne in the shower and the immediate effect it'd had on his overactive teenage hormones. The age difference was nominal now, but at the time, Dante had felt like a sick pervert. More than just the sexual attraction, Rayne had managed to worm his way into his heart, and it only made Dante feel worse.

He'd turned eighteen two weeks later, gotten the hell out, and never went back. He'd missed the kid like crazy every single day.

"If you don't let me take you, I'm calling Marcy." Rayne's angry voice brought Dante out of his thoughts like he'd been doused in a bucket of ice water.

"Don't call Marcy. She's on her honeymoon in Jamaica, and she will skin me alive if I interrupt her vacation."

"Honeymoon?" Rayne asked in shock.

"She's all grown up now. Smart as a fuckin' whip, too. She graduated with honors, got a full-ride scholarship to UCLA, and moved out west. She met Thomas last year. He's a good guy, though a little bland. He treats her like gold, though, and I can't ask more than that." Pride swelled in him at his sister's accomplishments. She'd grown into an amazing woman.

"Does she ever visit? I miss her." Rayne's cheeks flushed at the confession.

"Not as often as I'd like, but she does come home for Christmas. I'll tell her you asked about her."

"You won't have to because I'm going to tell her myself when I call to let her know what a jackass her brother is being."

Dante shook his head, groaning as the throbbing in his temples started again. "Don't call Marcy."

"Then I suggest you get out of that bed and let me take you to the goddamn clinic!" Rayne's voice rose to a shout, his eyes narrowing dangerously. "Dante Luca, I swear..."

"Okay, okay." With another moan, he pushed to a sitting position, holding his head when it swam. "I'm up. Let's go."

“Aren’t you going to shower? Or at least change?” Rayne sounded horrified.

“No. I go like this, or I don’t go.”

“You’re a pig.”

“Oink, oink.”

Rayne snorted as he rose from the bed and offered a hand. “Fine. But don’t you dare tell anyone I know you.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Mr. Everest.” Dante growled the words, his patience running thin. He was not in the mood to deal with Rayne’s superiority complex.

“I didn’t mean it that way.” Rayne dipped his head, looking down at the floor.

Ah, great. Now Dante felt like a humongous ass on top of being sick. Wasn’t there a law against adding insult to injury? He decided to write a strongly worded email to his congressman.

“I’m sorry. I’m kind of a jerk when I’m sick.”

Rayne waved his hand, but still wouldn’t look at him. “It’s fine. I deserved it.”

Pinching Rayne’s chin between his thumb and forefinger, Dante lifted the man’s face until he could see his eyes. “I’m sorry, okay? You didn’t deserve that.”

Biting his bottom lip, Rayne nodded. “You’re melting my skin off you’re so hot.”

Dante straightened a little and stuck his chest out. “That’s the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

Rayne just rolled his eyes and pushed his shoulder to get him moving. “Now who has an overinflated ego?”

“If you start using big words, I’ll think you’re insulting me.”

“Good, because I was.” Rayne slapped him on the rump and sniggered. “Now, move that sexy ass.”

“Hot and sexy,” Dante mused. “Are you trying to seduce me?” Rayne growled and shoved him again. “Guess not.”

* * * *

“They gave me a shot! Right in my sexy ass.” Dante pouted as he climbed into his bed. “This is all your fault.”

Rayne stood beside the bed with his hands clasped behind his back, biting his bottom lip and looking like he might pop a vessel from trying to contain his laughter.

“It’s not funny.”

Squeezing his eyes tight, Rayne shook his head rapidly, little snorts escaping his nose.

“You’re an asshole.”

Rayne’s head stopped its side-to-side trek and bobbed up and down, his eyes still closed.

“It hurt,” Dante whined.

With those words, Rayne lost the battle with his composure. Wrapping his arms around his midsection, he doubled over, laughing hysterically and gasping for air. Dante wanted to hit him. Too bad he looked so cute when he smiled.

“You’re supposed to be sympathetic and hover over me. I require hovering. Do it now.”

Rayne just laughed harder, dropping to kneel on the floor and rocking back and forth. “You are awful,” he wheezed.

“My ass! They shot me in the ass!”

Rayne looked up at him, tears streaming down his red face, his smile bright enough to rival the sun. Dante decided against hitting him and just wanted to kiss the goofy grin right off his beautiful face. “Come here.” He crooked a finger, beckoning Rayne to him.

The man popped up like he had springs in his shoes and sashayed closer. “Do you need me to kiss it and make it all better?”

“Please?”

“Tell me where it hurts.”

Dante tapped his bottom lip. “Right here.”

The teasing light died from Rayne's eyes, replaced swiftly by a fiery desire. His nostrils flared, and he swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing along his slender throat. Crawling up on the bed, he bent over Dante, leaning closer until they were only a breath apart. Then his tongue snaked out, tracing the seam of Dante's lips.

"Here? Is this where it hurts?"

"Yes," Dante breathed. A whole miserable week he'd watched the man as he moved about the house, worked in the sun, smiled, laughed, or simply breathed. One taste is all he wanted. One taste to remember.

Their mouths met, and Dante eagerly swallowed Rayne's happy sigh. Electricity tingled through his lips, moving swiftly and determinedly to gather and burn in his groin. His head spun, and lights exploded behind his closed eyelids. A simple kiss had never left him feeling woozy before.

Holding Rayne's face with both hands, he slipped his tongue through the plump, panting lips, delving inside to explore the sweet depths. Rayne's tongue met his, dancing and gliding, relinquishing control, but taking what he wanted.

Then all too soon, Rayne pulled away, his face flushed and his eyes wide. They just stared at each other for several minutes before Rayne leaned over, kissed Dante's brow, and stood from the bed. "You need to rest. I'll see you in the morning."

"Stay." He didn't care if he sounded needy. He wanted Rayne in his bed.

"Not tonight." Rayne smiled indulgently, blew him a kiss, and hurried out of the room.

Dante dropped his head back to the pillow with a pathetic groan as he reached down to grasp his straining erection through his sweats. The corners of his lips turned up in a soft smile as he pictured Rayne's face before he hurried out of the room. "*Not tonight*," he'd said.

He never said anything about the others, and Dante intended to hold him to them—all nineteen nights remaining.

* * * *

Rayne raced down the hallway, stripping out of his clothes as he went and berating himself the entire way. Once inside the guest bathroom, he turned on the shower and jumped inside without waiting for the water to warm.

Since when did he care about other people's well-being? So what if Dante had the flu *and* bronchitis? Who cared that they'd just returned from the hospital? It had never stopped Rayne before. The idea of hurting Dante in any way, intentional or not, made his stomach burn.

He needed to get a grip on himself. The time he'd spent with Dante was making him soft. When his thirty days expired, he'd return to his normal life, and these silly dreams of happy-ever-after would be a long forgotten memory.

God, the man kissed like a dream, though.

Groaning, Rayne dropped his head against the spray of the shower, one palm resting against the blue tiles in front of him, and the other reaching down to wrap around his jutting cock. Stroking slowly, he pictured Dante's handsome face, his full pink lips wrapped around Rayne's length, sucking and slurping, pushing him closer to the edge.

Rayne could still feel the gentle brush of Dante's tongue against his own. Still feel the warm breath that washed over his face. The gorgeously full lips that pillowed against his as strong fingers wound in his hair, pulling him closer.

Snapping his hips in and out of his grip, Rayne groaned as his sac tightened, the pressure building and finally exploding, shooting ropes of creamy seed from his slit. He watched as the sticky cream fell to swirl with the water and vanish down the drain.

Limp and exhausted, he finished his shower quickly, his mind refusing to accept the idea that he might be falling in love with Dante Luca all over again. His heart, however, held no such doubts.

Chapter Nine

Standing inside the newly finished kitchen, Dante grinned. It had taken nearly three days for the antibiotics to begin to work their magic, but he'd peeled himself out of bed that morning and demanded to go to the site. One house down, but three left to finish before the end of summer, he didn't have the luxury of lying around in bed.

Rayne grumped and grumbled, but had grudgingly agreed as long as Dante promised not to overdo it. It was actually kind of sweet. "You did all this?"

"Well, I had help, but yeah. I knew you needed it done before the end of the week."

"You did a fantastic job." Dante meant it. The kitchen cabinets, the banisters, the hardwood flooring, the ceramic tile, the entire house looked amazing right down to the last detail. "You should be proud."

"Shh!" Rayne flapped his hands around frantically. "Don't use the *P* word!"

"Calm down. This is the good kind of pride, remember?" Dante chuckled as he stepped closer and hooked a finger in the belt loop of Rayne's jeans. "You worked hard and accomplished something amazing. It's okay to feel good about it." He tugged, pulling the smaller man closer to him. "Yes?"

Rayne looked up at him dazedly, his soft bottom lip drawn into his mouth, and nodded as though in slow motion.

"I'm not sick anymore, Rayne."

Rayne shook his head, still moving slowly, his eyes never leaving Dante's.

Releasing his hold on the belt loop, Dante wrapped his hands around Rayne's waist and lifted him up on the countertop. "Much better." He grinned wickedly as he insinuated himself between Rayne's spread thighs. "I don't need to rest." Leaning closer, he brushed the hair back from Rayne's neck, skimming his nose along the silky soft skin of his throat. "I need you, baby. Stop running from me."

His small body trembled and vibrated, his head falling back on his slim shoulders. Delicate hands fisted in Dante's shirt, not pulling him closer, nor pushing him away. "I don't know what you're talking about," Rayne whispered roughly.

"You lie." Dante licked a slow path up Rayne's neck to his ear. "You've been avoiding me for the past three days."

"I just didn't want to get sick."

"You lie," Dante repeated. "I want you, Rayne, and I intend to have you. If you don't want this, you need to say so now."

"What about the crew?" Rayne's voice shook as he arched against Dante's questing mouth.

"Sent them to lunch. They'll be gone for at least an hour." His hands slipped under the hem of Rayne's T-shirt, his palms smoothing along the lean muscles of his tight abs. "Say yes, baby."

"You'll just leave me again," Rayne whispered distractedly as his fingers kneaded the muscles in Dante's chest.

"Not this time." He nipped lightly at the skin just behind Rayne's ear. "Say yes."

Lifting his head, Rayne stared into his eyes with a mix of lust and worry. Then he pressed their mouths together in a sweet, chaste kiss. "I want you, Dante."

That's all he needed to hear. Fisting both hands in Rayne's glossy hair, Dante attacked his mouth, licking, sucking, biting, and devouring him. Sweet heavens, Rayne tasted so good. Better than the times before, and better than Dante could have ever imagined.

His dick pressed against his zipper, straining and aching, demanding release from its confinement. Breaking the kiss only long enough to pull Rayne's shirt over his head and toss it aside, Dante dove back into the kiss, groaning and humping against the counter.

Mapping the lean contours of his lover's body, he gripped and stroked, touching as much of Rayne's skin as he could.

"Wanna see you," Rayne panted, gripping Dante's shirt and dragging it over his head. He whimpered softly, his eyes roaming over Dante's chest as his hands followed the path. "You're gorgeous." His eyes clouded with longing, and a hint of sadness tinted his words.

Slipping his fingers under his lover's chin, Dante lifted his head and smiled. "Baby, you're beautiful just how you are." He gripped Rayne's hips and dragged him forward, pressing their jean-clad erections together and grinding against him. "See what you do to me?" Then he claimed those luscious lips again, palming the small of Rayne's back. "See how you fit so perfectly in my hands?"

Rayne buried his face in Dante's neck, licking and nibbling as he humped against him. "No more talking."

More than happy to comply, Dante set to work, undoing Rayne's jeans and lifting him to glide them down his narrow hips.

Rayne hissed when his flushed skin met the cool granite, but didn't pause in his assault on Dante's senses. Running his hands down Dante's midsection, his fingers found their mark, gripping his cock through his pants and squeezing. "Lose 'em, big guy."

"Bossy little brat." Dante chuckled, leaning back to allow Rayne more access to divest him of his jeans.

Rayne fumbled with the button for a minute before he dropped his forehead to Dante's chest and groaned. "No condoms. No slick. I hate you."

Biting his lip to keep from laughing, Dante dug into his pocket and pulled out a little foil packet and a travel-sized bottle of lube. Tapping Rayne's shoulder, he held up his offerings and winked.

"You planned this," Rayne accused.

“You bet your sexy ass I did.”

* * * *

Maybe he should be more upset, but Rayne only felt relief that his lover had come prepared. He finally had Dante Luca stripped bare, needy, wanting, and all for him. It may have been the heat of the moment, but Dante said he wouldn't leave him again. Rayne intended to give the man a reason to hold on with both hands.

Unzipping his lover's pants, Rayne pushed the denim down his massive thighs until Dante's leaking cock sprang free, bobbing and straining, begging for his touch. He wrapped his fingers around the thick length, glorying in the heated flesh in his hand, and stroked lightly, lovingly. “I want you in me.”

Dante growled, gripping Rayne's hips in a bruising grip and dragging him forward until his ass hung off the edge of the counter. He cupped Rayne's ass, groping and spreading his cheeks, as his lips descended to lay siege to Rayne's mouth once again.

Reaching out blindly, Rayne slapped at the granite until his fingers encountered the little foil packet. Jerking away from Dante's plundering tongue, he ripped the envelope open with his teeth and set to work, encasing his lover's beautiful prick inside the slick latex.

Catching on to his urgency, Dante snatched up the bottle of lube, popped the cap, and dribbled a generous amount into his palm. He coated his shaft quickly, wrapping one arm around Rayne's waist and holding him tightly. Licking and sucking along the sensitive skin of Rayne's collarbones, Dante skimmed his crease, easily parting his rounded globes to caress Rayne's clenching hole.

Moaning and panting, Rayne pushed against the digits, desperately needing them inside him. Dante continued to tease, ringing the muscles, pushing against them, but never entering.

“Please, Dante.”

He could feel the man's lips turn up in a smile against his neck just as one thick finger pushed inside his hungry ass. "Yes," he hissed, arching his hips and dropping his head back on his shoulders. "More."

"Shh, baby. I'm gonna take good care of you."

Dante's finger pumped in and out of him, setting his nerve endings sizzling and his desire to boiling. A second finger eased in beside the first, stretching him and leaving him craving more. Rayne wrapped his arms around Dante's shoulders, holding on for dear life as lightning zipped up his spine and spread to his shaking limbs.

His throbbing cock jutted between them, rubbing against Dante's rigid abs as he rocked himself against his lover. "Now. Please, Dante. I need you, now."

"One more, baby. Just one more." Dante kissed his lips, his eyes half-lidded and blazing with desire. Three fingers breached Rayne's entrance, sawing in and out, then curling to brush over his prostate.

He cried out, grasping at Dante's sweat-dampened shoulders as his balls tightened and pre-cum seeped from the engorged head of his cock. Then Dante's fingers disappeared, swiftly replaced by the blunt tip of his swollen erection.

"Ready, baby?"

He had only one answer to give. "Yes." Rayne hissed at the slight burn as Dante slid home, sheathing himself to the root. They each held perfectly still, giving Rayne a chance to adjust to the large phallus filling his channel.

When the burn began to dissipate, he slapped Dante on the hip and rocked forward. "Fuck me."

"Bossy." Dante's chuckled turned to a strangled moan as Rayne tightened his inner muscles and jerked his hips, fucking himself on his lover's cock. "Oh shit," Dante panted. "Holy hell, you're tight."

"Can't last." The need to come already overwhelmed him, the pressure building in his balls until Rayne felt he'd explode at any second.

Grunting in apparent agreement, Dante's hips snapped forward as both arms wound around Rayne's back, jerking him forward to meet every punishing thrust. He loved it. He needed it. He begged for more.

Then one of Dante's arms slid under his left knee, opening him wider and changing the angle. His lover's next plunge nailed Rayne's prostate, and Rayne cried out to the ceiling. His orgasm barreled through him, racing up his shaft and exploding from his slit in hot, creamy ropes to fill the space between them.

"Ah fuck!" Dante yelled loud enough to shake the windowpanes as he continued to pump wildly through his own climax.

"Wow, that was...was..." Dante panted against Rayne's throat.

"Yeah, it was." Sated and content, Rayne clung to his lover as his breathing evened out and his heart rate returned to a less dangerous pace. He winced slightly as Dante's flagging prick slipped from his fluttering hole and watched the man step away to dispose of the soiled condom.

Back a moment later, Dante lavished kisses across his cheeks, his nose, his forehead, and down his jaw. "Thank you."

"My pleasure."

"We need to get cleaned up. The crew should be back so—"

"Hey, boss! I brought you some lunch. I didn't think you'd take the time to..." Hudson trailed off and his eyes went wide as he took in the two naked men in the middle of the kitchen.

"Oops." Rayne giggled.

Dante just groaned.

Chapter Ten

“Uh...sorry,” Hudson mumbled. He glared at Rayne, dropped a greasy paper sack on the island, and stomped from the room.

“Damn it,” Dante groaned. “Hudson, wait!” He hurried to pull his jeans on, grabbed his shirt from the floor, and took off after the man, leaving Rayne sitting on the counter with his dick in his hand. Literally.

Easing off of the countertop, Rayne began dressing, swiping at the drying jizz on his stomach and chest with his shirt. Dante hadn’t even spared him a backward glance. It hurt more than it should, and left him feeling confused and angry.

“What the hell just happened?” he asked the empty kitchen.

“I’d say that grumpy foreman has designs on your Mr. Luca.”

Rayne closed his eyes and growled, turning slowly to find Gordost standing just behind him, inspecting his fingernails. Young, blond, and dressed like a bum, he looked just the same as he did the night Rayne met him.

“Don’t you have anything better to do than pester me all the time? You fucked up my life. What else do you want from me?”

“Oh, I have plenty of things to do.” He twirled his hand around. “You’re much more fun, though.” He crossed his arms over his thin chest and tilted his head to the side, smiling slyly. “So, are you just going to let him slip through your fingers again?”

“It’s not like that. It was just a fuck, not a proposal of marriage.”

“Aren’t you just dying to know what they’re doing right now? I bet they used to be lovers.” Gordost tapped his chin in thought. “Maybe they still heat up the sheets occasionally.”

Pure, cold rage roiled in Rayne's chest. His vision blurred, his face growing hot, and his body shaking. "Shut up."

"Hell, they're probably going at it right now. Did you see how fast your Italian lover took off? Couldn't get away from you fast enough, could he?"

"Shut up." Rayne spoke the words quietly—icily.

"Don't worry. I'm sure he'll keep you on the side just to spice things up a little."

"Shut the fuck up!" Rayne screamed.

The god only smirked at him, clearly enjoying his little game. "I'm sure Hudson isn't too *proud* to beg. He's most likely on his knees as we speak." Innuendo slipped into Gordost's voice, and Rayne's hands fisted at his sides.

"How much do you want him, Rayne? Are you willing to fight for him? Beg for him to keep you? Or is your pride more important?" Then the god simply vanished.

Rayne paced the area between the island and the sink, his chest heaving, his jaw muscles ticking as he ground his teeth together. He pulled at his hair, yanking hard enough to jerk his head to the side. His heart beat frantically against his sternum. His stomach twisted and churned, threatening to crawl up his throat and out of his mouth.

No, no, no! This wasn't right. This wasn't supposed to happen. He couldn't love Dante. Two weeks, just two more weeks until he had his life back and could push this all under the rug like a bad dream.

Nothing in his plans involved falling in love with a six-foot-three, melt-in-your-mouth, sweet, loveable, goofy Italian. Obviously, Dante didn't share his feelings. He'd practically sprinted out of the room, chasing after a man who was definitely *not* Rayne.

No. Any emotional attachment he felt for Dante was just shadows left over from his childhood. Yeah, that had to be it. He really didn't even know the man anymore.

His feet moving faster, carrying him back and forth in swift but jerky movement, Rayne continued yanking on his long locks as he

tried to sort out his jumbled thoughts. On his next turn, he slammed right into a solid wall of muscle, and warm fingers wrapped around his fist, gently prying his fingers open and releasing his hair.

Then Dante wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him close, cradling the back of Rayne's head with his massive palm. "Not gonna leave you again, remember?"

Rayne couldn't take anymore. The floodgates opened, the walls came crumbling down, and he buried his face in Dante's chest, clutching at him desperately as he soaked his lover's shirt with eight years' worth of tears.

* * * *

Dante had never felt so helpless in his life. The sound of Rayne's gasping sobs tore at his heart, leaving it raw and bleeding. "I'm sorry." He didn't know what else to say. Nothing he could think of seemed adequate.

"Is he your lover?" Rayne's sobs quieted, but his voice still cracked as he spoke.

"Hudson?" A shocked chuckle escaped his lips before he could cut it off. "Why would you think that?"

Rayne looked up at him, his eyes red and puffy, and glared. "Is he?"

"No. He's never been more than a friend."

Biting his lip and nodding once, Rayne pushed back against him, snuggling in close and sighing. "Is he mad at me?"

Dante winced as he rested his cheek on top of Rayne's head. He didn't want to talk about it, but Rayne would find out soon enough. "He's gone."

"Well, that sucks." Rayne never stopped his nuzzling, and he didn't sound even the least bit upset about the news. They were really going to have to work on the little brat's social skills.

“You could at least pretend to be sorry. He’s a good man and a good worker. I don’t know how I’m going to replace him.”

Looking up at him, Rayne smiled innocently. “I am sorry. A little bit.”

Dante chuckled and slapped his lover on the ass. “You’ll get the hang of it. I gotta go talk to the guys who saw Hudson burn rubber down the street before the gossip starts.”

“Is that why you ran after him like that?” Rayne sounded perturbed, and Dante couldn’t blame him.

The anger, hatred, and violence in Hudson’s eyes had tripped all his protective instincts, and his only focus had been protecting Rayne. He’d guessed Hudson had been pissed because he just genuinely didn’t like the little man. Dante had been unprepared for the smoldering kiss Hudson planted on him when he’d finally caught up with the foreman.

The heated kiss lasted only seconds, followed by a right hook to the jaw when Dante rebuffed the advance. Vile words poured from his friend’s mouth—threats, obscenities, confessions of love, and general ravings of a madman. Then he’d tossed his tool belt to the sidewalk and offered a rather nasty resignation with another quick jab to Dante’s gut.

Rayne didn’t need to know any of those things. “Yeah, that’s why I went after him.”

The answer seemed to placate his lover because Rayne smiled and pointed toward the forgotten paper sack on the island. “Are you going to eat that?”

Dante snorted. “Go ahead. For such a runt, you sure do eat a lot.”

Rayne just shrugged as he snatched up the sack and peered inside. “You work me like a dog and barely feed me. The least you can do is let me have the table scraps.”

Before Dante could form a response, one of the younger hands walked into the kitchen and cleared his throat. “Uh, the electrician guy needs you across the street. Should I tell him you’re busy?”

Dante looked at the little man busy unwrapping a hamburger and grinned when Rayne shooed him away. "I'm busy. Go play in the dirt somewhere." He flicked his wrist and wiggled his fingers as he bit into the gooey burger.

Dante licked his lips, his eyes dancing over his lover's bare chest, taut abs, and narrow waist. He wanted to lick him from head to toe and back up again.

Rayne glared at him, pulling the food closer to his chest. "It's mine, and I'm not sharing."

"I wasn't drooling over the sandwich."

"Ah, c'mon, boss. I'm right here, ya know?"

Laughing, Dante clapped his worker on the shoulder and led him back through the house. "Relax, Archer, I'm not going to fuck him in the kitchen."

"Nah, we already did that," Rayne called.

The man beside him blushed a brilliant red, coughing as he nearly choked on his tongue. Dante laughed loudly, straight from his belly, and beat his palm against the kid's back. "You should probably get used to that."

"Him blurting out crap, or you fucking him in the kitchen? I gotta tell ya, I'm not down with watchin' you guys bumpin' uglies on the linoleum."

"I'm not ugly!" Rayne shouted from the kitchen just as they reached the front door. "We'll be bumpin' hotness."

Archer just shook his head. "I don't even know what he means, but I don't want to see that either."

Dante pushed him through the door, shaking his head and chuckling under his breath. He had a feeling things were going to be very interesting with Rayne in his life. He couldn't wait to see what the man would do next.

Chapter Eleven

Rayne curled closer to Dante's bare chest, his lips swollen, and his ass pleasantly sore from their recent activities. Big arms held him tight, cradling his body as though he were the most precious thing on earth.

He'd never cuddled before, preferring his bed partners to be on their way when he'd finished with them. It felt natural—right—to be held in Dante's embrace, though. Cocooned by the man's warmth, and the safety he represented, Rayne felt...special. Still, insecurities, and niggling doubts worried at the back of his mind.

"Did you mean it?"

"What's that, baby?" Sleepiness slurred Dante's words, making his voice deep and husky. The sound sent shivers down Rayne's spine, and his flaccid cock twitched in renewed interest.

"You're not going to leave?"

Dante flexed his arms, tightened his hold, and sighed as he nuzzled into Rayne's hair. "What's gotten into you? Where's all this coming from?"

"People don't really stick around in my life. I just want to be prepared."

Dante's hand moved down his flank and over his hip, caressing and soothing him. "You didn't do anything wrong. How many times have I told you that? Your mom didn't leave because of anything you did or didn't do. She was a bitch and a whore."

Rayne nodded, blinking rapidly to dispel the tears that prickled at the corners of his eyes. Dante had spent many nights comforting him and listening to him weep long after lights out in the children's home.

Just when he'd started to believe he hadn't been the cause of his mother's abandonment, Dante had disappeared as well, sending Rayne spiraling back into his depression.

"I waited for you to come back." He'd even sat beside the window, watching the people pass on the sidewalk, praying Dante would come strolling up the walkway.

"I know," Dante said quietly. "Just like with your mom, it wasn't your fault. I just couldn't do it."

Rayne's mom had split, deciding she liked being a punching bag for her boyfriend a lot more than she liked being a parent. Left alone in a smelly apartment, with no food, no water, and no electricity, Rayne had lasted four days before knocking on the neighbor's door to ask for a drink of water.

Mrs. Gleeson called CPS on the spot. They contacted his grandmother, but she refused to burden herself with him. He guessed he knew where his mom had garnered her unique brand of parenting. So, they shipped him off to Lakeside Orphanage, and there'd he'd stayed until his eighteenth birthday.

"Why couldn't you come back?" Rayne hated the neediness in his voice, but he couldn't stop it. "I know you couldn't stay, but you still could have visited. I hated it there without you."

"I'm sorry. I just couldn't do it," Dante repeated as he tugged on Rayne's hair, pulling his head back gently until their eyes met. "I missed you every day, but I was eighteen, and you...well, you were..."

"Jailbait," Rayne answered for him. "I know."

"Well, you aren't jailbait anymore." Dante grinned and kissed Rayne's lips sweetly. Pulling back, he tilted his head to the side, and his brow wrinkled. "How did you start modeling?"

Rayne rolled his eyes and shrugged. "They had some kind of booth thing set up in the mall. I filled out a piece of paper, they took my picture, and an agent called me the next week. Things just kind of

blew up from there.” God help him, but it was the truth. He still didn’t know how he’d ended up one of the top paid models in the business.

Dante settled back down on his pillow and patted his chest. Rayne happily rested his ear over Dante’s heart and let the steady rhythm lull him to sleep.

* * * *

Staring at the ceiling, Dante stroked his fingers through Rayne’s hair, and smiled indulgently at the wet drip of saliva he could feel pooling on his chest. His lover would be mortified if he knew he drooled in his sleep. The thought made Dante’s smile stretch wider.

Several things had fallen into place as he’d listened to Rayne recount the time he’d spent at Lakeside. He imagined going from nothing to having the world at your fingertips would go to anyone’s head. Somehow, he thought Rayne’s issues might run a bit deeper.

If Rayne closed himself off, hardened his heart, and pumped his veins full of ice water, he’d never run the risk of being hurt again. His pride came not from his accomplishments, but from his elevated social status, and therein lay the problem.

Rayne wanted so desperately to be accepted, admired, and adored, he’d constructed an entirely new persona full of fame and glamour, leaving little room for heartache and disappointment. Terrified of waking up to find it all some elaborate dream, he’d clung to his fairytale, gnashing his teeth at anyone who deemed to claim it for themselves.

Then again, he could be way off base, and the guy really was just a pompous, arrogant dickhead. He highly doubted it.

His cell phone rang, and Dante reached out quickly to grab it from the nightstand, smoothing his fingers down Rayne’s back to soothe him when he began to stir. “Hello?”

“Hey, Dante.” Hudson spoke in a quiet monotone.

“Hudson, it’s one o’clock in the morning.” Dante spoke just as quietly, not wanting to rouse his lover.

“I know. I’m sorry, man. I couldn’t sleep. I feel like shit about what happened today. Can we talk?”

“Can’t it wait until morning?” They’d been friends for almost six years, but Dante didn’t want to rehash inflicted wounds from earlier in the day. He just wanted to curl around his baby and sleep.

“Please, Dante?” Hudson’s voice wavered, and a sob drifted over the phone.

Sighing in resignation, Dante gently extracted himself from beneath Rayne’s limp body and padded over to his dresser. “I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Thank you,” Hudson whispered, then disconnected.

Dressing quickly, Dante returned to the side of the bed and stared down the man sleeping there, debating whether to wake him or not. Rayne looked so peaceful, his palms pressed together and resting under his cheek, Dante decided to let him rest. With any luck, he wouldn’t be gone long.

Tiptoeing from the room, he padded down the hallway, grabbed his keys and wallet from the bar, and slipped out the back door. The entire drive, he debated with himself on what to say to Hudson. He didn’t want to damage their friendship further, but the man needed to understand there would never be anything romantic between them.

A bratty little imp with sea-green eyes and a megawatt smile had already claimed Dante’s heart. Not even two weeks had passed, and Dante couldn’t imagine his life without Rayne. Fate had given him a second chance, and he’d be damned if he’d screw it up again.

Pulling up near the curb in front of Hudson’s house, Dante killed the engine and just sat, staring at the porch light for several minutes. Cursing himself for being a coward, he flung open the door and climbed down from his seat. Better to just get it over with. He’d hear what Hudson had to say, hopefully patch what they’d broken, then get his ass home to Rayne where he belonged.

Pausing at the front door, Dante took a deep breath and rapped his knuckles against the wood in three quick beats. The door opened almost immediately, and Dante took a hurried step back. Hudson stood inside the entryway, staring back at him with red eyes, his hair mussed, his clothes wrinkled, and the pungent aroma of sweat and cheap whiskey wafting from him.

He stepped aside without a word, waving Dante inside. Sliding past his friend, Dante had to hold his breath as his stomach rolled at the foul odor. Striding into the living room, Dante shook his head in disgust at the empty beer cans and liquor bottles strewn over the table and floor.

“Okay, I’m here.” Dante started to turn. “What did you want to talk about?”

Hudson pounced on him, knocking them both to the floor, and forcing his tongue through Dante’s gasping lips. His fingers wrapped around Dante’s wrists in a strong grip, pinning them to the carpet over his head as he humped the hard ridge inside his sleep pants against Dante’s thigh.

Dante growled and bucked, trying to dislodge the man on top of him. Though a big man himself, Hudson had a few inches and at least forty pounds on him, and he found it no easy task to throw the man off of him.

“God, you’re so gorgeous,” Hudson rasped as his lips trailed down Dante’s neck. “You have no idea what it does to me, watching you work in the sun, your muscles flexing and sweat dripping down your bare back. You’re like a Greek statue come to life—a walking wet dream in the flesh.”

“Get the fuck off me,” Dante demanded coldly.

“We could be so good together if you’d just give me a chance.”

“Hudson, I’m going to break every goddamn bone in your face if you don’t get the fuck off of me!”

Ignoring him, Hudson gathered Dante's wrists into one hand and used the other to skim down his body and reach between them to cup his limp cock, squeezing it roughly. "You belong to me."

"I belong to no one." Jerking out of Hudson's loosened grip, Dante swung out, connecting solidly with the man's temple.

Hudson's head snapped to the side, but he recovered quickly, plowing his fist into Dante's nose. The sound of crunching bone and the immediate lightning bolt of pain sent Dante's head spinning. He cursed, coughing as blood from his nasal cavity trickled down his throat.

Punching, kicking, pulling hair, and rolling around on the dirty carpet, they fought like two boys in a schoolyard scuffle. Finally, gaining the upper hand, Dante sat on top of Hudson, straddling his hips and panting for breath. One more blow to the jaw, and the man's eyes rolled back in his head, and he slumped unconsciously to the floor.

Climbing to his feet, Dante prodded his broken nose, wincing at the sharp pain that pierced straight to his throbbing head. Staring down at the sleeping man on the floor, he shook his head sadly, mourning the loss of their friendship.

As he made his way to his pickup, Dante grimaced at the thought of going home. No way could he hide this from Rayne, and his lover was going to be spitting mad. Sighing heavily, he climbed into the driver's seat and buckled his seatbelt. Who knew kitchen sex could cause so much trouble?

Chapter Twelve

Pacing the living room, his loose boxers swishing around his thighs, Rayne seethed. He'd awoken cold and alone, no trace of Dante in the house, and no clue as to where the man had gone. The least he could have done was leave a note. It was just common courtesy.

He heard the key in the front door and paused mid-stride, his hands going to his hips, and waited. The front door creaked as it eased open slowly, and Dante's soft groan reached his ears seconds later.

"Where have you been?" Rayne spoke without turning. He couldn't even look at the man. How dare Dante make him worry.

"Hudson called and wanted to talk."

"And you had to rush right over there? You didn't have time to wake me up or scribble out a note."

"I'm sorry." Dante's voice sounded strange—thick and bit nasally.

Turning on his heels, Rayne pointed a finger at his lover, prepared to give him one hell of a tongue-lashing, and froze. His jaw dropped, and his chin fell to his chest in shock. "What happened to your face?"

Dante shrugged and looked away. "It's not a big deal."

Marching over to the man, Rayne grabbed his chin and turned his face to inspect the injuries. "Did Hudson do this?"

"There was a failure to communicate." Dante's eyes danced behind the puffy skin around them.

"Your nose is broken," Rayne said casually. "You have a pretty good shiner already, and the other eye doesn't look too happy either." He released Dante's chin and plucked at his shirt collar. "This shirt is trash. You'll never get the blood out of it."

Dante stared at him, confusion written all over his face. “You’re not mad?”

“Oh, I’m plenty mad, but I’m not your wife or your mother.” Rayne shook his head and sighed in exasperation. “Let’s get you cleaned up. I’m tired, and the bed is cold without my personal heater.”

Grinning like a fool, Dante slipped his fingers into the waistband of Rayne’s boxers and tugged him forward. “Give me a kiss.”

“Not on your life.” Rayne held his palm up in front of Dante’s mouth, stalling his forward progress. “You’re gross. If you want anywhere near these lips, I suggest you get cleaned up first.”

“Spoilsport.”

Rayne shrugged and stepped away, reaching out to take his lover’s hand. “I’ll get you some aspirin and an icepack.” Looking over his shoulder as he pulled Dante through the living room toward the kitchen, he winced in sympathy. “I’m going to have to reset your nose.”

“Uh, maybe we should just go to the hospital.” Dante sounded nervous, his hand tugging against Rayne’s hold.

“They’ll give you a shot.” Ducking his head to hide his grin, Rayne held firm to Dante’s wiggling fingers. He pulled out a chair from the table and pointed at it. “Sit down.”

Dante plopped down, his hands fisted in his lap, and his bottom lip quivering like a frightened child. Oh, his poor baby. Softly caressing the side of Dante’s face, Rayne leaned over him, placing a gentle kiss on his brow. “We can go to the hospital if you want.”

“I don’t like needles,” Dante pouted.

Rayne grinned into the man’s silky hair, and his heart melted. “I know, babe.” Leaning away, he eyed Dante’s nose, bringing his hands toward the man’s face.

Dante’s hands gripped his wrists, holding them in place several inches from his face. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

Rayne grinned encouragingly and nodded. “Not a damn clue.” He’d seen it done in movies, though. It didn’t look too difficult. Just a little push and voila!

Leaning further back in his chair, Dante’s eyes widened and his lips moved, but no sounds escaped.

“Oh, don’t be such a big baby. Would you rather go to the hospital?” Rayne lifted an eyebrow in question, smirking at his lover.

“Fine. I don’t suppose it could get any worse.” Slowly releasing Rayne’s wrists, Dante sat up straighter and fisted his hands on his lap once more. “Do it.”

Positioning his fingers on either side of Dante’s bent nose, Rayne tried to smile reassuringly. His heart hammered, his hands shook, and his stomach tightened painfully. “Okay. Deep breath. On three.” Rayne took a deep breath of his own and began counting. “One. Two.”

“Motherfucker!” Dante jerked away from his hands and glared at him. “You didn’t say three.”

Rayne just beamed at him. “I can’t believe that worked.”

Rolling his eyes, Dante patted his hip, then pushed him away. “Go get that icepack, Dr. Everest.”

“Ooh, I like the sound of that. Say it again.”

Dante groaned. “I think I liked you better when you were a stuck-up jerkwad.”

Kissing Dante’s temple, Rayne tugged the ends of his lover’s hair. “You do say the sweetest things.”

* * * *

“What the hell?” Dante pounded his fist against the steering wheel as he pulled up in front of the newly finished house.

“Oh, my God,” Rayne breathed. “Who did that?”

Broken windows, the gutters destroyed, front door smashed in, the gorgeous green lawn filled with rivets and holes. Vulgar obscenities

sprayed painted across the white siding in vivid red. Dante didn't know whether to scream or cry.

Climbing out of the cab, he walked around the front of the truck to stand beside Rayne on the sidewalk. "I gotta call the police."

"Already did." Hudson stepped over the fallen door and hurried down the steps to join them. "Fucking kids. I hate those little bastards."

"What the hell are you doing here?" Rayne rounded on him, stabbing a finger in his chest as he growled. "Did you do this?"

Hudson glared, his face turning three different shades of red in the span of seconds. "Fuck you. I wouldn't do this to Dante."

Rayne moved his finger from Hudson's chest and swept it around to point up at Dante's face. "Just like you didn't do that?"

Hudson prodded his own battered face—the swollen jaw, bruised eye, split lip—and shook his head. "Things got out of hand." He looked up to meet Dante's stare, his eyes pleading. "I'm sorry. I was drunk, and I know it's no excuse, but I feel like shit about it." He held his hand out in a peace offering. "I'd like my job back if it's all right with you."

Dante clasped his friend's hand and smiled as they shook. "Damn good thing, too. I didn't know how I was going to replace you."

"You are not seriously buying this shit, are you?" Rayne practically screamed the words, his arms crossed over his chest as he stared daggers at Hudson. He peeked up at Dante, boiling anger written all over his face. "Dante, don't be stupid! You know he did this!"

"That's enough." Dante released Hudson's hand and turned to tower over his lover. "People make mistakes. You don't just condemn them for one little screwup."

"One little screwup," Rayne whispered. "You really are that stupid." He shook his head as though disappointed, then stomped off down the sidewalk without another word.

Dante watched him go, battling the urge to call him back. It wasn't like he had anywhere to go. Deciding to let the little man simmer for a while, he turned back to his foreman and shook his head. "He doesn't forgive easily."

"I won't lie to you. I don't like the little shit. He's right to be pissed about this, though." Hudson waved a hand toward Dante's broken nose. "It shouldn't have happened. I got jealous, then I got drunk, and the two just don't mix."

"Are we gonna be okay?" Though he valued Hudson's friendship, Dante didn't want to be fighting off advances every time he turned around.

"Yeah. I'll behave myself." Hudson nodded and grinned depreciatively. "Can't change the way I feel, but I can respect the feelings aren't reciprocated."

"Good enough." Dante clapped him on the shoulder as he passed by on his way toward the house. "Let me know when the cops get here. I'm going to check out the damage inside."

"No need." Hudson pointed toward the approaching squad car. "The men in blue have arrived."

* * * *

"Stupid, overgrown, trusting idiot." Rayne marched down the sidewalk, his muscles tense, his head bent, and eyes locked on the ground as he muttered under his breath.

Normally, Dante's big heart and easy trust were things Rayne adored about the man. Hudson didn't deserve Dante's trust or kindness, though.

Maybe he held a little grudge because the burly supervisor had the hots for *his* man. Maybe he was just a little upset because Hudson had beaten the shit of *his* man. And maybe, just maybe, he was acting like a petulant child. He really didn't give a fuck.

He was pissed off at Dante for his blind faith and undeserving forgiveness. Felt betrayed because Dante had taken Hudson's side and furious because he could see right through the foreman's lame apology.

Tires screeched and a car horn blared, jerking Rayne back to the present. The car swerved around him where he stood in the middle of the street, the driver cursing and shaking a fist at him. Hurrying across the asphalt, Rayne leaned against the lamppost, pressing his hand to his chest, trying to keep his heart from jumping through his sternum.

Looking up at the signs on the cross streets, Rayne realized he didn't know how long he'd been walking, or even what neighborhood he currently trekked. The little church across the street looked unfamiliar. He didn't recognize any of the surrounding houses. Not even the stone fountain on the corner sparked a memory.

Just as he began to panic, a big heavy-duty pickup pulled up beside him, and Dante smiled at him through the window. "Lookin' for a good time, darlin'?" He wiggled his eyebrows playfully. "I got a thick piece of meat just waitin' for ya." He drawled his words, slipping into a southern accent.

Relief flooded him, and Rayne couldn't help but smile. "You are an idiot, Dante Luca." Hurrying around the back of the truck, he climbed into his seat and leaned over to give his lover a smacking kiss. "Thank you."

Dante just chuckled, nudging a Styrofoam container toward him. "Barbeque from Rudy's."

Settling the box on the floorboard, Rayne scooted across the bench seat, snuggling up close to Dante. "Not exactly what I had in mind." He skimmed his fingers up the inside of Dante's thigh. "Do we have time to play?"

Dante groaned as he reached down to still Rayne's wandering hand. "We're almost there, and I do not want a repeat of yesterday."

Huffing in disappointment, Rayne settled back in his seat and pouted. He didn't exactly want his lover getting his ass kicked again,

but he really wanted that beautiful cock in his mouth. Barely lunchtime, and a roller coaster of emotions had already filled his day. He just wanted to feel close to the man beside him.

Dante parked near the curb of the desecrated house and reached over to pull Rayne to him. “Be a good boy, and I’ll let you play on the way home.”

Rayne continued to pout, but his mind swirled with all the deliciously naughty things he wanted to do to his lover. Dante kissed his lips once, twice, then flicked at them with his tongue. “Just a couple more hours, then I’m all yours.”

Winding his arms around Dante’s neck, Rayne sighed. How could he ever hope to stay mad at the man when he just said all the right things?

Chapter Thirteen

“Hey, Rayne, some of us are gonna go grab a beer and shoot some pool after work. You wanna come?”

Yes. Yes he did. Not in the way Archer meant, though. No, he wanted to come in a blinding orgasm with a big, scrumptious Italian. “Uh, well...” The snob in him turned his nose up at smoky bars with loud music and drunken laughter. The lonely little boy in him yearned to be “one of the guys.”

“It’s cool if you already have plans. I just thought I’d ask.” Archer smiled shyly, his blond hair falling over his brow to cover one of his gray eyes.

Ah hell. “Let me talk to Dante.”

Archer beamed at him, nodding his head rapidly. “I gotta pack away the tools around back. Just come find me when you’re finished talking to the boss man.” Then he hurried off around the side of the house.

“What are you going to talk to me about?” Dante pressed up against his back, wrapping his arms around him and resting his chin on top of Rayne’s head.

“Archer asked me if I wanted to go play pool and have a drink with the guys.” Rayne couldn’t stop the slow smile that spread across his face at being included.

“Do you want to go?”

“Yeah,” he said softly. “I do.”

“Then you should go.”

Turning in his lover’s embrace, Rayne looked up at him curiously. “Aren’t you coming?”

Dante smiled, showing off his dazzling white teeth and shook his head. His hands smoothed up Rayne's neck, cupping his jaw in both hands. "I'm hurting, and the guys don't exactly like hanging out with the boss after hours."

"I can come home with you. Take care of you." Rayne felt selfish for wanting to go out while Dante recovered at home alone.

Dante kissed his lips tenderly. "Go have fun, baby. Then come home to me." His next kiss scorched Rayne's lips and left his body burning. "Come home to me," he repeated.

Rayne could only nod dazedly. After a kiss like that, he had no doubt to whom he belonged. Dante had just branded him, and to Rayne's surprise, he had loved every minute of it. "Don't stay up too late, and remember to take your antibiotics."

"Yes, Mom." Dante chuckled, kissed his lips again, then stood straight. "Do you want my truck?"

"How will you get home?" Rayne cocked his head to the side curiously.

"I'll catch a ride with Hudson."

Oh, fuck no. "That's okay. I'll just ride with Archer."

* * * *

Dante sat in the dark living room, casting furtive glances at the door every few seconds. Three o'clock in the morning, and Rayne still hadn't come home. He wanted his lover to have a good time, make some friends, but most of the bars had closed an hour ago.

Worry that something had happened to Rayne clawed at him, but he pushed it away. Someone would call if anything happened. Still, his fingers itched to snatch up the phone and dial one of his men to check up on his missing lover.

The sound of car doors slamming drew his attention, and he sighed in relief. He heard his lover giggle, followed by the sounds of a

distinctly different snicker, and Dante frowned. The door eased open, and Rayne stepped inside, turning his head to look over his shoulder.

“Shh,” he said rather loudly, then burst into another fit of giggles.

“Are you sure about this, man?” Dante recognized Archer’s voice, and the green-eyed monster reared its head and bared its fangs.

“Yeah, it’s cool. Just be quiet.” Rayne’s voice echoed around the room.

Archer groaned. “I can’t get this off. Turn the light on.”

“No. We’ll wake up Dante. Here, I’ll help.”

Dante watched the two dark fingers mover closer, Rayne’s hands reaching for Archer’s groin. He’d seen enough. Maybe he had no right to his jealousy or feelings of possessiveness, but it didn’t stop him from wanting to toss Rayne over his shoulder and scream, “Mine!”

Reaching over to the lamp on the end table, he flipped it on, his eyes focused on the men standing near the door.

Rayne squeaked, and Archer yelped, each of them turning to face him and looking guilty of all kinds of sins. “You scared the hell out of me,” Rayne accused.

“Do you know what time it is?” Dante tried for calm, but his voice shook with barely contained fury.

“Sorry, big guy.” Rayne smiled brightly, not looking even remotely apologetic. “It took a while to get a cab.”

“A cab?”

“Yeah, we were both too smashed to drive, so I called a cab.” Rayne puffed out his chest, looking very pleased with himself. “I told Archer he could crash on the couch, and we’d get his truck tomorrow.”

“Sorry, boss man. I told him it was a bad idea.” Archer dropped his head like a whipped dog.

Relief flooding him, Dante smiled and waved his hand. “I’m glad you didn’t drive. I’ll grab a blanket.” He rose from the cushions and tilted his head to the side. “Just out of curiosity, what were you trying

to get off?” More jealousy threatened to override good sense, but Dante squashed it down.

Archer held up his arm, tugging at the paper bracelet wrapped around his wrist. “It freakin’ itches, dude.”

Snorting and feeling like an idiot, Dante retrieved a pair of scissors from the end table drawer. “C’mere, kid.”

Archer stumbled over, grinning at him goofily. “I’m a little drunk,” he confessed.

Dante wrinkled his nose at the alcohol fumes wafting from the man in front of him. “I’d say more than a little.” He held Archer’s arm still and slipped the sharp blade under the offending bracelet, snipping it in two. “Well, here’s the couch. I’ll bring you a blanket, and the bathroom is right down the hall and on the left. You need anything else?”

Archer shook his head, flopping down on the sofa. “Thanks, Dante.” He kicked his boots off, yawned hugely, and was asleep instantly.

Replacing the scissors, Dante scanned the room, frowning when he didn’t see Rayne. He grabbed a blanket from the hall closet, tucked it around the kid on his sofa, and hurried to his room in search of his intoxicated lover.

The sight that met him when he opened the door almost dropped him to his knees. Rayne writhed in the middle of the mattress, stroking his leaking shaft with one hand, and three fingers of the other buried deep in his tight little ass.

“Well, are you going to just stand here, or get over here and fuck me?”

Needing no more encouragement, Dante prowled toward the bed, stripping out of his sleep pants as he went. Crawling up on the bed, he positioned himself between his lover’s splayed thighs, batted Rayne’s hand away, and gripped his turgid flesh by the root. Aiming it toward his mouth, he enveloped the head, licking at the slit and groaning at the bitter flavor washed over his tongue.

Pushing up on his elbow, he took a deep breath, licked a slow circle around the spongy crown, then swallowed the hot shaft to the root, nuzzling Rayne's soft curls with his nose.

Rayne cried out, his hips arching up off the bed and his fingers slipping from his glistening hole. "Yes! Oh, holy shit!" A continuous stream of profanity poured from his parted lips as he humped up into Dante's mouth, nudging the tip of his weeping prick against the back of Dante's throat.

Contracting his throat muscles and swallowing around the tip, Dante pushed Rayne's legs wider, slipping his hand between them to caress his lover's slick entrance. Working up a steady rhythm, he bobbed his head, sucking hard, and pushed one finger past the fluttering muscles, sawing it in and out of Rayne's silky channel.

"More. Harder. Now." Rayne's commands came between choppy breaths, his hands fisting in the sheets beneath him, his heavy-lidded eyes locked with Dante's. *Bossy bastard.*

Dragging his lips up the hard cock in his mouth, Dante flicked at the slit, catching more drops of pre-cum on his tongue, savoring the taste of his man. He eased his finger from Rayne's clenching tunnel, then pushed back in with two, curling his fingers against Rayne's prostate, and deep-throating his pulsing cock once again.

Rayne bowed up off the bed, dropping his head back and crying out to the ceiling as his muscles convulsed and hot, salty cum sprayed the back of Dante's throat. Pulling back, he bobbed his head a couple of times, milking Rayne's orgasm, letting the sticky seed pool in his mouth before swallowing it down.

His lover dropped back to the mattress with a happy little hum and a contented smile playing over his plump lips. Gently extracting his fingers from Rayne's still twitching hole, Dante licked him clean and placed a soft kiss on his baby's thigh.

His own dick screamed and ached, jerking and throbbing with each beat of his heart, demanding release and pretty fucking soon.

Maneuvering until he knelt between Rayne's knees, he stroked himself furiously, his eyes eating up the luscious body beneath him.

Rayne's eyes opened, and he smiled adoringly, reaching out to cup and fondle Dante's tightening sac. "Come for me," he whispered lustily.

As though he'd been simply waiting for the command, Dante grunted loudly, as his climax churned in his balls, shooting up his shaft and exploding from the tip to coat Rayne's stomach and groin in creamy ropes of hot semen.

Coming down from his high, Dante leaned over his lover, bracing himself on his hands, and delivered a toe-curling kiss to his smiling mouth. Pulling apart long seconds later, Dante rolled from the bed and held out a hand.

Rayne's hand slipped into his, and he rose from the bed, following Dante silently to the shower. Each touch, each kiss, each lingering look spoke louder than any words Dante could articulate.

Only fifteen days remaining, he knew he'd need to find the words soon if he hoped to convince Rayne to stay. He'd never had a problem speaking his mind before, but his heart had never had reason to voice its desires.

Until now.

Chapter Fourteen

“What the hell are you wearing?” Dante stopped just inside the bedroom door and stared.

Rayne looked over his reflection in the mirror and frowned. Tight, black T-shirt, tighter, low rider jeans, he thought he looked damn good. “What?”

“Where are you going?”

“Out with Archer.” Their previous nights out had been so much fun, when Archer suggested going out again, Rayne hadn’t hesitated to jump at the offer. Too much beer, greasy bar food, raucous laughter, and the genuine sense of camaraderie left him wanting more.

“Oh.” Dante’s face fell, and he nodded his head once. “Well, have fun. Call me if you guys need a ride.”

Turning to face his crestfallen lover, Rayne smiled warmly as he sidled up next to him. He placed his hands on Dante’s chest, smoothing out the wrinkles in his shirt. “I should have said something to you. I’m sorry. I’ve never really had friends before. It’s new and exciting, and I guess I just got carried away. I can stay if you want.”

Dante grinned and shook his head. “I just got a little jealous. You’ve been spending a lot of time with Archer lately.” His fingers gripped Rayne’s hips and tugged him closer. “I guess I just want to keep you all to myself.”

“We’ve been out three times.” Rayne scrunched his eyebrows and tilted his head to the side. Had he been spending too much time with his new friends?

“I know, baby.” Dante kissed his forehead and sighed. “You’ve also been going to lunch with him, spending time with him on the site,

and he's been over here twice this week." His voice dropped to a whisper, and his eyes looked sad. "I don't have a lot of time left with you."

Rayne's heart plummeted straight to his gut. "So, when the thirty days are up, you're just going to send me on my way? I thought..." It didn't matter what he thought. He should have known better. Here he'd been spinning fantasies of moving Dante into his house in Highland Park, but the man obviously thought of their affair as nothing more than a fling.

"Rayne, I didn't mean it like that." Dante tried to pull him closer, but Rayne wiggled out of his hold and backed away.

"How exactly did you mean it then?" He held his hand up to forestall Dante's reply. "It doesn't matter. You're right. We're too different, and this never would have worked anyway." Rayne's hands clenched at his sides as he continued backing out of the room. "Nine more days, and I can get the hell out of this dump." Then he turned and practically sprinted for the front door.

The ice formed in his veins and steel plates snapped together, rebuilding the barrier around his heart. They hadn't made any promises, or confessed undying commitments of love and forever. They were just playing a game.

"Rayne, would you just wait a minute?" Dante hurried into the living room after him.

Pausing with his hand on the doorknob, Rayne closed his eyes for just a moment, then plastered on the brightest smile he could muster before turning around. "It's okay, Dante. I get it. You can still have my ass anytime you want it until I'm out of here." The words tasted bitter on his tongue, bile rising in his throat.

"Would you knock it off and let me explain?"

"No." Rayne shook his head. "It's been fun slummin' it, but I think you need to remember who I am. After next week, I'll go back to pretending you don't exist because really, you don't. Not in my world."

Dante looked like Rayne had slapped him. Then his eyes softened, and he grinned. "You don't mean that." Moving swiftly across the small pace, he stopped in front of Rayne, reaching out to cradle the side of his face. "You always were a rotten liar."

Rayne rubbed his cheek against Dante's palm as he swallowed around the sudden constriction in his throat. "I won't let you break my heart again, Dante."

A car horn blared outside causing Rayne to jump like a startled colt. With a sad smile, he stepped away and reached for the door. "I gotta go. Don't wait up." Then he slipped out the door and hurried out to Archer's pickup.

* * * *

Half-naked, damp bodies surged and undulated together, moving as one beneath the pulsing strobe lights. Music blasted from huge speakers, the bass thumping loud enough to vibrate his chest and make his ears ring.

Rayne stared in wide-eyed fascination at the men who were practically fucking on the dance floor. In fact, he had a feeling a few of them in the shadowy corners actually were fucking.

Elevated above the dance floor, three very tan and mostly naked men twisted and gyrated on the stage, wrapping themselves around the shiny floor-to-ceiling poles. Their hard cocks bounced and swayed inside the confinements of tiny Speedos, begging to come out and play.

Rayne had never seen anything like it. The smells, the sounds, the delicious eye-candy left him rock hard and panting. Another scantily clad man passed by, his tight ass swaying inside his red spandex shorts, carrying a tray of little tubes filled with liquor.

Stepping up to the shot boy, Rayne boldly ran his hands over the guy's rippling pectorals, down his chiseled abs, and around his hip, to squeeze his perky bottom. The guy just smiled indulgently, spreading

his arms wider to allow Rayne more room to play. God, he loved this place.

“Another shot, hot stuff?”

Rayne had already had six, not including the four vodka sours he’d consumed when they first arrived, but whatever. “Give me two.” He tucked a ten-dollar bill inside the man’s waistband and purred.

“Liquid cocaine again?”

“Is that what I’ve been drinking? The one that tastes like cinnamon?” He couldn’t remember. Hell, he could barely remember his own name.

“The very same.”

Two plastic tubes found their way into Rayne’s hand, and he stumbled and grinned happily, emptying the contents of both into his mouth before swallowing. A big hand landed on his shoulder, and he spun around, beaming at his new friend. “Archer! I thought I lost you!”

Archer just laughed, holding on to Rayne’s shoulders as he tried to remain upright. “Well, now you found me!” They both doubled over in laughter. “Let’s go dance.”

Winding through the multitude of sensual bodies, they found an empty space on the edge of the dance floor, and Archer grabbed Rayne’s hips and yanked him closer. Grinding against him, he moved with the music, his hands roaming over Rayne’s chest and shoulders.

Rayne tensed, suddenly uncomfortable, and tried to move away. Archer held him in a firm grip, pressing against him and encouraging Rayne to match his movements. “Loosen up. You’re too tense. Just move to the beat.”

Trying to get into the rhythm, Rayne twisted his hips and tried to relax. The more Archer pressed against him, every movement pushing the hard ridge beneath his zipper into Rayne’s midsection, the more Rayne wanted to put distance between them.

He didn’t oppose dancing, but this felt a lot more like sex. His thoughts strayed to Dante, his beautiful, sweet, and charming lover.

The nasty words he'd said to the man before leaving him standing in the middle of the living room replayed through his mind, and Rayne felt sick. He hadn't meant a word of it. He'd been scared, angry, and lashed out like a child.

The cavernous room suddenly felt claustrophobic, the air too thick, too hot. He had to get out of there before he suffocated. He needed to go home and make things right before it was too late.

His back pressed into the cool bricks of the wall behind them, and Rayne snapped to attention, looking up into Archer's heated gaze. Sometime during his inner debate, the man had moved them off the dance floor and into the shadows.

Seeing Archer's intentions, Rayne opened his mouth to protest just as his friend's mouth descended over his lips, thrusting his wet tongue inside. Archer leaned against him, pinning him to the wall, his hands grasping and groping at every part of Rayne he could reach.

"I want you, Rayne. I've wanted you since the day I met you. You are so fucking hot." Archer panted the words against Rayne's neck between licks and nips at the sensitive skin. "I know you want me. I see the way you look at me."

Finally managing to free his hands from between their bodies, Rayne pushed at Archer's shoulders, arching away from the wall in an attempt to free himself. "You're drunk, Arch. Now, get off me."

"Wanna fuck you, baby. You gotta let me fuck you."

Rayne jerked his knee up between Archer's spread thighs, satisfied he'd found his mark when the man groaned and stumbled away from him. "I am not your fucking baby," he snarled. No one but Dante had the right to call him that.

Shouldering past the man he'd thought to be a friend, Rayne hurried through the club and straight out the double doors. He paused on the sidewalk, bending over and resting his hands on his knees as he breathed in the night air.

Standing straight, he pulled out his pockets, cringing at their emptiness. He hadn't realized he'd spent that much.

Clouds rolled overhead, blotting out the moon and churning with the approaching storm. Rayne prayed the worst of it would hold off until he made it to Dante's. Lightning sizzled across the sky, slashing through the clouds. The loud crack of thunder followed swiftly, and Rayne shivered, hurrying down the sidewalk.

It was only a mile or so, and if he hurried, he could be inside, safe and warm before the storm unleashed. Tucking his hands inside his pockets, Rayne marched quickly toward his destination, his mind swirling with the events of the evening.

Should he tell Dante what had happened with Archer? Though it pissed him off, he didn't want the kid to lose his job over it. They were both drunk, amped up by the music and the atmosphere. Maybe he'd just keep that little tidbit to himself.

With only two blocks remaining, the sky finally opened up in a torrential downpour, dumping buckets of rain on the city. Rayne's clothes and hair stuck to his face and body. His sodden jeans felt heavy on his legs, his shoes squishy as they soaked up the water.

By the time he reached the front door, he was cold and tired, soaked to the bone and desperately wanting a hot shower. He wondered if Dante would make him some hot cocoa. Relieved to find the door unlocked, Rayne hurried inside and closed the door quietly behind him.

He stood there dripping and shivering, his eyes locked on Dante where the man sat on the sofa, flipping through television channels. Without even looking away from the screen, Dante took the remote and slung it across the room to shatter against the wall.

Rayne yelped, and he stumbled back against the door. "What the hell, Dante?"

"Did you fuck him?"

Chapter Fifteen

“What?”

Dante turned to look at the drenched man by the door. “Did you fuck him?”

“What the hell are you talking about? I didn’t fuck anyone.”

Picking up his cell phone from the cushion beside him, Dante took one last look at the photo displayed, clearing showing Rayne locked in a passionate kiss with Archer. He tossed the phone across the room right into Rayne’s fumbling hands.

His eyes stung and his nose burned as he watched the blood drain from his lover’s face. Though the evidence stared him in the face, he’d still prayed it wasn’t true. “Get out.” Perhaps he had no right to his anger. They’d never talked about their relationship in the long-term, but with his heart shredded and aching, Dante didn’t care about right and wrong. He wanted the man gone.

“Dante, no. It’s not what you think. Just listen to me.” Rayne hurried over to the sofa, his wet shoes squeaking on the hardwood floor. “It’s not what it looks like.”

“Get out,” Dante repeated.

Rayne threw the phone at him, nailing him in the chest with it hard enough to leave a bruise. “Not until you fucking listen to me!” He knelt on the floor, his delicate little fingers curling over Dante’s knees. “Who sent that to you?”

“Does it matter?” Dante looked away, unwilling to fall victim to the pleading in Rayne’s soft green eyes. “Are you saying it didn’t happen?”

“Yes, it happened.”

Dante closed his eyes and breathed deeply against the pain those three little words elicited.

“He kissed me, but I didn’t kiss him back. Well, that’s not completely true.” Rayne chuckled softly, his fingers gripping Dante’s knee. “My knee kissed his balls pretty good. He may be moving a little slowly at work tomorrow.”

His eyes springing open, Dante whipped his head around to stare down at his smiling lover. “What?”

Rayne nodded. “You heard me. Why do you think I’m all sopping wet? I kicked him in the balls, told him off for calling me baby, then walked home.” He rose up a little straighter, insinuating himself between Dante’s thighs. “To you, Dante. I came home to you.”

Pushing the dripping hair back from Rayne’s face with trembling fingers, Dante gave him a wobbly smile. “Come here, baby.”

“I’m all wet.” Rayne crinkled his nose adorably. “Let me go dry off and change real quick.”

Taking Rayne’s hand, Dante squeezed, tugging on it insistently. “I don’t care. I need you to come here.”

Biting his lip and nodding, Rayne crawled up in his lap, curling into a ball and resting his palm against the side of Dante’s neck as he looked up at him. “I’m sorry.”

Dante didn’t have to ask why. None of it mattered—not the harsh words said between them, the damning photo, or the cold water soaking into his boxers. “I’m sorry, too.”

“Are we okay now?”

Holding his man closer, Dante whispered his lips over Rayne’s cheek. “Yeah, baby. We’re okay now.”

“Who sent you the picture?”

Dante groaned, closing his eyes and resting his forehead against Rayne’s. “Hudson.”

“I freakin’ knew it!”

“Rayne,” Dante growled in warning.

Tilting his head to the side, Rayne grinned wickedly. “One more?”

Dante rolled his eyes and chuckled. “Fine. But just one.”

“That fucktastic, idiotic, sleazy, slimy, jealous cockroach.”

“I think that was more than one.”

“Nuh-uh.” Rayne shook his head, still smiling. Snaking his arms around Dante’s neck, he pulled himself closer, licking at Dante’s lips and purring. “I really, really want you.”

“That’s a lot of wanting,” Dante murmured against Rayne’s silky lips.

“Oh yeah,” Rayne agreed before sealing his mouth over Dante’s and plunging his tongue deep inside.

Dante moaned, his tongue wrapping around Rayne’s—slipping, sliding, and dueling. He worked Rayne’s T-shirt up to his collarbones, breaking the kiss to pull the soaked material over his head and drop it to the floor with a wet *plop*.

Rayne shivered, but his lips never stopped their assault on Dante’s neck. Flipping his lover around and pressing his back into the cushions, Dante went to work, removing the man’s damp clothing. “You walked all the way in this storm?”

Rayne nodded, his lower lips protruding as he pouted. “I need some special lovin’ and then Dante Luca’s secret recipe hot chocolate.”

Tugging the denim down Rayne’s thin legs, Dante growled as his lover’s hard cock bounced free, slapping against Rayne’s stomach and dribbling pearly drops from the slit. Pushing his own boxers down, Dante kicked them aside and crawled over to kneel above his baby.

He frowned, looking between his knees and all the creamy skin spread out before him like a feast for a king. “This couch sucks.”

Rayne started to giggle. “If you weren’t so damn big!”

Dante leered as he stroked his straining shaft. “Why, thank you, Mr. Everest.”

More laughter burst from Rayne's lips as he pushed up on his elbows. "Well, I really want that fat cock in my ass like five minutes ago. So, what do you suggest?"

"Hands and knees, over the arm of the couch." Dante watched as Rayne wiggled around, turning and kneeling, presenting his upturned ass to Dante as he eased his chest to the padded arm of the sofa.

Reaching out the grip the rounded globes before him, Dante paused and dropped his chin to his chest. "Need supplies."

Rayne groaned, humping his hips and pushing his ass back against Dante's groin. "Then hurry the fuck up or I'm going to do this without you." His hand slipped beneath him, the muscles in his arm bunching and flexing as he jacked himself off.

Jumping up, Dante hurdled the back of the couch, sprinted down the hallway, banging off the walls and doorway in the rush to get to his room. Diving across the bed, he ripped the drawer right out of the nightstand and dumped the contents on the bed. Snatching up a strip of condoms and the bottle of lube as though he'd found the Holy Grail, he raced back to his lover.

Rayne moaned and whimpered, his hand moving furiously over his turgid length. "Please, Dante. Fuck, I'm not gonna last."

Tearing open the condom with his teeth, Dante quickly slid the latex down his shaft as he moved back into position behind Rayne. Popping the lid on the lube, he drizzled a steady stream down his lover's crease, then added a little extra to his pulsing cock.

Jerking himself with one hand, he slid two fingers through Rayne's muscled cheeks, circling his tight opening before pushing in with both digits.

Rayne's velvet-lined walls contracted, squeezing Dante's fingers and sending his head spinning. Working as quickly as possible, he pumped in and out, stretching Rayne's hole until he could add a third finger.

"Now, Dante," Rayne panted.

Removing his fingers, he lined up the head of his prick with the pretty, pink pucker and pushed forward. His breath rushed out in a whoosh when he slipped past the first ring of muscles, and he held on to Rayne's hips, trying to steady himself against the onslaught of pleasure.

Slowly, almost torturously, he fed his cock to Rayne's hungry ass, inching forward until he encased himself to the root. "Your ass looks so pretty wrapped around my cock."

"Move, damn it!"

They really needed to work on his baby's communication skills. Sliding his arm under Rayne's slick chest, Dante eased him up, holding him to his chest as he began to move, pumping in and out in steady, deliberate movements.

He nuzzled against the back of Rayne's neck, placing open mouth kisses across the nape. One palm pressed flat to his lover's sternum, the other slid down Rayne's stomach and wrapped around his hot prick.

Dante stroked him lightly, laving kisses across his lover's shoulders as he continued to roll his hips slowly, making love to the man he adored. "You belong with me, Rayne."

"Yes."

"You were always mine."

"Yes," Rayne whispered.

"I can't let you go, baby."

"Then don't."

His heart overflowing, Dante increased his rhythm, snapping his hips forward, driving into Rayne's welcoming body harder, faster. His fingers tightened around the pulsing shaft in his hand, stroking Rayne in time with every forceful thrust.

"Wanna hear you scream, baby. Will you scream for me? Scream my name?"

"Dante!"

“Yeah, that’s it. Scream for me, baby.” Dante sucked at his lover’s neck, drawing the skin between his teeth and biting lightly. Dipping his thumb into Rayne’s slit, Dante slammed into him as the tingle started in his lower belly and electricity zoomed up his spine.

Throwing his head back against Dante’s shoulder, Rayne screamed, his inner walls strangling Dante’s cock, and molten strings of cum shot from his jumping prick.

Pushing in to the root, Dante stilled, burying his face in his lover’s rain-slicked hair as he groaned out his release.

Still holding Rayne to him, Dante rode out the aftershocks, shuddering each time Rayne’s muscles clenched around him. Pinching the base of his spent cock to hold the condom in place, he gently eased out of his lover’s body and collapsed in a heap on the sofa.

Hissing as he removed the soiled latex, he tied it off and tossed it to the floor beside him.

“Shower. Need shower.” Rayne sounded dazed and disoriented.

“I can’t move.”

Rayne’s cold foot slid up the inside of his thigh, nudging against his sac. Dante shot up from the sofa and glared at the little man. “You suck.”

Rayne wiggled his eyes grows playfully. “Get that shower started, and we’ll talk about it.”

Dante didn’t even offer a snappy comeback. He dipped his head once and jogged down the hall to the bathroom.

Chapter Sixteen

“I gotta go pick up the new windows today.”

“Hey, did the cops ever come up with any suspects?”

Dante just shook his head. “They said probably kids. Not much we can do about it.” He motioned toward the object in Rayne’s hands. “Do you think you can handle this?”

Rayne rolled his eyes and held up the spray gun. “Just point and pull the trigger. Not exactly rocket science.”

Kicking at the machine on the ground beside them, Dante shook his head. “A pressure washer is a little different than a garden hose.”

Taking a couple of steps back, Rayne nodded, pointed the nozzle at Dante’s chest and squeezed the trigger. Water gushed out, soaking Dante’s shirt, plastering it to him, and showing off his rippling muscles.

Dante spluttered, holding his hands up to shield the spray. “Rayne, you little shit!”

Releasing the handle, Rayne beamed brightly. “See? I got this.”

“I should spank your ass for that.” Dante held his arms out wide. “Just look at me.”

Rayne dropped the nozzle and hurried to the side of the house, placing his hands flat against the siding and spreading his legs. “Positioned assumed. Commence spanking.”

Instead of a nice swat to the ass, cold water pelted him in the back, causing him to gasp out. “That’s it.” Spinning on his heels, he leapt at his lover, tackling him to the ground.

Dante rolled with him over the grass until he ended up on top, straddling Rayne’s hips and grinning down at him. “I win.”

“Oh, get off me, you big ape.”

Dante fell over him, bracing himself on his hands. “Say it.”

“I will not.” Rayne turned his head away, biting the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling.

“Say it.”

Rayne shook his head, the laughter bubbling up in his chest and threatening to escape.

“Okay.” Dante started poking at Rayne’s ribs until the giggles burst from his mouth, and he squirmed to get away. His ribs, his hips, even under his chin—Dante tickled him everywhere.

“Okay, okay,” he gasped. “You win!”

The relentless tickling ceased, and Dante smiled down at him in triumph. Then he leaned over again, stretching out over Rayne’s prone body, and kissed his panting mouth. “That wasn’t so bad was it?”

Wrapping his arms around his lover’s neck, Rayne urged him closer. “Not bad at all,” he whispered before laying siege to Dante’s mouth.

The kiss seemed to go on forever. Rayne couldn’t remember a time he’d ever been this happy. Lying in the soft grass, the sun’s rays warming his face, and his lover heating the rest of him. Suddenly, his old life held little appeal. He didn’t know exactly what would happen at the end of the thirty days, but he hoped it involved the man currently atop him. Why would he ever think to give this up?

An angry growl drew him out of the moment, and he pulled out of the kiss, cutting his eyes to the side. Archer stood on the sidewalk, his expression murderous as he watched them. Then he turned abruptly and stomped up the front steps and into the house.

Following his gaze, Dante sighed and pushed off of him, rolling to his side on the ground. “Do I need to talk to him?”

Rayne shook his head slowly, a slight frown tugging at the corners of his lips. He hadn’t spoken with Archer since he’d left him doubled

over in the club. He'd tried to talk to the guy earlier, but Archer just glared at him and walked away.

"I thought he was just drunk and that's why he got all grabby. I don't know what's wrong with him."

"You're hot, baby. Plus, you're a pretty great guy when you're not being an egotistical prick. He's got a crush on you, and you hurt his feelings."

Rayne turned the words over in his head, working his way through them. "I didn't mean to hurt his feelings."

Dante stood to his feet and held a hand out to help Rayne up. "He's young. He'll get over it soon enough. Just give him some space for a few days."

Taking the offered hand, Rayne pulled himself to his feet and shrugged. "Or he'll stalk me, steal my underwear, and sniff them while he masturbates."

Dante choked, coughing into his hand. "Excuse me?"

Rayne shrugged again and loped over to pick up the discarded spray gun. "You said yourself. I'm completely fabulous. Who could fault the kid for falling madly in love with me?" Placing the back of his wrist to his forehead, he pretended to swoon.

Dante rolled his eyes and snorted. "And so modest. You really should give yourself more credit, baby."

* * * *

Rayne sighed as he stared at the meaningless numbers on the computer screen. Dante's officer manager had called in sick, so the task had been delegated to Rayne. He didn't know what the hell he was doing, or what any of the words or numbers meant. He suspected this was Dante's payback for the pressure washer incident the Friday before.

While it beat the hell out of slaving away in the summer heat, he was bored, and the clock seemed to move more slowly every time he

looked at it. Stealing another glance at the offending hands of time, he groaned. Forty more minutes until Dante arrived to take him to lunch. Five days remaining, and no way to know what the future would bring, he wanted to soak up as much time with his lover as possible.

The bell over the front door jingled, pulling Rayne from his thoughts and directing his attention to the man who stood in front of his desk. Eyeing the newcomer warily, he pushed his chair back and rose cautiously to his feet.

“Hey, man. What brings you here?”

Archer glared at him. “I came to pick up my final paycheck. Boss said it would be waiting.”

“You got fired?” Rayne gaped at the young man across from him. Surely, Dante wouldn’t fire the kid just for having a crush on his lover.

“No. I quit. Can I get my paycheck or not?”

Not willing to argue with the man, Rayne let the angry words roll off his back as he rummaged through the mess of papers on the desktop. Coming up with a plain white envelope with Archer’s name on the front, he slid it across the table and nodded at the man.

“There it is. Are you sure about this? If it’s because of me, you really should rethink. I’ll be gone in a few days, and everything will go back to how it used to be.” Rayne hadn’t expected how much the words would hurt to say.

Before he could move away, Archer’s long arm shot out, his hand wrapping around Rayne’s throat. “What do you see in him?” Moving slowly around the desk, his fingers biting into Rayne’s neck, Archer’s lip curled over his top teeth, and he snarled. “What makes him better than me?”

Rayne gripped Archer’s wrist, turning his head one way and then the other, trying to break the man’s hold. In his old body, he may have succeeded, but this new, weaker frame couldn’t hold up to the task.

The younger man walked him backward until his back connected jarringly with the wall. “What makes you so fucking special that you

can't give me the time of day? You're a fucking cock tease, Rayne. Always looking at me, undressing me with those eyes."

Shaking his head as much as he could, Rayne struggled to breathe, to think around the roaring in his ears. He couldn't even get enough oxygen to his lungs to scream for help. Archer turned him abruptly, mashing his face and chest into the drywall, and covering him with his much larger body.

Rayne gulped in the much-needed air, his chest rising and falling rapidly. Archer gripped his hips, pulling him back roughly to grind his swollen shaft against Rayne's wiggling bottom. "That's it. Fight me. I promise he won't want you when I'm finished with this ass. No one will."

Unadulterated terror clawed at Rayne's chest, and he began thrashing and screaming, shoving against the wall with everything he had. Archer held him in place, leaning on him heavily as one hand fisted in his hair, and the other fumbled with the top button on Rayne's jeans.

"Gonna fuck you 'til you bleed. If I get in deep enough, maybe I can find out what makes you think you're so goddamn special."

"Archer, please! Stop it!" Broken sobs bubbled up in Rayne's chest as he felt his button give way and the zipper follow quickly. "Get the fuck off of me!"

Calloused fingers slipped under the waistband of his boxers, and Rayne screamed, redoubling his efforts to free himself. Then the massive weight covering him disappeared as a feral cry filled the small office. Rayne slumped against the wall, sliding down it to the floor and pulling his knees up to his chest.

Dante sat on top of Archer, his fist driving into the man's face over and over as blood splattered over the carpet. Trying to pull himself together, Rayne stood and rushed to his lover's side. "Dante!"

The man completely ignored him, and the manic gleam in his eyes scared the shit out of Rayne. When Dante pulled his fist back to

deliver another brutal blow, Rayne latched on, wrapping both his arms around his lover's forearm. "Dante! Stop!"

Dante's head snapped around, and he bared his teeth. Rayne refused to let go. Then Dante's face relaxed, his eyes softening with recognition. Crawling off of the battered man beneath him, he knelt in front of Rayne, touching him everywhere.

"Are you okay, baby? Are you hurt?"

Folding himself into the bigger man's lap, Rayne curled into his protective embrace and buried his face in the warm flesh of Dante's throat. "Just scared. Thank you, Dante."

Dante's arms squeezed him tightly, rocking him back and forth, as his huge body trembled. "I was scared, too, baby. God, I've never been that scared or that...that...furious." He shuddered once. "I wanted to kill him," he whispered.

Patting his lover's chest, Rayne pushed out of his lap, and stood. "We should call the police." The adrenaline began to ebb from his body, leaving him cold and shaking. His stomach heaved with revulsion, and Rayne dove toward the trashcan beside his desk, dropping to his knees and expelling the contents of his stomach.

Falling back to rest against the side of the wooden desk, he wiped his mouth on his arm and stared blearily up at Dante. "Maybe you should call." Then his eyes drooped, the darkness closing in around the edges, and he passed out.

Chapter Seventeen

“Rayne!” Dante crawled across the floor to catch his lover before he slumped to the floor. His poor baby was having a shitty day.

Cradling the man’s head in his lap, Dante stroked his hair, tapping him lightly on the cheeks. “Wake up, baby. Open your eyes, Rayne.”

The bell jingled over the door, and Dante looked up to see Hudson come strolling into the office. “Hey, Dante, I thought I’d swing by and see...” He trailed off, surveying the scene before him. “What the hell happened here?”

Dante continued petting Rayne’s hair lovingly, but rage festered just beneath the surface of his calm façade. “I came to get Rayne for lunch and found him shoved up against the wall with Archer’s hand down his jeans.”

Hudson shook his head and grimaced. “I’m sorry you had to see that. I did warn you when I saw them at the club Thursday night. After that picture I sent, how could you not see this coming?”

The thin thread on Dante’s self-control threatened to snap. “Rayne wasn’t a willing participant.” He spoke softly, his words laced with ice and steel.

Hudson’s face paled, and his eyes rounded as he looked between Rayne and Archer. “No.” He shook his head. “He was just supposed to seduce him, not force him.”

Shock, disbelief, fury, and betrayal coursed through Dante, and a misty red haze descended over him. “You did this,” he growled.

Archer groaned from his position on the floor, his head rolling back and forth of the carpet. Dante had the urge to spring at him and beat him until he stopped moving. Archer turned toward him, his eyes

huge and fearful as he slowly rose to a sitting position and pushed back against the wall.

“You stupid shit!” Hudson bellowed. “You were just supposed to keep them apart, not fucking rape him!”

Archer’s gaze snapped to Hudson, and he shook his head rapidly. “I wasn’t going to hurt him.” His words came thick and syrupy. “I just wanted to scare him a little.”

“How much did you pay him?”

Hudson whipped around to face Dante. He looked shamefaced as he dug his hands into his pockets and kicked at the carpet. “Two-hundred bucks to take Rayne out and help me get that picture.”

Dante had heard enough. “You know you’re fired, right?” He didn’t think he needed to spell it out, but the pair weren’t exactly running on all cylinders.

Hudson dropped his head and nodded dejectedly. “Yeah, I know.”

“Call the cops.”

Jerking his head up, Hudson stared at him for a long minute before he nodded again and extracted his phone from his pocket.

“No.” The softly spoken word came from Dante’s lap.

Looking down, he smoothened his knuckled over Rayne’s cheek, his chest constricting with what could have happened if he’d arrived even five minutes later.

“What are you saying no to, baby?”

“No cops.” Rayne’s eyes fluttered open, pinning Dante with his gaze. “No cops,” he repeated.

“Rayne, you have nothing to be embarrassed about.” Dante caught movement out of the corner of his eye. “Sit the fuck down!” he roared. Once satisfied that Hudson wouldn’t try to make a break for it again, he returned his attention to Rayne. “I’ll be right here with you.”

Pushing up to sit beside him on the floor, Rayne shook his head. “I’m not embarrassed. Nothing happened, though.”

Dante wanted to grab the little man and shake him. “Baby, he almost—”

“But he didn’t.” Rayne cut him off. He looked past Dante to Archer. “He needs help, not a jail cell.”

“Rayne, man, I’m so damn sorry. I didn’t mean for things to go so far. I wouldn’t have really hurt you. I swear it.” Archer’s words flowed quick and desperate. “You’re just so fucking hot, and the way you smell, and I got so angry because you just blew me off like it’s nothing.”

Rayne looked at him and nodded blankly.

“I just wanted to scare you. I promise I’d never hurt you like that.”

Dante ignored the asshole’s ramblings. “And Hudson?”

“Other than being a dickhead, he didn’t actually do anything wrong.” Rayne shrugged, his eyes moving back to meet Dante’s. “A wise man once told me that everyone deserves compassion.”

Yeah, he’d said it, but that was before someone had put their hands on the man he loved. Dante held very little in the way of compassion at the moment. “He doesn’t deserve it.” Glancing over his shoulder, he shook his head sadly. “Neither of them does.”

“Oh, I think they still need to be punished.” Rayne smirked and threw his head back. “Gordost!”

“You screeched?” a bored voice drawled from behind them.

“Whoa! Who the fuck is that?” Archer pushed closer to the wall. “Where the hell did he come from?”

“Oh, wow, that actually worked.” Rayne struggled to his feet as he spoke. “You were listening? You saw what happened?”

The god nodded and rolled his eyes. “Naturally.”

“Well, get to the smiting.” Rayne waved his hand toward the two men sitting near the window.

Gordost prowled closer, tilting his head to the side and eyeing the pair with keen fascination. He paced in front of them, leaning closer occasionally to sniff at one of them. Finally, he turned back to Rayne and smiled like a little boy on Christmas morning.

"I can't help you." Gordost held his hand up when Rayne opened his mouth to argue. "But, my brothers would be delighted to have such wonderful new playthings."

"Dante, what's he talking about?" Hudson watched the god with great trepidation, his eyes shifting toward Dante before hurriedly focusing on Gordost once again.

Dante ignored him. Under different circumstances, he may have felt sorry for the men. After the attack on Rayne, however, he felt their punishment would be too lenient.

"Pathos. Zavist."

Two men, not much bigger than Gordost, appeared in the room before Dante could blink. They looked like twins. Both thin and willowy, long blond hair, and eyes as blue as a summer sky, they moved as a unit, bouncing on their toes in obvious excitement.

"You called, brother?"

Gordost grinned mischievously and flicked his wrist toward Archer. "That one is yours, Pathos. Have fun, but please try not to kill this one."

"Kill!" Archer yelped. "Dante! What the hell, man?"

Pathos clapped his hands together, grinning from ear to ear and launched across the room to land in Archer's lap. He began kissing and licking up the man's neck as his hands roamed, gripping and fondling. "Ooh, I like this one. He's big." Pathos turned to wink at Rayne, nodded his head, then he and Archer vanished.

"Oh, shit," Hudson breathed. "This ain't cool, man. I'm sorry, Dante. I swear to God, I'm so fucking sorry!"

"Is this one mine?" Dante feared the other twin would explode with his eagerness.

"Yes, Zavist. Be gentle with him. I know he looks big, but remember what happened last time?"

Zavist poked his bottom lip out and looked down at the floor. "It wasn't my fault," he whined.

Dante battled between feeling anger for a man he had once called friend and trying desperately not to laugh at the stunned look on Hudson's face. He imagined he had worn a similar expression when Gordost popped up in his living room for the first time.

Gordost huffed out an exasperated sigh and swatted his brother on the ass. "Go play."

Zavist bounded forward, tackling Hudson and rolling with him across the floor. "You are mine. You belong to me. Got it?" Then they, too, disappeared from the room.

"They won't really hurt them, right?" Rayne wrung his hands together in front of him.

Gordost shrugged. "Nothing permanent."

"So, what about me?" Rayne's hands fisted on his hips, and he glared.

"I'll let you know when your thirty days are up. You are so much fun to play with, I might not let you go." Gordost winked and flashed out of sight, leaving Rayne and Dante alone in the room.

"I think that may have been worse than jail." Rayne sounded apprehensive, as though he regretted his hasty actions.

"I know. Isn't it great?"

Chapter Eighteen

“Dante, I don’t know about this.” Rayne stared out over the dirty lake and grimaced.

“You said the same thing about the ballgame, the water park, and Walmart. You survived those, didn’t you?”

“Barely,” Rayne mumbled under his breath.

With only a few days remaining of his forced banishment, Dante had insisted he needed to “experience” Dallas. Rayne didn’t know what eating hotdogs at Ranger Ballpark or getting an atomic wedgie from a three-story water slide had to do with Dallas, but he’d enjoyed spending time with his lover.

The sights, the sounds, the smells—everything had been new and invigorating. Rayne had felt like a kid again. Well, what he imagined a kid should feel like when at his first baseball game. His own childhood had afforded little opportunity for such extravagant things.

Their trip to Walmart had been another matter entirely, and not something he wished to repeat any time in the near future. “That greeter guy was creepy. I’m not even sure he was looking at me. Well, the one eye was...I think.”

Dante laughed as he finished hammering in the last stake. Standing, he patted the top of the two-man tent. “That should do it.”

“Are you seriously making me sleep on the ground?” Weren’t there wild animals and things they should worry about? “Maybe we should get a cabin. I don’t want to get eaten by a bear or an alligator.”

Dante laughed so exuberantly, Rayne feared he’d hurt himself. “There are no bears or alligators in Texhoma. The worst you’ll have to worry about are mosquitoes.”

“Well, I don’t like those either.” Fishing, hiking, and sleeping on the ground in some shithole town in Oklahoma were not how Rayne had envisioned spending the last night of his curse.

“Oh, don’t be such a girl.” Dante jogged over to his pickup and rummaged around in the bed for a minute before coming back with two fishing poles. “Grab the worms, princess.”

“Oh, no! You have definitely got the wrong guy for this. I do not fish!” Rayne crossed his arms over his chest and stomped his foot. “I’m not doing it.”

Propping the poles against the tent, Dante sidled over to him, fisting his hands in Rayne’s hair, and smashed their mouths together in a hungry, demanding kiss. Just as Rayne began to debate the need for oxygen, Dante pulled away and smirked at him. “Yes, you are.”

Rayne bobbed his head like a puppet, his brain foggy and dazed. “Yes, I am.”

* * * *

“I still say they’re dumping radioactive toxins into the lake. Fish just do not get that big!” Rayne gestured wildly with one hand as he poked at the campfire with the stick in his other. “The damn thing was bigger than me!”

“It was a forty-pound catfish, not a sea monster. There are bigger ones in this lake.”

“Whatever.” Rayne shrugged and reached for the marshmallows on the log behind him.” He held one up to Dante, shrugging again when Dante shook his head. Spearing it on the end of a wire coat hanger, he held it over the fire, bobbing it up and down in the flames.

“What happened to your parents? I mean, how did you and Marcy end up at the home?”

Dante took a long swallow of his beer. “I don’t really remember my parents. They died in a car wreck just after Marcy was born. We

lived with our mom's sister until she passed away from leukemia. We didn't have any other family, so we became wards of the state."

"That's awful. I'm sorry."

"It happened a long time ago, but thank you."

Rayne pulled the wire from the flames, blew on the gooeyness at the end and popped it in his mouth. "So, why didn't you become emancipated when you turned sixteen?"

Dante grinned. His little man was fishing for information, and he found it adorable. "Well, mostly because of Marcy. The courts wouldn't have granted me custody at sixteen. The shelter could have kicked me out, but they understood and let me stay because of her." He paused, waiting for Rayne to look at him. "And, I didn't want to leave you, either."

Rayne nodded, but the corners of his lips twitched before he could hide his face. Snagging another marshmallow, he speared it and thrust it into the fire.

"So, I guess this is it, huh?" Dante had been putting off the conversation all week. They hadn't spoken of what would happen when Rayne went back to his fancy house and ritzy lifestyle. Though part of him longed to say the words inside his heart, Dante kept tight-lipped. What did it matter if he'd never see the man again?

Removing the blackened marshmallow from the fire, Rayne studied it intently as he spoke. "I don't fit here, Dante. I try, but I'm mostly just stumbling around in the dark all of the time."

Dante nodded, though his heart screamed at him to say something to stop the words spilling from Rayne's lips. He couldn't force Rayne to stay, to build a life with him or love him.

"I want my life back," Rayne whispered. He twisted around and stared into Dante's eyes. "I want you to be a part of that life. I want us to try to make this work."

As much as he wanted to leap at the offer, he couldn't do it. "I don't think we can. We have completely different lives, Rayne. Hell,

we might as well live on different planets. I don't think they can coexist."

"Then move in with me." Rayne crawled across the blanket they'd spread over the sand to kneel in front of him. "Come live with me. I have enough money to take care of us."

Running his fingertip lightly along Rayne's jawbone, Dante smiled sadly. "It's not about money. Just like you don't fit here, I don't fit in your life. I'd never be happy if I couldn't do what I love."

"Can I still see you?" Rayne's eyes shimmered with unshed tears, and his words came out hoarse and gravelly.

Though he knew it would only cause him more heartache, Dante nodded slowly. "Of course. We'll still be friends, right?" He hoped Rayne wouldn't hear his lack of conviction.

To his surprise, Rayne shook his head, the tears streaming down his soft, pink cheeks. "I don't want to be your friend, Dante." Moving to straddle Dante's thighs, Rayne pressed his palm over Dante's heart. "I wasn't going to tell you. I wanted to wait, but I might not have another chance."

Dante's heart felt like it would crawl up his esophagus and out of his mouth. His skin heated, and his stomach fluttered. "Rayne?"

Placing two fingers over Dante's lips, Rayne smiled through his tears. "I love you, Dante Luca. I want more time with you. I know it won't be easy, but I won't let you leave again. You promised."

Wrapping his hand around his lover's delicate wrist, he pulled the fingers away from his mouth and kissed Rayne's palm. "I did promise." No, it wouldn't be easy. In fact, it would be damn near impossible. He would fight Heaven and Hell to keep Rayne in his life, though. He'd only needed to hear those three little words. "Say it again."

Rayne chuckled wetly, leaning in to kiss the tip of Dante's nose. "I love you. I have since I was sixteen." Sitting up straight, he cupped Dante's cheek and gave him a fierce glare. "It hurt like hell when you

left the first time. I never thought I'd get a second chance. I need you to tell me that everything's going to be fine. Lie if you have to."

"Rayne, I—"

"I know this is all fucked up, and I should have waited before I told you. I should have given us more time together."

"Rayne."

"We can figure it out. I'm just asking for a chance."

"Rayne."

"I have to travel a lot, but it's not so bad. You could hire a good supervisor and come with me. I know you don't think you'll like it, but I didn't think I'd like sauerkraut on my hotdog either."

"Rayne!" Dante yelled the words, trying to stop his lover's incessant babbling.

Rayne bit his lip and dipped his head. *Much better.*

"If you will shut up for two second and give me a chance to talk, you'd realize how ridiculous you're being." He waited for Rayne to lift his head, then smiled and kissed his pouty lips. "I love you, baby. I don't mind traveling. I'm glad you didn't wait. And everything is going to be fine."

Dante had never seen a bigger shit-eating grin than the one that spread of his lover's face. "Repeat the first part."

"I don't mind travelling?"

"Dante."

"You're being ridiculous?"

"Oh, you're hopeless." He dove forward, attacking Dante's mouth like a man possessed, licking, biting, and sucking. "I don't care, though," he murmured shakily against Dante's lips.

"Hey, Rayne?" Dante felt none too stable himself.

"Yes, Dante?"

"I love you, baby."

Rayne's lips stretched wide across his. "I heard you the first time."

* * * *

Dante loved him, and suddenly nothing else mattered—not his social status, his money, or even his villa in Italy. Hmm, he should probably tell Dante about that.

Slipping his hand between them, Rayne cupped his lover's growing erection and massaged it gently. "Want you, babe."

Dante groaned, falling back on his elbows and arching his hips, almost unseating Rayne from his lap. He scrambled to stay upright, grabbing on to Dante's shoulders to keep from falling over. He loved that he could pull such a response from the big man.

His eyes shining with love and desire, Dante rolled them easily, gently easing Rayne to the blanket and covering his body.

Neither spoke—no words were needed. Their lips met in a slow, sensual kiss, and Rayne smoothed his hands over Dante's bare shoulders, skimming his fingers down the warm skin of his back.

Though they'd come together in some very imaginative ways in the past weeks, this time felt different. Rayne didn't know if it was the knowledge that Dante loved him, or the fear of the unknown, or the freedom to let go and turn over control to his capable lover. Every kiss, every touch—even the warm summer breeze that drifted over his face—felt more intense, more meaningful.

They moved together, working to shrug off the confinements of their clothing as they stole kisses and whispered words of need and longing. Rayne's body heated, his skin sizzling with every touch, and his cock throbbed and ached between their writhing bodies.

Dante trailed kisses across his collarbones and down his chest, swirling his tongue around one of Rayne's erect nipples before sucking the pebbled bud into his mouth. Arching into his lover's seeking mouth, Rayne moaned, his hands fisting in Dante's long hair as he humped his hips against the man's midsection.

Continuing his downward trek, Dante glided his tongue along Rayne's stomach, dipping into his belly button before diving lower to

lick and bite at the crease where thigh met groin. Strong fingers encircled Rayne's pulsing shaft, stroking him slowly as Dante marked the skin on the inside of his thigh.

Groaning at the onslaught of pleasure, Rayne reached over his head, stretching to loop his fingers around the shoulder strap of his backpack. Pulling the bag across the blanket, he fumbled blindly for the zipper, opening the pocket and extricating the goods inside.

Dante's mouth moved lower, his slippery tongue lavishing Rayne's sac as he continued to pump his fist over Rayne's swollen length. Warm saliva dribbled down his perineum, Dante's finger following swiftly, pushing between his crease and swirling the slick spit around Rayne's quivering hole.

Rayne's breathing sped, coming in shallow pants as his body quaked. Bending his knees, he pulled them toward his chest, spreading himself open. Dante groaned, journeying farther south, his tongue flickering over Rayne's taint before licking a slow path across his hungry opening.

Dante groaned again, his fist tightening around Rayne's cock. "I love the way you taste. I could eat this pretty little ass forever." His tongue prodded the tight ring, exerting more pressure until he slipped through, wiggling his tongue and licking at the inside of Rayne's tunnel.

Lightning strikes of erotic desire slammed into Rayne as his back bowed, and he gritted his teeth, willing himself not to come. "Dante, stop!"

The stroking stopped, and Dante's head popped up from between his spread cheeks, his lips swollen and glossy. Rayne whimpered pathetically, waving the piece of paper and the bottle of lube in his hand. "I don't want to come until you're inside me, but you need to hurry."

Dante looked at him curiously, taking the white paper from his hand and unfolding it. "Rayne, this is...it's..."

“Yes. I went to the clinic on my lunch break last week. I’m clean, Dante.”

“I get tested twice a year when I get my physical for the company insurance. The last one was three months ago, and I haven’t been with anyone except you since.”

Rayne tossed the lube at his lover’s chest and nodded curtly. “Then lube up and let’s ride because I need to come like right fucking now.”

Dante snapped the cap open and poured the slick oil over his rock hard prick. “You are awfully demanding.”

Rayne pushed up on his elbows and gripped Dante’s gorgeous cock, jerking the tanned length a few times before scraping his fingernail over the tip and dipping into the oozing slit. Dante gasped, his hips snapping forward and a visible shudder rippling through his body. “You were saying?”

“Lube up and ride. Got it.” He dribbled more lube over his fingers, kneeling up between Rayne’s thighs. Pulling his knees to his chest again, Rayne reached down to grip his rounded globes, spreading them wide.

Dante looked like he’d swallowed his tongue, and his eyes actually rolled back in his head. “You’re going to kill me,” he muttered.

Rayne wiggled his ass, begging without words for his lover’s touch. Dante didn’t disappoint. He circled Rayne’s needy opening twice, then pushed in with two thick fingers, pulling a soft cry from Rayne’s open mouth.

He pumped fast, twisting his wrist and separating his fingers, stretching Rayne to receive him. A third finger eased inside beside its brethren, pulling at the taut muscles until they relaxed.

Then the fingers were gone, and Dante dropped over Rayne, catching himself with his hand braced beside Rayne’s ear. The spongy head kissed his anus, but didn’t enter.

“Are you sure, Rayne? You know what this means. There’s no going back.”

“Not going anywhere,” Rayne whispered. “I’m yours, Dante. Now, show me I belong to you.”

Dante’s eyes looked a little misty. He dipped his head, sealing his mouth over Rayne’s as the head of his cock pushed inside, and he buried himself to the hilt in one slow glide. Their tongues dueled as Dante thrust his hips, moving gently inside Rayne’s sensitized channel.

What started as calm and tender quickly erupted into a burning passion, clawing at them both and burning them from the inside out. Dante’s arm slipped under Rayne’s lower back, jerking him up to meet each demanding shove of his hips.

Rayne’s balls churned, his sac drawing close to his body. A tingle started in his lower belly, zipping down his groin, and rocketing up his throbbing cock.

Dante pushed harder, his rhythm increasing, becoming feral and primal. Grunts and groans escaped his snarling lips, his teeth bared as he slammed home again and again. The firelight flickered across his damp skin, making it glow and giving him the look of some fierce gladiator.

Rising up on his knees, Dante gripped Rayne’s hips, pulling him upward until only his shoulders remained on the ground. He drove inside Rayne’s ass, nailing his sweet spot on every invasion.

Gripping his bobbing cock, Rayne jacked himself frantically, racing along the path toward orgasm.

“Come for me, baby. Come on my cock.” Dante snapped his hips forward, grinding his pelvis against Rayne’s ass. “Now!”

Rayne couldn’t have stopped it if he wanted. His orgasm ripped through him, spewing from his cock to cover his chest, his stomach, even his neck.

“Ah!” Dante’s head fell back on his shoulders, and he roared, his fingers digging into Rayne’s hipbones.

The molten lava of Dante's seed coated Rayne's chute, filling it to overflowing. Dante panted and shuddered above him, his eyes boring into Rayne's as his chest heaved. "You belong to me."

Rayne closed his eyes and sighed happily.

Chapter Nineteen

Rayne stretched lazily, smiling at the warm body pressed against his back. Long fingers ghosted over his naked hip and up his flank. “Mm, good morning, sweetheart.”

“Good morning, gorgeous.”

Rayne’s eyes flipped open, and he sat up quickly, snapping his head around to the man in his bed. “Who the fuck are you?”

“You can just call me lover,” the guy purred. Fair skin, red hair, lean frame—he definitely wasn’t Dante.

Rayne’s eyes drifted around the room, and his heart jackhammered with panic. His bed, his curtains, his expensive rug, and oversized closet—he was home. Only, it didn’t feel like home anymore.

Holding his hands out in front of him, his eyes widened at their larger size, the sun-bronzed skin stretched tight over slim fingers and topped with perfectly manicured nails. Launching himself out of the bed, he raced over to the full-length mirror on his closet door, grinning widely at his reflection.

Six feet of sleek, beautiful male stared back at him, absurdly handsome and gloriously naked. Damn, it felt good to be back. He couldn’t wait to tell Dante. How the hell had he ended up back in Highland Park anyway? And who the hell was the guy in his bed?

Turning to face the stranger, Rayne jerked his thumb toward the bedroom door. “Time for you to go, dude.”

“I thought we could play a little more.” The man batted his lashes, offering a winsome smile.

More? “What exactly did we do?”

“Well, darlin’, I may need a diagram to show you some of those acrobatic moves of yours.”

Rayne’s stomach curled in revulsion. “Get the fuck out.”

Huffing, the guy crawled off the bed and began dressing. “No need to get snappy. I just thought you’d like another go round before breakfast.”

He finished clothing himself and strutted over to run his fingers down Rayne’s bare stomach. “It was fun, but I gotta run. Call me sometime.” Then he turned and left.

Rayne’s mind whirled in confusion, flipping through the events of the previous night and demanding to know how he’d ended up in his own bed with some redhead. Damn, he needed to see Dante.

He felt light and buoyant, happy down to his soul as he showered and dressed. Dante loved him. The man of his dreams loved him. Taking the stairs two at a time, Rayne rushed down them, jogging across his posh living room and grabbing the keys to his Benz from the crystal bowl beside the door.

The entire drive across town, Rayne couldn’t wipe the goofy grin off his face. His skin tingled, his lips hummed, and his cock twitched inside his slacks, already anticipating its lover’s touch.

Pulling into Dante’s driveway, Rayne launched himself from the vehicle and darted up on the small wooden porch. He rapped his knuckles against the wood, bouncing from foot to foot in his eagerness to see Dante.

Then the door swung open, and there he stood—his gorgeous, kind, sensitive lover. “Surprise!”

“What do you want?” Dante glared at him, his massive arms crossing over his chest.

Rayne stared back blankly. “Dante, it’s me.”

“I know who you are. What are you doing here? How do you know where I live?”

“What are you talking about? I lived here for a whole month.”

Dante snorted derisively. “You stayed here? Right.” His arms dropped to his sides, and he took a menacing step forward. “You made your feelings perfectly clear at the museum gala. We have nothing left to say to one another.”

Rayne began to tremble, his bottom lip quivering as tears welled up in his eyes. This was a joke—some kind of sick joke. “Dante, please. I...I love you. Why are you acting this way?”

Insane laughter burst from Dante’s mouth, and he slapped at the doorframe. “You love me? I’ve seen you once in eight years, and I wouldn’t call it a friendly meeting. Leave me alone, Rayne.”

The door slammed closed, leaving Rayne gasping for breath on the front porch as the world crumbled down around him. Stumbling down the steps, he made his way to his car in a stupor. Dante acted like the last four weeks never happened. God, the man loathed him.

“Why?” Rayne whispered thickly.

“He doesn’t remember you.”

Rayne growled, spinning around and grabbing Gordost by the throat. “I am sick of your little fucking games. What did you do?”

In a flash, the god disappeared, only to rematerialize on the other side of Rayne’s car. He smiled brightly, his blond hair shining in the sunlight. “He doesn’t remember a thing.” Gordost giggled like a child. “I am naughty.”

“Why?”

Gordost shrugged. “Because it amuses me.” He wagged his finger at Rayne. “You have your life back, now. You should be grateful.”

“So, I guess I passed your little test.” Rayne let the bitterness seep into his voice.

Gordost stared at him for a full minute before doubling over in laughter and shaking his head. “I don’t know if you did or not. I was bored, and you provided an entertaining distraction. Oh, and you pissed me off.”

“What! You turned my entire life upside down because you were bored?”

Gordost cackled madly, then gave a little wave and disappeared.

* * * *

Dante fumed as he marched across his living room and snatched up his phone from the end table. “Sorry about that, honey.”

“Did you say Rayne? As in Rayne Everest?”

“Yeah, it was Rayne Everest.” Dante sighed at his sister’s enthusiasm. Seemed the arrogant jerk had another admirer.

“What on earth is he doing there? Ooh, are you seeing him?” Marcy squealed, piercing Dante’s eardrums, and he yanked the phone away from his head.

“Marcy, calm down. I’m not seeing him. I’m not seeing anyone. I don’t know what he was doing here, but I have nothing to say to him.”

“Oh, Dante.”

Closing his eyes, Dante fought down the sigh that rose up in his chest. “How was Jamaica?” he asked, hoping to cut off any commentary on his love life.

“It was amazing!” Marcy started babbling excitedly about all the wonderful things she and her new husband had seen and done on the island. Dante listened to her talk, smiling and nodding, relieved she had found a man who adored her so much. Thomas worshiped the very ground Marcy walked on, and Dante couldn’t have chosen a better match for his baby sister.

“Dante, when are you going to find someone? I worry about you.”

Groaning, Dante closed his eyes and gripped the phone in his fist. “I’m fine, Marcy. I don’t have time to date right now.”

“You should make time. Don’t you get lonely?”

“Can we not have this discussion? I haven’t met anyone worth my time, and that’s all there is to it. I’m only twenty-seven, baby girl. I have plenty of time to meet someone.” He chuckled softly. “I’m not going to turn into an old spinster, so relax.”

They talked for a while longer until Dante needed to finish his morning chores and head out to the building site. “Call me this weekend. I love you, Marcy.”

“I love you, too, Dante. Take care of yourself, okay?” The concern in her voice tugged at his heartstrings.

“Promise.” Then he hung up.

After he finished picking up the living room, Dante grabbed his keys and headed to work. Maybe he would stop and pick up some donuts for the crew. They worked hard for him, did a stellar job, and had finished the second house three days ahead of schedule. Coffee and donuts were the least he could do to show his gratitude.

His thoughts strayed back to Rayne as he drove, causing his hands to tighten on the wheel and his breathing to accelerate. They’d been friends once, a whole other lifetime ago, but they weren’t so much as acquaintances now. So, what had brought Mr. High and Mighty to his doorstep?

It didn’t matter. After their last encounter, and Rayne’s cruel rebuff, Dante had nothing to say to the man. God, but he’d looked so sad, standing there on Dante’s porch, the vulnerability evident in his eyes. Remembering the scared boy he’d befriended in the children’s home, it had taken everything in him not to pull Rayne into his arms.

Pulling into a space in front of Pat’s Donut House, Dante smiled when he spotted Silas standing near the corner of the building. He didn’t know the guy’s story, or how he’d come to join the ranks of the homeless, but Dante liked the man. Silas always had a kind word and a ready smile. He had nothing, yet he would give you the shirt off his back if you asked.

Exiting the cab, Dante gave Silas a friendly wave before entering the little shop. His mouth watered and his stomach snarled at the sweet smells permeating the bakery. The rich aroma of fresh-brewed coffee and the cavity-inducing scent of fried bread and powdered sugar glaze assailed him. Forget Wheaties—this was the breakfast of champions.

He ordered three and half dozen assorted pastries and two large coffees, paid the cheery cashier, and juggled everything through the door and out to his pickup. After depositing the load in the passenger seat, he picked up the smaller box of donuts and one of the coffees and turned back to the building.

“Good morning, Dante!” Silas beamed at him, his handsomeness only marred by the scruff along his jaw and the shabby threadbare clothing he wore. “How are you on this beautiful day?”

“Can’t complain.” Dante held out the box and cup, dipping his head when Silas took them. “How are you?”

Silas curled the cardboard box against his chest, his grin softening. “I’m doing well. Thank you, Dante.”

Waving his hand, Dante brushed aside the gratitude. “It’s nothing.”

“So, where is your young man?” Silas craned his neck to look around Dante, obviously searching for someone.

“Young man? I don’t have anyone with me, Silas.”

Confusion covered the older man’s face, and his eyes met Dante’s. “I see. I’m sorry things didn’t work out. He was a good boy.”

“Uh, yeah.” Dante’s brows drew together, and he frowned. Maybe Silas had spent too much time in the summer heat. “Well, I gotta run, but you watch out for yourself.”

They nodded their good-byes, and Dante ambled to his pickup, still turning over Silas’s words in his brain. He hadn’t been with anyone in over a year. Hell, he didn’t even have friends he hung around regularly.

Shaking it off, he started the engine and drove out to the site. His men all lumbered around the third house, setting out their tools as they laughed and joked with one another.

“Breakfast!” Dante called as he approached them, laden with the pink boxes from Pat’s.

The banter stopped immediately, and everyone rushed to him, snatching the boxes from his hands. “Thanks boss,” chorused throughout the group as the men eagerly dug into the gooey goodness.

“Hey, where’s Rayne?” one of the men called.

“Who?” Could this morning get any stranger?

Everyone stopped and turned to look at him with raised eyebrows. No one spoke, and they seemed somber—a complete one-eighty from the raucous laughter from moments before.

Scanning the crowd of men, Dante noticed two missing. “Where’s Archer and Hudson?”

The frowns on the guy’s faces deepened. “Hudson took off last week. No one has seen him since,” Thames answered after a minute. “Archer quit. Don’t you remember?”

Shaking his head, Dante felt the confusion build until it started to piss him off. What the hell was going on around here? Why would Archer just up and quit? And where was Hudson? They’d been friends for years. The man had never skipped out on a job without a good reason.

The harder he tried to remember the events of the last week, the more holes he found in his recollections. In fact, there were several days where he couldn’t remember anything at all. What had he done yesterday?

Wracking his brain to remember, he felt the pressure begin to build behind his eyes, the pain lancing through his temples. Why couldn’t he remember?

Chapter Twenty

Dante's lips pillowed against his, a warm tongue teasing the seam, seeking entrance. Those calloused fingers moved over his nude hip, tracing little circles and leaving a trail of fire in their wake. The hard ridge of Dante's weeping cock rode his thigh, pre-cum making the skin slick and sticky.

"Rayne!"

Snapping out of his daydream, Rayne looked at the man behind the camera and sighed. He couldn't get Dante out of his head. Three months, and the man still consumed his every thought.

"Would you pay attention? We're losing the light." The photographer waved his hand upward, indicating the sun's slow path across the sky.

"Yeah, let's get this over with." Rayne spread his legs wider, leaning back against the fountain as the cool water cascaded over his shoulders and down his chest. He couldn't even remember what the shoot was for, or why he'd agreed to it.

He let the assistants pose him, adjust his limbs, and tousle his hair. He moved on autopilot, contorting his body according to the photographer's directions, but letting his mind drift to thoughts of Dante.

He'd come so close to having everything he'd ever wanted just to watch it ripped from his grasp. All the things he'd once found important in his life no longer held the same value.

"Okay, we're done. We'll do the bench shots in an hour. Please, be on time." The photographer—Rayne couldn't remember his name—shook his head in exasperation and stomped away.

“Don’t mind him. He’s always grumpy.” One of the assistants stood smiling over Rayne, holding out a huge, fluffy towel. “You looked fabulous.” He smiled shyly, his cheeks reddening as he spoke.

Taking the towel, Rayne let his gaze peruse the man’s tan skin, dark hair, lean waist, and sculpted physique as he slowly dried himself. Not an exact replica, but the guy looked close enough to Dante that Rayne could pretend. He hadn’t taken anyone to his bed since he’d returned, had found no one worthy.

He needed to get over Dante, though. He’d only drive himself insane if he continued to entertain fantasies of a life with the sexy construction worker. They’d had a good time—the most memorable month of Rayne’s life—but he needed to move on.

“What’s your name?”

“Angelo, sir.”

Taking the man’s hand, Rayne pulled him closer. “Come with me, Angelo.”

As expected, Angelo nodded quickly, desire burning in his dark eyes. Not the same chocolate brown of Dante’s, but darker, flatter. He mashed himself against Rayne’s front, his erection digging into Rayne’s hip.

Angelo’s mouth hovered near his ear, his warm breath washing over Rayne’s neck and causing him to shiver. “You are so gorgeous.”

Rayne knew this, though it no longer held a source of pride for him. “Come on.” He pulled Angelo along behind him, not caring in the least who saw them, or that they knew exactly what would happen inside his trailer.

His agent rushed over to him, anger and panic written all over her face. Rayne waved her away. He just didn’t care anymore. Let the tabloids plaster his face across the front page. Angelo would get his fifteen minutes of fame, and Rayne would get to sink his dick into something warm and welcoming.

Huffing, his agent, Ally, turned on her heels, threw her hands up in the air, and stormed off toward the crowd milling around the set.

As soon as they stepped through the door of his trailer, Rayne pushed Angelo up against the wall and attacked his mouth, shoving his tongue between the man's lips, searching for the taste of coffee and peppermint.

He found the sweet flavor of berry gum instead. Jerking away, he stared into Angelo's eyes, trying desperately to transform him into the man who held his heart. Trying again, Rayne slanted their mouths together, running his hands over Angelo's fit body, pressing his palm over the straining cock behind his shorts and rubbing up the impressive length.

Nothing happened. His dick remained flaccid, his heart rate holding steady. Growling in frustration, Rayne pushed harder, grinding himself against Angelo's hip as he kissed the man roughly.

After several long seconds, he finally admitted defeat. Pulling out of the kiss, he rested his forehead against Angelo's shoulder, fighting to hold back his tears. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Who is he?"

Straightening quickly, Rayne shook his head. "There's no one."

Angelo only smiled. "You are a terrible liar, Rayne Everest."

Ducking his head, Rayne grinned. "He says the same thing."

"You love him."

"Yes."

"Then why are you not with him?"

"He doesn't want me anymore." The words tore at his heart, ripping and shredding it to tiny pieces.

"Then you have to make him remember all the reasons he wanted you in the beginning." Winking, Angelo kissed Rayne's cheek softly. "Go get him." Then he sidestepped and reached for the door. "Good luck, Rayne."

Rayne had a feeling he'd need a lot more than luck.

* * * *

Dante stared at the picture on the display screen of his phone. He didn't know why he had the picture, why it set his teeth on edge, or why he couldn't bring himself to delete it. He recognized Archer, but not the man in his arms. Still, the passionate embrace filled him with a deep sense of possessiveness every time he looked at it—not for Archer, but for the unknown man he'd never met before.

Turning off the screen, Dante tucked his cell phone into his pocket and sighed. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing. For three months, he'd had the niggling feeling in the back of his mind that he'd misplaced something important.

Staring up at his newest acquisition, he felt none of the excitement that usually filled him when he started a new project. The old Victorian needed a lot of work, and normally he wouldn't have been able to restrain himself from jumping in feet first. Though building from the ground up held the most appeal to him, he loved renovating neglected houses into their former state of splendor.

Now, it was just a job, a mundane task as uninspiring as washing the dishes.

His crew crawled over the place like ants at a picnic, hammering, sawing, scraping, and sanding. He had still yet to hear a word from Hudson. No matter how many times he dialed the man's number, it always went straight to voicemail. With no family for Dante to contact, he could only wait and hope Hudson would turn up unharmed.

He'd briefly thought of reporting the man missing, but the crew insisted the former supervisor had run off with a lover. Still, why wouldn't Hudson answer his phone? And why did Dante have a teasing feeling he knew exactly where the man resided?

Dark clouds rolled overhead, moving in from the west and bringing with them the promise of thunderstorms and torrential downpour. He hoped that would be the worst of it.

Shuffling up the cracked walkway, Dante ascended the creaking and peeling front steps, and entered through the equally neglected

front door. High ceiling, beautiful crown molding, a solid oak banister, the house had great potential.

Continuing on to the kitchen, Dante paused just inside the room, his eyes zeroing in on the empty space beneath the faded countertop where a dishwasher should be. His stomach cramped, his pulse quickened, and sweat damped his palms.

Walking slowly, almost cautiously, Dante moved over to the hole and crouched down to peer inside. A shaky breath escaped his lungs when he found it completely empty. He didn't even know what he'd expected to find.

Rising out of his crouch, he turned in a circle, making a long list of repairs needed in the kitchen. His palms smoothed over the dusty top of the center island, and a strange sense of sadness overwhelmed him.

His lips tingled, his belly fluttered, and fierce longing settled over him. It happened a lot lately, and at the strangest times. He'd almost burst into tears like a baby at the sight of that stupid fish over the entrance of Nate's Seafood the other day. He just wished he could figure out what kept provoking the feeling.

"Hey, boss, the storm's moving in. You want us to pack it up for the day?"

Dante turned and nodded his head at the newest member of his crew. "Yeah, Quinton, go ahead and tell everyone they can leave once they've got the equipment put away."

"Got it." Then Quinton turned and headed back through the house.

Dante followed at a slower pace, trying to ascertain why he still felt like someone had punched him the gut. Damn, he was a complete mess.

He helped get the tools packed away, moving the bigger equipment inside the house, and thanked his workers for the progress they'd made. The wind whipped around them, and fat raindrops began to fall from the angry sky. A loud crack rent the air, followed by an equally loud crash.

Swinging around, Dante groaned at the heavy tree limb embedded in the roof of the house. The last thing he needed was water damage in the attic to add to his extensive list of improvements. Jogging to his pickup, he popped open the bed cover and dug around until he came up with a thick, blue tarp.

“You need some help, Dante?” Quinton hurried over to him, squinting through the rain as it splattered against his face.

Lightning flashed across the sky in the distance, the thunder rolling and rumbling behind it. Dante shook his head and clapped the man on the shoulder. “I’ll take care of it. You go on home.”

Quinton nodded. “Be careful, boss.” Then he turned and sprinted through the already forming puddles in the front law and jumped into the shelter of his truck.

Tucking the tarp under his arm, Dante rushed through the house, up to the second floor, and out onto the balcony just off the master bedroom. Climbing over the railing, he eased down to the roof and started across the slick surface.

Chapter Twenty-One

The shoot was rescheduled due to the storm, and Rayne couldn't have been happier. He had somewhere else to be, somewhere much more important. Angelo's words played over and over on an endless loop, and Rayne knew exactly what he needed to do.

Dante didn't remember him or the time they'd spent together. He didn't remember the tender touches, the gentle kisses, or the softly spoken words of love. He didn't remember them, but Rayne believed they lurked inside Dante's heart. Now, he just had to find a way to drag them to the surface.

Pushing the gas pedal, he urged his car forward, speeding through the rain-slicked streets as his wipers worked in tandem to clear away the water pouring over his windshield. The luxury sedan rocked and shimmied, and Rayne fought to keep the wheels inside his lane against the damning wind.

Slowing as he pulled up in front of Dante's house, Rayne frowned at the empty driveway. Where the hell was Dante? Without stopping, he continued down the street, performed a perfectly executed U-turn, and sped back the way he'd come. Maybe Dante had stopped for a late lunch. Rayne would check his usual haunts.

Cursing under his breath as he sped past several of his lover's favorite eateries, frustration ate away at him when he found Dante's pickup parked at none of them. Flying past the little diner where Dante had bought him his first meal after they'd met, Rayne spotted a lone figure huddled under the awning.

Jerking hard on the steering wheel, he whipped into the parking lot and came to a screeching halt, parked across several empty spaces.

Clambering out of his vehicle, he jogged up to the man, and held out his hand.

“Silas.” He couldn’t stop the smile that spread over his lips. “I know you probably don’t recognize me, but I need to find Dante.”

Silas took his hand, shaking it firmly as he grinned right back. “Rayne! It’s good to see you!”

Shock rendered him speechless for a heartbeat before he could find his voice. “You know who I am?”

“Well, you do look different, but the eyes are still the same. I don’t know what happened to you, but I reckon I have an idea.” A knowing smirk settled over his visage.

Though curious, Rayne didn’t really have the time to get into it just then. “Do you know where Dante is?”

Silas scratched the several days’ worth of stubble on his jaw and scrunched his brow as he thought. “I think he’s got a new job going on over by Ventruvian Park. You could check there.”

“Great! Thanks, Silas.” Rayne started to turn, but stopped, eyeing the man in front of him with concern. “Why aren’t you at the shelter?”

Silas shrugged. “I stopped by, but the place was already packed because of the storm.” He patted Rayne on the back. “Don’t worry about me, son. I’ll head on over to the church if things get too bad.”

His reassurance did little to appease Rayne’s concern. Digging his handcrafted leather wallet from his pocket, he extracted three hundred dollar bills from the contents and pushed them into Silas’s resisting hand.

“Rayne, I can’t take this.”

“You can, and you will. Get some food and a place to stay for the night. Promise me.” It suddenly occurred to him that the usual stench of sour whiskey was surprisingly absent from the man. Pulling another hundred from his wallet, he passed it over as well. “If you find you need a drink to keep you warm, at least buy the good stuff.”

Tears beaded in Silas's eyes as he looked down at the wad of bills in his hand. "Thank you," he whispered.

Nodding once, Rayne hurried back to his car, slipped inside, and burnt off in the direction of Ventruvian Park, and hopefully, his happily-ever-after. No matter what happened, he planned to lay it all out there, bare his heart to Dante, and pray the man would pull his stubborn head out of his sexy ass and own up to his feelings.

Rejection or disinterest was unacceptable. Rayne would do whatever it took to make the man remember. He had become accustomed to getting what he wanted, practically having it hand-delivered with a pretty red bow. Well, he wanted Dante Luca, and he aimed to have him.

Skidding around the corner, he mashed harder on the accelerator, tearing down the street as he splashed through small ponds of standing water. Rain coursed down the ditches beside the curb, flowing like a river to the drain grates where it gushed through the metal bars, spilling like a waterfall into the sewers below.

Spotting Dante's monster of a truck, Rayne slammed on his breaks, fishtailing and coming to a stop in the middle of the street. Without thought or care about blocking potential traffic, he launched himself out into the downpour and sprinted around the car and up on the sidewalk.

The rain soaked him immediately, stinging his skin as the wind whipped it sideways. His hair blew wildly, slapping against his cheeks and neck, tangling around his ears. The sky grew darker still, the storm raging around him.

Another bout of lightning lit up the sky, bringing with it the sharp crack of thunder like a heavenly snap of a mighty whip. Rayne jolted, his heart hammering, and his ears ringing at the deafening sound.

Starting toward the front door, Rayne stopped when a muffled curse reached his ears through the driving rain. Redirecting his gaze toward the rooftop, his mouth hung open and fear settled in his soul as he watched the man he loved fighting against the wind.

“Dante!” His voice barely carried to his own ears. Hurrying to stand on the lawn just beneath his lover, he cupped his hands around his mouth and tried again. “Dante!”

* * * *

Son of a bitch! He had sorely misjudged the size and weight of the tree limb. The rain beat against his back, soaking him to the bone, and impeding his grip on the offending log.

“Dante!”

His name reached him, muffled, barely loud enough for him to hear over the fury of the wind. Releasing the branch, he moved cautiously over the wet shingles, peering down at the man standing on the lawn below him. Blinking rapidly against the water splashing against his face, he felt the frown tug at the corners of his mouth when he recognized Rayne Everest.

What the fuck did he want? “What are you doing here?” he yelled.

“We need to talk!”

Stretching his arm behind him to indicate the huge hole in the roof, Dante felt the anger boil inside him. “I’m a little busy if you haven’t noticed. I’m sure whatever you have to say can wait.”

“It can’t wait. Dante, get down from there and let’s talk.” Rayne’s upturned face twisted into a mask of worry as another strike of lightning sizzled across the sky.

“Go away, Rayne. I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“Fine! Then just listen to me.” Rayne took a step closer, placing his hand over his heart. “I love you, Dante. I’ve been miserable without you.” His voice wavered, and Dante watched him swallow hard. “You love me, too. I know you do. You have to remember.”

“I don’t love you. I barely know you anymore.” He didn’t have time for these games. “Go away,” he repeated. He turned to go back to his task, but Rayne’s voice called up to him again.

“You do know me. You know me better than I know myself. You saw through all my bullshit when no one else bothered to look. I need you, Dante. I need you to remember.”

“Remember what?” A sudden ache formed in his chest, and his words came with less heat. A small flicker of...something nudged at the back of his brain, but he couldn’t grasp on to it.

“Remember the lake, the campfire, the summer breeze. Remember the way our bodies moved together. Remember when you told me you loved me. It’s in there, babe. You have to find it.”

Flashes of a red blanket, black hair fanned out over it, damp bodies moving together in the night flashed through Dante’s mind too fast for him to latch on to one. Images of smooth, creamy skin beneath his palm, the contrast between his dark olive skin beautiful and fascinating rolled by as though in slow motion. Small, supple, and yielding, the body beneath him writhed and flexed, heated and flushed from his touch.

“You promised you wouldn’t leave,” Rayne called up to him. “Are you going to break that promise?”

His mind’s eye traveled up along the slender neck and rounded jaw, past full, lush lips and a cute button nose, to meet with the most gorgeous sea green eyes he’d ever seen. He didn’t recognize the face looking back at him with love and trust, but he would never forget those eyes.

Dante stared at Rayne where he stood on the lawn as the storm continued to assail him, trying to reconcile the man from his memories, with the man before him.

“No going back, remember? I belong to you.” He could hear Rayne’s voice crack even over the pounding of the rain against the siding.

“Are you sure, Rayne? You know what this means. There’s no going back.”

“Not going anywhere. I’m yours, Dante. Now, show me I belong to you.”

Remembrance slammed into Dante, stealing the breath from his lungs. He pictured the first meeting with the small, beaten, and scared man beneath the counter. The weeks he shared with Rayne. The nights they'd spent talking, holding each other, and making love. Their fishing trip to the lake, the campfire, the whispered endearments and pledges of forever—he remembered it all.

“Rayne?”

“Yeah, babe. It's me.”

“What happened? How...”

“Gordost is an evil fucking dipshit.” Rayne chuckled wetly. “Come down here. I really need to touch you right now.”

Dante couldn't agree more. How could he have forgotten? His heart soared, leaving him feeling giddy and excited. The roof be damned, he needed Rayne in his arms. Once he had him there, Dante did not intend to ever let him go again.

Without thinking, without even realizing he did it, Dante stepped forward, reaching his hand out to Rayne. Another step and his foot slipped, sweeping out from under him and sending him to his ass to tumble across the second story rooftop.

Scrambling for purchase, his fingers slipped over the shingles, his feet kicking and flailing to slow his momentum. Just before his feet reached the edge of the roof, Dante realized his attempts were fruitless. With an almost silent gasp, he rolled over the edge, plummeting to the ground below.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Rayne cried out in horror as he watched Dante bounce across the roof, over the edge, and fall to the ground with a sickening thud. Sprinting across the space between them, he fell to his knees in the rising water, his hands fluttering over the prone man, unsure where to touch him.

“Dante!”

Dante didn’t answer him, didn’t move, didn’t so much as twitch. Pressing his hand flat to his lover’s chest, the tears came fast and steady when he couldn’t find a beat beneath his palm. Moving his shaking fingers up to Dante’s neck, he pressed against his jugular, frantic to find a pulse.

“Dante! No, damn it! You cannot fucking die on me.” Rayne fell forward, resting his forehead against Dante’s still chest and sobbed. “Open your eyes. Open your eyes.” He chanted the words again and again as he wound his fingers in a white-knuckled grip in Dante’s sodden shirt.

Thunder boomed and rolled, echoing the pain in his chest. Sitting up, he threw his head back, screaming out at the injustice. Staring up at the dark sky, the rain pelting his face, he prayed for a miracle.

Miracles. Yes! “Gordost!”

The god appeared instantly, standing beside him and looking very put upon as the rain drenched him, and the wind blew through his hair. “What now?”

Turning his attention back to his fallen lover, Rayne choked back another sob and took Dante’s hand into his. “Save him.”

“Why should I?”

Jerking his head around to stare at Gordost, Rayne bared his teeth and growled. “Do it!”

Gordost sighed, crossing his arms over his chest. “Things like this require sacrifice. I can’t just simply snap my fingers and fix your fucking problems.”

“Take whatever you want. I don’t care. Take my life if you want. Just save him.”

Frowning, the god shook his head. “You can’t take his place. Besides, I can’t kill you—rules and such.” He wrinkled his nose at this.

“Save him!” Rayne screamed.

“Give up your life, your riches, your beauty.”

“Done.”

“And...your lover. If I save him, you can never see him again.”

Hot and wet, the tears pooled to the brim and overflowed once again. “Never?”

“It’s up to you. Either way, you’ll never see him again. Is it better to know he exists, but you can’t be with him?” Gordost looked a little too happy for the morbid conversation.

Rayne closed his eyes, the pain lancing through him and slashing at his soul. “I promise,” he whispered brokenly. “Now, please save him.”

Heat spread through Rayne, tingling out to his limbs, and he felt his body shrinking and reforming. His clothes swallowed him, at least two sizes too big. Holding his hands up in front of him, he marveled at their smaller size, smoother texture, and paler complexion.

He didn’t care about any of it. Hovering over his lover, he held his breath, waiting for Dante to open his eyes. Several agonizing seconds passed before Dante gasped painfully, his eyes flying open, and his back arching up from the grass.

“Oh, thank God,” Rayne murmured in relief. He dove on top his lover, grabbing the man’s face and kissing him until neither of them

could breathe. “You stupid asshole, you scared the shit out of me!” Then he slammed their mouths together again.

Jerking away once more, he panted against the wet skin of Dante’s throat. “I love you. I’ve missed you, babe.”

Dante’s arms wrapped around his back in a crushing embrace, his lips resting against Rayne’s ear. “I love you, baby. Not going to let you get away this time.”

Gordost cleared his throat beside them, demanding Rayne’s attention. Well, the god was in for a rude awakening. Over his dead body would he leave Dante. “What?”

“It’s time to go.”

“Then leave.” Rayne smirked wickedly.

“We had an agreement.”

“I lied.”

Gordost gaped at him, his hands fisting at his sides, as he blinked stupidly. “You can’t lie. That’s not how it works. You have to leave now. You can’t see him anymore.” The god sounded like a petulant child, pouting because he’d been tricked.

“What if I say no?”

“Then I revoke my gift.”

“You can’t. You said yourself you can’t kill anyone. He’s very much alive now.” Rayne wiggled his eyebrows, very pleased with his quick thinking.

Gordost stared at him for a full minute before bursting into laughter. “I like your style Rayne Everest.” He twirled his wrist, a bottle of lube appearing in his clasped fingers. He tossed the tube to Rayne. “Enjoy!” Then he vanished.

“What the hell just happened? Why do you look like that? What did he just throw at you?” Dante fired off questions in rapid succession.

“Shut up.” Rayne attacked Dante’s clothes, tearing at them like a wild animal, ripping them from Dante’s body.

* * * *

Dante went from confused and frustrated, to hot and horny in seconds flat. He no longer cared why he was practically drowning, or why Rayne had reverted to his small form, or what the conversation with Gordost had been about. All he cared about was having Rayne's cock in his ass, plowing into him and driving him out of his mind.

Pushing to a sitting position, he attacked Rayne's oversized clothes, pulling his shirt over his head, and shoving him back to the sodden ground to yank his pants down his slim thighs. Growling, hissing, and snarling, they groped and grabbed, rolling across the grass and puddles, their mouths locking and tongues dueling.

Rolling once more until Rayne perched atop him, Dante wound his fingers in his lover's hair and jerked his head back roughly. "Fuck me. I need you, baby."

Rayne's eyes darkened, the storm inside them echoing the one thrashing around them. He bobbed his head, flipping open the cap on the lube and slicking his fingers as he moved off of Dante to kneel between his legs. Dante spread his thighs and bent his knees, begging silently for Rayne to hurry.

Slim fingers slipped between his cheeks, zeroing in on his quivering pucker. Rayne caressed the muscles, coating them in lube, then pushed in with two fingers. The burn blazed across his opening, and Dante sucked in a deep breath, willing his body to relax.

Rayne bent over him, latching on to a nipple and tugging at it like a dog with a chew toy. Pleasure shot from Dante's tortured nub, straight down to his engorged shaft. His cock jumped, the pressure in his balls built, and his hot channel begged for something more substantial.

"Now, Rayne. I can't wait."

Releasing the pebbled nipple in his mouth, Rayne rose to his knees, removed his fingers from Dante's clenching hole, and coated his cock with more lube. "Hold on, baby. It's gonna be fast and hard."

Dante groaned, wrapping his legs around Rayne's lean hips. "Make me feel it."

The spongy crown of Rayne's cock pushed against his opening, applying pressure until it popped through the muscles and slid home to the root. Dante cried out, his thighs squeezing Rayne's waist. Rayne remained motionless, allowing Dante time to adjust to the thick length filling his body.

When the burn subsided, and the pleasure took over, Dante tightened his inner walls and rocked forward, impaling himself farther on Rayne's hard cock. Rayne grunted, grabbing at the top of Dante's thighs as he slid out until only the crown remained, then slammed back in hard enough to rattle Dante's teeth.

Fast and furious, Rayne thrust into him, setting a punishing pace and demanding Dante keep up with him. A firestorm started in Dante's belly, spreading out to his limbs and sizzling his nerve endings. Pressure built in his heavy sac, gripping his balls and squeezing until the need to come became too intense to resist.

"That's it," Rayne ground out. "Love the way your ass eats up my cock. Motherfucker, you're tight." He gave two quick, hard jabs, his balls slapping against Dante's ass. "Can't last, babe."

Thank fuck was all Dante could think. He gripped his throbbing cock, stroking it fast and hard, his eyes never leaving Rayne's. Water rolled over his lover's handsome face, dripping from the tip of his nose and over his parted lips. His raven hair fell heavy around his cheeks, sticking wetly to his narrow shoulders. Dante had never seen anything more beautiful.

Rayne's next thrust nailed his pleasure button, and Dante's head came up from the ground, his neck straining as he cried out toward the churning sky. White-hot pleasure zipped from his balls and straight up his pole, blasting from the slit in an orgasm that rocked him to his core.

Rayne followed him seconds later, his fingers digging into Dante's thighs as he gasped and shuddered, spilling his load deep into

Dante's convulsing tunnel. Several seconds later, he eased his flagging cock from Dante's hole, and sagged, flopping over Dante's chest like a ragdoll.

"Love you," he panted. "I think you killed me."

Dante laughed, his breath stuttering through Rayne's hair. "I love you, baby."

"Can we go home now?"

Closing his eyes, Dante sighed in utter contentment. "Please, come home," he whispered.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Showered and dressed in one of Dante's T-shirts and a pair of his boxers, Rayne wrapped a blanket around his shoulders and snuggled up next to his lover on the sofa. "I think the storm is passing."

Dante's arm settled around his waist, pulling him closer as he dropped a chaste kiss on top of Rayne's head. "Sounds like it. So, what are you going to do now?"

"I'm not sure. I guess I need a job." He looked up at Dante, his eyes round and his lower lip quivering.

Rolling his eyes, Dante bent and licked at the protruding lip. "You are one manipulative little bastard."

"But it works."

"That it does. Well, you're in luck. Ms. Kramer has decided to retire. She's moving to Connecticut to be closer to her grandchildren at the end of the month. So, I find myself in need of an office manager."

"I wouldn't have to work in the heat or cold or get my hands all banged up?"

Dante shook his head silently.

"Then hell yeah! How much are you going to pay me?"

Eyeing him seriously, Dante cupped Rayne's cheek, smoothing his thumb over his lips. "You're sticking around, right?"

"You couldn't get rid of me if you tried."

"Then I want to make you partner in the company. Fifty-fifty, split right down the middle."

His eyes bugging in shock, Rayne couldn't believe his ears. Dante had built his company from the ground up. He'd worked hard, poured

everything he had into making it prosper. Him offering to share it with Rayne meant more than just an income. It smacked of commitment.

Throwing himself into Dante's lap, Rayne wrapped his arms around his lover's neck and delivered a scorching kiss to his smiling mouth. "Thank you."

"Love you, baby." Dante looked up at him adoringly, his hands settling on Rayne's hips. Then his eyebrows drew together, and he tilted his head to the side. "What ever happened to Archer and Hudson?"

"One way to find out." Rayne winked and turned his head to the side. "Gordost!"

Appearing beside them on the sofa, Gordost huffed, drawing his knees up to his chest. "I thought I was done with you. You have what you want. Leave me alone."

"A few questions, and I won't bother you again." Turning to sit more comfortably in Dante's lap, Rayne snuggled back into his lover's embrace as he faced the god. "Where are Archer and Hudson?"

"They're fine." Gordost waved a hand in dismissal. "They are unharmed and will be returned within the week with no recollection of the last several months." He smiled wickedly. "They'll begin their punishment upon their return."

"Begin? What do you call what you've been doing to them?"

"On the contrary, I have only seen them once. My brothers are keeping them quite busy." Gordost snickered. "Believe me, you would not call what has been going on a punishment. Pathos and Zavist grow bored, however, and require a new game. They will oversee your friends'...reformation."

Rayne gulped, but remained silent. Part of him felt sorry for the men, but the bigger, more pissed off part, still held a grudge for their scheme to pry Dante from him. "You won't hurt them right?"

"Did I hurt you?"

Rayne shook his head slowly. “No, I guess not.”

“Don’t worry. They’ll be fine. Can I go now?”

“What about Rayne? I mean aren’t people going to notice he’s missing?” Dante spoke for the first time since Gordost’s appearance.

“All traces of Rayne Everest the supermodel have been erased. It’s like he never existed.”

“Well, that fucking sucks.” Rayne crossed his arms over his chest and pursed his lips. “I did some damn hot photo shoots.”

Dante chuckled and kissed his temple. “I’ll take your picture whenever you want, baby.”

Heat infused Rayne’s cheeks, and he bit his lip, peeking up through his lashes at his lover. “How about now?”

“And that’s my cue to leave.” Gordost rose from the cushion and stood in front of them. “Gentlemen, it has been interesting. Now, don’t bother me again.” Then per his style, he simply vanished.

* * * *

Scooping Rayne into his arms, Dante stood, supporting his lover’s weight easily. He’d never tell, but he preferred Rayne this way. His smaller size fit so perfectly against Dante. This was the Rayne he’d fallen in love with, and the one he hoped to wake up to every morning.

“Did you eat today?”

Rayne shook his head. “I had a photo shoot and then I came to find you.” He ducked his head, pushing his face into Dante’s throat. “I kissed Angelo.”

Dante stumbled, catching himself before he tumbled them both to the floor. “Who’s Angelo?”

“One of the assistants on the set. I missed you, and he kind of looked like you, so I took him back to my trailer. I kissed him, but that’s all, I swear. I took him there to do a lot more, but I just couldn’t

go through with it. Hell, I couldn't even get it up. I wanted him to be you, but he just didn't measure up."

"I hope you mean to my charm."

Rayne snorted, pulling away to roll his eyes as he clung to Dante's neck. "Don't be an ass."

Pecking his lover's lips, Dante tried to tame his jealousy. "How about eggs?"

Rayne perked up, his bottom wiggling in Dante's hands. "With cheese, tomatoes, and onions, and those cute little sausages?"

"Anything you want, baby."

"Oh, I like that. Say it again."

"Brat."

Dante walked them to the kitchen and deposited his lover onto one of the high stools beside the island. "Sit there and look pretty."

Moving over to the refrigerator, Dante began pulling things out, setting them on the counter. "You want me to make you an omelet?"

"Can I still have the little sausages?"

"Sure, I don't see why not."

"Then yes."

Chuckling under his breath, Dante began preparing the vegetables, chopping and dicing them, as he heated the butter in the pan on the stove. The entire scene seemed very domesticated, as though they'd done this a thousand times over.

He hoped they would.

He could just picture Rayne sitting at the table, reading the morning paper and sipping his coffee. His hair silvery and shining in the sunlight that poured through the windows to bathe his lined face. Older, more distinguished, but still just as sexy as the day they met, he'd kiss Dante's lips, whispering the words he'd never grow tired of hearing. Yes, Dante looked forward to growing old with Rayne.

"You know, it's kind of fucked up, but in a way, I'm glad I met Gordost."

“Why is that?” Dante asked over his shoulder as he cracked eggs into a bowl, added milk, and began to whisk.

“Well, if he hadn’t shown up and flipped my world on its ass, then I would have never gotten a second chance with you.” He sounded exasperated, as though this should have been obvious.

“Then I’m glad you hauled off and slapped the little shit as well.”

Dante hummed as he moved around the kitchen, feeling Rayne’s gaze follow him, heating his back and warming his heart. Turning to set a plate in front of his lover, he caught the mischievous smirk on the man’s face. “What are you grinning about?”

Sliding down from his perch, Rayne sashayed around the island, and pushed Dante back against the opposite counter, reaching out to pop the button on his jeans and slide his zipper down. “I do love a man who’s handy in the kitchen. Remember our first time together?”

How could he forget? Dante nodded, swallowing hard as Rayne jerked the denim down his hips. “That still doesn’t explain what you’re grinning about.” His voice flowed, thick and husky, dripping with lust.

“Well, darlin’,” Rayne drawled as his fingers wrapped around Dante’s cock, and he slid down his body to kneel on the floor. He licked a slow path along the pulsing length in his hand before looking up and smiling again. “The devil did grin, and I’m feeling very naughty.”

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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