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Stranger In Black
Devon Rhodes

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...“You should probably fix your...ah...” The man ran a thumb over Christian’s lower lip and the caress had him darting his tongue out to catch a taste before he realized what he was doing.

Oh, to have met him under different circumstances.

But he wouldn’t even know him on the street. Didn’t know his name. In fact, other than knowing he wasn’t Carl, the man could be anyone.

He looked down at the purse in his hands and gasped, remembering the gloves. Christian twisted around, searching frantically for them for a moment before spotting them just peeking out from under his skirt where he’d thrown them on the floor. He turned away to put them on, and then fished in his purse—gingerly pushing the soiled handkerchief aside—for his lipstick and compact.

His swollen lips and smeared lipstick were those of a wanton. No wonder the suggestion had been made. He tidied his lower face up the best he could and thrust the makeup back into the purse.

Christian was again offered an arm, and this time he accepted by curling his gloved hands around the crook of the man’s elbow, feeling the strength under his touch even through the layer of clothing. A much stronger build than himself, and it called to him.

Should he ask for the man’s name? Try to see him again? Christian grimaced as they continued down the hallway at a much slower pace than when he’d dragged “Carl” this way a short time earlier. Yeah, that would go over well. *Hi there, I’m the woman who gave you head at the masquerade. Except I’m not a woman.*

At least he’d have his memories. Something about the man tripped his triggers, and the cross-dressing and anonymity of it all was an erotic twist he’d not soon forget...

ALSO BY DEVON RHODES

The Swap

STRANGER IN BLACK

BY

DEVON RHODES

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STRANGER IN BLACK
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*Here's to my wonderful friends,
who always support me when I go off on tangents.*

CHAPTER 1

This is probably the worst idea I've ever had.

"You know, I think this is the worst idea you've ever had."

Christian was briefly startled before turning to face his escort. What he'd momentarily taken for an "echo" was really only his so-called friend David, offering his version of support. Christian glared at his self-appointed conscience and defended himself—even as he privately agreed.

"Shut up. It's a fucking great plan, no two ways about it. And I look spectacular."

The tall, muscular black man stepped back and deliberately checked him out from head to toe and back up while Christian tried not to squirm. In the ankle-length, Marie Antoinette-esque shepherdess gown, the coiffed wig complete with ringlets

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demurely brushing his shoulders, and the artfully applied makeup—applied by David’s second cousin—*Shelly? Sherry?*—whom he’d thankfully never see again—he was already well off his game and floundering. Christian was sure that at some point, he’d step on the hem of his gown just like in some farcical movie, ripping it clean off and exposing his decidedly *not* female equipment to the jeering crowd.

Or almost as bad, his hair-covered legs, which he’d adamantly refused to shave when they’d said it was time to get rid of the telltale growth, arguing that since the gown was nearly floor-length he didn’t have to. *No way in hell*, he’d declared. They’d finally stopped laughing enough to point out it was his *forearms*, not his legs, that were to be the object of their efforts. He’d tried for at least five minutes to convince them blond didn’t show, before teetering on the edge of giving in. Then they showed him what they’d been holding back and he’d given David a shove, telling him exactly what he could do with his razor. The elbow-length white gloves didn’t exactly go with the flounced half-sleeves, but he’d grabbed them like a lifeline.

David’s cousin—*Shandra? Shayla?*—had taken a rather disturbing interest in helping Christian transform himself into David’s date for the evening. Christian had to admit she’d done a good job, raiding the costume department of some community theater she belonged to and also pulling item after item out of her “accessory dresser.” Did all women need a whole piece of furniture just for their accessories?

But in the end, the face staring back at him in the mirror, even shaved and made up, had still looked exactly like his own. Fearing he’d never be able to pass for a woman, he’d almost called the whole thing off.

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Until David had pulled Christian's saving grace out of the bag.

The sequin accented and jeweled demi-mask completely covered the upper half of his face, save for the uptilted eye holes. Then it swooped down in a sort of inverted heart, concealing his cheeks and trademark dimples down to the jawline, leaving only his tinted lips and chin visible. The mask itself was somehow molded into a very feminine countenance, and dressed and with it in place, Christian was shocked and gratified to see a sexy woman in his stead.

"Spectacular? I was going to say hot—until you opened your mouth."

Christian's jaw dropped. Fuming at the double-edged compliment, he was about to throw down regardless of the gown. Then the incongruity of his uber-straight friend calling him "hot" finally ticked over in his brain.

"You think I'm hot?" Christian struck a seductive pose, at least he thought so. Apparently David and—*Shenice! That was it!*—Shenice disagreed, from the severity of the winces he got in response.

"Damn, man. Don't do that!" David held his hands out in a warding off gesture and dramatically averted his head. "Yeah, I would totally hit that. If you weren't such a dick. And didn't have one."

Shenice rolled her eyes, then coached, "You have to be more subtle, graceful. Fluid in your movements. You're too blocky." She watched him expectantly, but Christian was more interested in David's comment.

"Yeah? Really? Huh. Maybe you're not as straight as you think you are," Christian teased as he turned to the mirror and tried to be less...blocky. Whatever the fuck that meant.

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David laughed broadly, secure in his own skin. “You might want to keep in mind that you couldn’t look *less* like a guy right now. And I’ll admit there are some guys that do drag really well. Doesn’t change the fact that when I pull up the skirt, I *don’t* want to find an outie, you know what I’m sayin’?”

“Good point,” Shenice chimed in seriously. “Don’t pull your skirt up. Or let anyone else do it either,” she added, and Christian turned to her in the mirrored wall. “Hmm, maybe we should tuck you.”

The placid expression of the mask was one hundred eighty degrees from what was on his face underneath it. “Tuck me? If that means what I think it means, no fucking way! And I’m not going to go around flashing people. What the fuck?”

David was almost down for the count with the laughter now coming from him in choked gasps. Shenice just crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow as she recited all the ways he could be outed. “Bathroom visit? Groping in the corner with some hot guy? Tripping and falling? Getting out of the car?”

“No. Way. My...stuff is *not* getting tucked.”

“Okay, okay. But you at least have to wear pantyhose. Just in case.”

Christian turned to David looking for commiseration. He was wiping his eyes. No help there. *Jerk.*

Shenice was rummaging in her apparently bottomless accessory dresser again. “Here are some queen-sized.” She smirked. “No pun intended.”

David was slowly regaining his composure. “Hey, man, isn’t this a helluva lot of work just to go to a party your booty call is going to?”

“He’s not just a booty call.” *He’s an old wound I have to*

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excise.

“Have you two been on a date?”

Christian narrowed his eyes. “Of course we have.”

David sighed, all traces of amusement gone. “Let me rephrase that. Have you been on a date not at your house? In public?”

Christian’s eyes dropped as the arrow hit its target. Shenice chimed in gently, “Honey, a man that won’t take you out and show you off to the world isn’t worth it. You’ve gotta have some respect for yourself. Trust me. I had this guy, oh, he was fine. Dressed nice, flashy car, you know the type. Comes on strong, knocks you off your feet, right? Next thing you know, you’re getting all the sex you want. But when you stop and think about it, that’s all you’re getting.”

Despite his best efforts, Christian found himself getting pulled in to her tale...so much like his own situation it was eerie.

“Dates just don’t happen, more like standing booty calls. You tell yourself, oh, he just wants to be with you so bad, other people get in the way. Honeymoon period. But if you’re honest with yourself”—there was true empathy in her eyes—“he doesn’t want to be with *you*. He wants to have *sex* with you. Sometimes he’s married or has a girlfriend. Maybe he’s just a selfish prick with impossibly high standards about who he’s seen with. Or in your case, maybe he’s so far in the closet he can’t find the door.” David was nodding, watching him somberly as Shenice made their case.

It was starting to feel like an intervention.

He shifted uncomfortably, glad he was safely hidden behind the mask. Only his eyes showed at the moment, and he was sure they could read the shame in his gaze. Because deep down, hadn’t he realized all this was true? Why else would he be going to such lengths to watch Carl unobserved? Why else did he need to see the

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truth with his own eyes, if not to cauterize the wound and start healing?

* * *

There'd been a time where Christian's world had revolved around Carl Burkhardt. They'd been close friends as teenagers, well before Christian had the nerve to do anything about his secret attraction. He'd loved Carl with the intensity that only a teenager could muster, burning hot and unwaveringly. It wasn't until they were in college that Carl—sexy but straight Carl—had laughingly pulled a drunken Christian into a dark closet at a kegger and kissed him. Actually kissed him. He'd gone on to whisper the words Christian had been longing to hear for as long as he could remember—how sexy he was, how he'd always wanted him—before allowing Christian to blow him. Christian remembered walking home in the cold that night, warmed from within at the giddy and amazing feeling of finally being with his long-time crush.

After that barrier had been shattered, they'd actually taken the plunge into intimacy, and Carl had, hesitantly at first, taken Christian's virginity. Their skills improved quickly as did Carl's confidence in bed, and Christian had no reason to think they wouldn't be together forever. Their "dates" were mostly going to the pizza place, parties and bars together—what he'd considered time as a couple. But it was a case of hiding in plain sight for Carl, who'd never even considered coming out or acknowledging Christian as more than a buddy. It wasn't long before Carl had run scared after only a handful of clandestine screws, petrified of being considered gay. The rejection had stunned Christian, and the sight

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of Carl out on a date with a girl bartender soon after broke his young heart. Their friendship had been cut off at the knees and finally faded, leaving Christian with a walled-off place in his heart no man since had been able to penetrate.

Carl's reentrance into Christian's life recently had been one of those chance twists of fate. They'd run into one another at the dry cleaners, not even knowing they'd been living in the same city. Christian was recently single at the time and had been somewhat cautious at first. The sight of Carl brought back the bitterness of his rejection. But Carl persisted in calling and after some long phone conversations, which flowed easily due to their shared history, he'd slowly let his guard down. Carl had shown up with pizza one night, with a familiar lopsided grin, charming Christian while he asked to come in.

He'd melted.

Part of him was thrilled at the opportunity to at last have "the one that got away" back in his life. Carl had grown up, Christian decided, and was ready for an adult relationship. Sparks had flown, and since then, they'd "dated," with Carl much more assertive about having sex—and a *lot* more talented—than he'd ever been when they were younger.

But Shenice was right. It was all just a serial one-night stand. The sex was hot, but there was something missing...a lack of emotional investment on Carl's part. Christian had a sense he was holding back a huge part of himself. And, of course, there was the fact Carl never took him out or spent the night. Carl's reasoning was that he just couldn't sleep in a strange bed. Christian snorted silently at the thought. Put bluntly like that, it sounded like exactly what it was—a pathetic excuse.

Last week when Carl had come by quite a bit earlier than usual,

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he'd entered carrying a garment bag. At first, Christian's heart had sped up, thinking Carl was finally planning on spending the night. *Ha. Like that was ever going to happen.* Still curious, he'd followed Carl into his bedroom and watched as Carl had unzipped the bag, showing him the costume. It was simple but effective. A black long-sleeved robe, much like you might see on judges, and an eye-catching, golden full-face mask. The mask itself was part of a headdress of black velvet that completely covered Carl's head and shoulders when he tried it on for Christian. To Christian, it brought to mind a sorcerer, ready to bend all others to his will. The dispassionate, haughty expression of the mask lay at odds with Carl's jovial delight with the ensemble, which he'd rented in order to attend a masquerade ball given by and for the Harris One Hundred.

The local movers and shakers group actually numbered more than that in its roster of influential community members, businessmen, and philanthropists. Being nominated for a membership was a highly prized accomplishment in this city, and everyone knew about their annual masquerade event. When the invitations went out, one could practically hear the shrieks of delight from the lucky recipients. His neighbor and close friend, David, had been invited for the past couple years and the networking had done wonders for his career.

And Carl had been invited this year.

"See, Chris?" he'd said, thrusting the invitation into Christian's hands, who obliged by confirming with his own eyes what Carl had already read to him in a thrilled voice. "And everyone knows that being invited means they might consider you for a nomination. It's the first step. This is amazing. I'm on my way."

Christian had been truly pleased for his friend, and had waited

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somewhat expectantly to be asked along since the invitation had clearly stated “and guest.” But the rising star pointedly didn’t take the next logical step and invite Christian, although Christian did later reap the benefit of being thoroughly fucked by the *Stranger in Black*, as he’d privately nicknamed the costume. Afterward, Carl mumbled a familiar excuse as he bundled the rental back into the garment bag and prepared to leave. Christian picked up the invitation to hand to Carl.

“So apparently I’m not your date...” The slight flicker in Carl’s otherwise amiable expression would have passed by if he hadn’t been watching closely and hadn’t known him so well. “Who are you taking as your guest?”

“Chris, it’s... This is more of a work thing than a social thing,” he’d evaded and it hadn’t gone unnoticed by Christian that Carl’s response didn’t answer his question. At least he hadn’t flat-out lied to Christian’s face and said he wasn’t taking anyone. It was in that moment that Christian knew—Carl was never going to be his and, in fact, was likely with someone else. The relationship he’d hoped for off and on for the past decade of his life was never to be reality. And it was time to accept that. But sometimes love is a hard habit to break, and Christian knew that it was entirely possible his stupid heart could spend another decade fixated on the man if he didn’t do something drastic, like plunge a stake through it.

Or actually witness the reality of Carl with the person he’d chosen in Christian’s stead.

Carl hadn’t offered anything further as he was leaving, and Christian let it drop. But he’d made careful note of the information on the invitation. As he watched the door close behind Carl, an idea had come to him.

One that involved David, a dress, and a dance.

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He had David and the dress. And now, even better still, a demi-mask.

Time for the dance.

* * *

“Thank you.” Jarrod accepted the long, thin box from the messenger service he’d been told to expect. He tipped the delivery boy, who smiled and let himself out, while Jarrod turned toward the desk with what was probably the costume for the ball.

There was an envelope inside a see-through sleeve on the top of the box, and he extracted an invitation and a letter from inside. As he suspected, it was from Mirabelle Sunada.

Dear Jarrod,

Here is my invitation to the masquerade ball. It should be sufficient to gain entrance, but feel free to mention that you’re my guest if need be.

I’ve enclosed the costume I talked Carl out of wearing. Luckily for me, he was horrified at the thought of going a whole evening without being able to drink in the full mask, much as he loved the look of it. If this Chris is there, I’m sure she’ll come right up to you, thinking you’re Carl. Just get as much information as you can before she suspects, and then I’ll take over from there.

I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your help in this matter.

Love, Mira

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He'd been pissed as hell when Mira had finally confided what had her so quiet and down lately—she knew her fiancé, Carl, was cheating on her. She'd overheard more than one indiscreet phone conversation between him and someone he called Chris. After doing a bit of online sleuthing, she'd found IM conversations and emails between the two, and in black and white, it had been blatantly obviously they were having a sexual affair.

After reining in his initial desire to go beat the crap out of the little pissant, Jarrod had turned his energy toward convincing his dear friend that she was better off without the jackass. He'd never liked Carl, had never seen what Mira and so many other people saw in him. Oh, he was attractive and charismatic, the life of the party yet equally comfortable with the older set. But there was something fake about the way he always had the perfect response, something a bit disingenuous about his supposedly loving manner toward Mira. And now Jarrod knew he'd been right, but he didn't take any pleasure in it when Mira had sadly reminded him, "You told me so."

Jarrod couldn't believe that a secure, confident woman like Mira would even consider giving Carl a second chance, but that's exactly what she was planning to do. *After* she confronted Carl with the evidence of his affair, as well as warned off his lover. Against his better judgment, Jarrod had been roped into this week's grand scheme—the Harris annual masquerade. Both Carl and Mira, attorneys at the same firm, had been invited separately.

"You can be my guest," she'd told him. "I know from the emails I saw that Chris knows what his costume looks like. Intimately." Jarrod had pressed his lips together at the unwanted visual. "So if Chris happens to come, she'll either go straight to

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you or at least watch you. Either way, we'll know who she is, and then I can talk to her."

"Why don't you just email her?" Frustrated, he'd added vehemently, "Or better yet, break up with him?"

"Because I want to see her in person. To talk to her face-to-face. I deserve to have this, or I'll wonder forever who she was." Mira's almond-shaped eyes met his, sad but determined. "And because I love him."

Seeing how serious she was, Jarrod had bit back any further caustic remarks. This relationship was something she wanted to try to salvage, and though he didn't agree it could—or *should*—be done, he would help however he could and keep the commentary to himself.

Jarrold couldn't help a grin as the irony hit him. "Face-to-face. You do realize she'll probably be in a mask, too, right?"

Mira had looked at him, startled, then burst out laughing. "Oh God, you're right." She tapered off into giggles. "I'll still get to look her in the eyes, I suppose. If she's even there."

He'd shrugged, wondering whether Carl would be stupid enough to invite his fiancée and his girlfriend to the same event.

What's stupid is you even doubting he'd be that cocky.

"She'll be there," he predicted with confidence. "And I'll be glad to help. Just tell me what you want me to do."

CHAPTER 2

Car after car, limo after limo pulled up and disgorged the beautifully dressed cream of society onto the literal red carpet leading up into the hotel hosting the masquerade event. The evening was a chilly one, spring having not yet fully given way to summer, despite what it said on the calendar, so overcoats and capes covered much of the finery. It made trying to spot one particular long, dark robe almost impossible, and Christian gave up, knowing he'd have a much easier time of it once inside.

The car David had hired crept forward incrementally as they awaited their turn under the portico.

"Are you okay? Sure you want to go through with this?" David took Christian's hand in his own as if he were the lady he outwardly appeared to be, much to his bemusement.

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Teasingly, he covered David's hand with his own as he replied, "Yes, I'm sure, darling."

David's small mask, which just surrounded his eyes and left his face on view, did nothing to hide his astonished look and the upward movement of his right eyebrow. He pointedly removed Christian's hand from atop his own, but then leaned in even closer.

"Say something else," he demanded.

"Geez, no pressure or anything."

"Holy crap, you sound just like a chick."

"Really?" Christian was dubious. "I'm not even changing my voice. Wait a minute." His jaw dropped. "Are you telling me I always sound like a chick?"

David shook his head. "Nope. See, you have to be looking at you to get it. You don't sound any different than a woman with a sexy, low voice when you look like that." He ran his gaze over Christian admiringly.

This time it was Christian's eyebrow that shot up, though he knew David couldn't see it under the full mask. "I'm getting a bit worried about your orientation, bud. Should I be welcoming you to the dark side? We have cookies," he tempted, trying not to be miffed by David's observation about his voice.

"Fucking amazing," David complimented, then looked around. "Here we are. Ready or not..."

"...here I come," Christian finished as he reached for the door handle.

"Stop!" David smacked his arm, and Christian glared at his date as he rubbed the glove-covered limb dramatically. "They'll open the door for you, idiot. Meet you outside." David was already getting out of his side of the vehicle to walk around as Christian's door opened and a doorman held out his hand in invitation.

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“Watch your step, miss,” the young man cautioned as Christian tentatively laid his hand onto the similarly white-gloved one extended to him, then tried to make a graceful exit from the seat of the car while managing his skirts, heels and wig. The memory of Shenice regaling him with the possible ways of flashing the public popped into his head and that gave him impetus as a touch of panic set in. Feeling like a total klutz, he finally managed to stand, but the first step he took caught the sloped curb and he canted sideways.

The grip on his hand tightened, and another large masculine hand landed on the small of his back to steady him. “Easy, miss. Are you all right?”

He looked up into the oh-so-young face of the man assisting him and could see the faint admiration in his eyes at this range. He really thinks I’m a woman, Christian thought, astounded. The first realization that he might actually successfully pull this off hit him with a wash of relief, and he curved his lips into a demure smile, watching as a blush chased up over his helper’s cheeks.

“Thank you.” David’s amused voice came from his right, and his hand was taken from the doorman’s and tucked into the crook of his friend’s arm. Without a backward glance at his admirer, Christian confidently walked at David’s side, ascending the steps into the hotel lobby.

Inside, the elegant furnishings and décor were offset by the incongruous sound of Right Said Fred crooning that he was too sexy for his shirt, so sexy it huuuurt.

At David’s snort, Christian laughed out loud, trying to stay in his voice for the evening. They attracted some attention from others in their vicinity, though with most people masked, it was hard to tell whether they were amused by or disapproving of their

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mirth.

Deciding he didn't care either way, he continued along with the flow of couples toward the left. While many opted to wait for one of the bank of shiny, brass-colored elevators, David led them to a curved staircase where others in fancy dress were climbing up toward the mezzanine level.

Christian tried to put on the brakes. "I can't climb those stairs in this dress," he protested under his breath, but David refused to deviate from their trajectory.

"Just watch what the other women do. Ouch! Uh, I mean women, not other," he corrected quickly when Christian pinched his arm. Hard. Irritated by being referred to as a woman, Christian nevertheless followed instructions and observed the women ahead of them. Each one paused, transferred their purse to the hand on their man's arm and gathered a handful of skirt in their now-free hand, almost as if choreographed, as they approached the first step.

Almost there now, David held his hand out for Christian's reticule, which he hadn't wanted to bring, but David and Shenice had insisted he take, claiming no self-respecting woman would go anywhere without at least a clutch for their lipstick.

Christian slapped it into his hand and with difficulty got a grip on his skirt, the combination of gloves and slick material making it a challenge. Then it was time to step up.

Hiking the dress up in front, he took the first step. Unbelievable how vulnerable he felt at the moment—off-balance in the low heels, trying not to drop the skirt and step on it, just one hand relying on David for balance.

C'mon. If you can do this, the rest will be a piece of cake. This'll probably be the toughest thing you do all night.

And it did get easier, especially once he let go of his

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nervousness and remembered that David, who probably had at least fifty pounds on him, wasn't about to let him fall down the stairs, flashing his bits at all and sundry. Still, Christian breathed a sigh of relief when they reached the top and he could let go of his death grip on both David's arm and his skirt.

His relaxation was short-lived and an inhalation caught in his throat as he spotted the *Stranger in Black*, aka Carl, standing alone near the wall opposite the stairs, as if waiting for someone.

David looked back when Christian stopped moving. "What? Do you see him?" He gently tugged Christian into motion again. "Where is he?"

"All in black, gold mask, over by the elevators."

David look up and surveyed the area. He grunted in apparent disgust. "He looks like a dark wizard from a B movie in that get-up."

"Oh, I don't know. I thought it was pretty sexy. Well, up until I realized he was cheating on me." At David's inquiring *hmm*, he continued guiltily, "Or maybe a half hour afterward, tops."

"Chris..." David shook his head, then apparently thought better of continuing. "Want a drink?" he offered in a change of subject.

"God, yes, but I'd better not. I really don't want to have to piss while I'm here."

"Oh, whatever. Don't forget, women have all stalls. Wait here." He pulled Christian out of the line of traffic toward the wall, ironically closer to the unsuspecting Carl, before taking Christian's cloak and striding off toward the coat-check window to one side of the ballroom entrance.

Christian turned back so he could keep one eye on Carl and the other on the guests coming up the stairs. A very petite, brunette woman in red made her way gracefully up the stairs alone, and he

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admired the way she made it look effortless. He absently watched her, then his gaze sharpened as Carl pushed away from the wall and went directly to the woman in red.

His stomach flipped and he went hot under the mask. “Oh fuck.”

Christian snagged the attention of a passing waiter and claimed a glass of champagne, knocking it back as if it were whiskey. He’d known going in tonight that Carl and he were through, that he had someone on the side—or maybe *Christian* was the one on the side, more likely. But actually seeing it with his own eyes hurt. Maybe not hurt, exactly. Made him feel...foolish.

I was a fool. Oldest story in the gay-boy book, the closeted straight guy on the down-low, and I fell for it. What an idiot.

He thought back to how he’d blithely accepted the way Carl had maneuvered their time together to always be “in,” never going out—or changing plans for plausible reasons at the last minute. The way he never spent the night. Never gave details about his life or spoke of the future.

Their shared history and Carl’s new sexual assertiveness was a turn-on for Christian, but it was a shell, a mere mask representing what Christian craved for real. A confident, true-blue man. Someone willing to take charge in the bedroom, but also provide a sense of security and belonging out of it. Which was something Carl was incapable of doing—at least with him—and Christian knew it.

Still, the illusion died hard. Watching Carl lead the woman gently along, hand possessively on her lower back, Christian felt a tug of longing, of a shameful desire for the return of the blinders he’d had on before this.

Carl bent over the woman’s hand and Christian could almost

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feel the affection flowing between the two. Sick at heart, but still strangely drawn to Carl in spite of himself, he watched as the woman crossed the room to greet another man, all in white, with a kiss on the cheek.

Christian watched Carl watch the pair from across the room, and the disapproval he radiated was almost palpable. Jealousy, Christian realized sadly. *I didn't think he was capable of it.*

Suddenly, Carl turned in his direction and stared. Caught, Christian could only return his gaze, pinioned to the spot as Carl approached in that sexy costume with a confident stride that made his heart pound and his cock test the pantyhose constricting it.

“Chris?” he asked, his tone making it less of a question and more of a statement of fact. His voice was deeper than usual—apparently dressing up had an effect on everyone.

Caught, Christian finally nodded confirmation despite wishing he could maintain the deception. “I...” He cleared his throat and tried again. “I supposed you’re surprised to see me here...like this.” He indicated his dress with a vague gesture, and Carl’s eyes, hardly visible behind the gold mask, swept downward.

“You look lovely,” he complimented warmly, throwing Christian for a loop.

“Uh...”

“Here you go... Oh. You already have a drink.” David’s return was met with stillness from the cloaked form of Carl and gratitude from Christian, glad to see a fresh drink.

“Thanks.” He took the full glass of champagne and handed David the empty. Taking a long swallow as David in turn set the glass on a nearby table, he watched the two men size each other up and realized he’d have to make introductions.

“Carl, David. David, Carl,” he managed and the two shook

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hands briefly.

“Can I...” Carl began, as David started, “Chris, let’s...” then stopped.

“Go ahead,” David told the other man, and Christian decided enough was enough. He turned to his friend.

“Can you excuse us for a few minutes?”

David looked reluctant, but nodded. “Sure. I’ll be over by the champagne fountain when you’re ready to go in.” His eyes were steely as he gave Carl one last glare before removing to the other side of the mezzanine.

Before Carl could speak, Christian slipped his hand into the crook of his arm. “Can we go somewhere private?” He looked up into that expressionless mask and felt a tremor go through him at the molded arrogance of the disguise. Feeling overly warm both from the earlier evidence of Carl’s duplicity, but also at the thought of being dominated by the ideal man portrayed there, he tamped down the upwelling desire and tried to focus on what he wanted to do.

The whole point of coming was to have been surreptitiously observing Carl with his date. Well, Christian had seen Carl’s date. *Girlfriend? Or wife?* And Carl had somehow figured out who he was under the disguise. So no need to stick around. But as long as they were here...

Christian impatiently led Carl by the arm down one hall and around the next, past meeting room after meeting room boasting signs with corporate names in white plastic letters until they were away from any sign of noise. He tried a sliding door to a room without a sign, and it opened easily into an empty banquet room, tables bare and chairs stacked. He pulled Carl inside with a yank and closed the door behind him.

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“What...” His voice sounded hollow and surprised behind the mask.

“Shhh,” Christian warned and pushed Carl back none-too-gently against the wall before sinking to his knees before him in a manner he almost wished David and Shenice were there to see. *They’d have been so proud of me, managing that move.* The next move probably wouldn’t have been quite as high on their approval list, as he parted the robe and pulled Carl’s zipper down. Batting his soon-to-be ex’s hands away, Christian reached inside to stroke the growing ridge with his gloved hand.

He paused. The gloves were going to be a problem, plus he didn’t want to mess them up—after all he had to return them to Shenice—so he pulled them off and dropped them atop his purse.

Now that he could feel what he was doing, he traced the shaft barely contained by the briefs inside Carl’s fly. *Briefs?* Christian shook his head as that aberration by the boxer man just reconfirmed how over it was between them.

One last time, for old-time’s sake. Just to show him what he’ll be missing, then sayonara, sucker.

Uh, suckee.

* * *

Jarrold couldn’t believe what was happening. One minute he was confirming Chris’s identity and trying to learn what he could about her, as well as figure out her escort’s role in all of this. Then suddenly Chris was yanking him into an empty room with every intention of giving him a blow job.

The crazy thing was, he was actually getting a bit of a rise out of it. For a woman. *Unbelievable.* Maybe it was something in the

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almost masculine way she was so confident—strong and forceful. Except he usually preferred his men at least across the halfway mark into the submissive side of the spectrum.

Preparing to back away—the hell with the assignment for Mira—suddenly everything stopped for a moment before Chris pulled her gloves off and threw them aside. And then Jarrod saw. And he froze, cock thickening even as his brain struggled to process just what he was seeing.

Those hands...

They disappeared for a moment as they delved into his fly and pulled out his hardening shaft as if they did it every day.

And apparently they do.

Long fingers, but blunt, sprinkled with hair, the breadth and size...

A man's hands.

Chris...was a man.

And then a warm mouth took him in and all conscious thought fled.

Hands aside, there was nothing remotely tentative or gentle about the way Chris was working his cock with his lips and tongue. The few times in his life he'd had sexual contact with women, their light touch had driven Jarrod crazy, and not in a good way. The...attack, for lack of a better word, was with just the right pressure and nothing uncertain about it, maybe even a bit on the rough side, which was just fine with him.

Jarrod couldn't stifle a groan of pleasure as Chris pulled him toward the brink at breakneck speed. It was unexpected and like something out of a porno—but erotic as hell. All the layers of deception, too, added a sense of forbidden pleasure to the encounter. Jarrod knew Chris's name, but nothing else about him.

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Hell, he hadn't even known he was a man until a few minutes before. Meanwhile, Chris knelt before him, thinking he was...Carl.

That shot of reality had the effect of cold water splashed on Jarrod's arousal, and he attempted to dislodge the man before him. Chris evidently knew almost immediately that he'd lost his willing partner, and he pulled off Jarrod's softening shaft with lingering suction before bracing Jarrod in place against the wall with a firm hold on his hips.

"I know."

The husky tone was pure sex, and Jarrod felt his saliva-wet cock, cool in the ambient air, begin to harden once again just from the sound of it. Now that he knew Chris was a man, his voice was arousing as hell. Then the penny finally dropped on what he'd actually said.

"What? You know..."

"I know you're not Carl."

That surprised Jarrod, especially since Chris didn't seem to be making any effort to move away from the intimate contact. Feeling a bit foolish with his prick hanging almost in the unknown man's face, he dropped his hand in front of his groin as tried to take a step to the side. But Chris refused to let him move, and unbelievably nudged at his hand with first his nose then mouth.

"Don't. I want to."

"You don't even know me," Jarrod heard himself saying and almost cringed at how prudish he sounded.

"I know how you taste..." Then he licked Jarrod's hand and, like magic, it lost the will to resist and fell away.

"Oh God," he groaned.

CHAPTER 3

Christian couldn't believe he was doing this—he'd never been one for anonymous hookups, even when he *could* see their face—but the part of him whispering to stop was being drowned out by the hedonistic majority. Part of his mind had known it wasn't Carl, despite the visual evidence of the costume to the contrary, even before he'd gotten him alone. The voice, maybe, or the way he acted, walked, something. But he hadn't let himself think too much about it, finding little rationalizations for the discrepancies.

Until he undid "Carl's" pants. Then it was plain as the nose on his face he had the wrong man.

After all, foreskin doesn't grow back.

But by that point, he was already on his knees, so why not take a taste? How often did you get to suck off a straight guy?

STRANGER IN BLACK

Apparently every time you do Carl.

Fine, how often do you get to do it when the man thinks you're a woman?

No answer from the peanut gallery to that one. And the taste and feel of him was addictive right off the bat, needing more confirmation, more exploration. Christian had the impostor in the palm of his hands, in complete control of the scene, so it was immediately evident when the guilt or reality kicked in for his partner. Maybe he finally remembered that Christian was under a false impression, and felt guilty about the deception? Though that seemed odd, since he'd helped to create the situation by—for whatever reason—impersonating Carl, even to the point of responding to his name during the introductions with David.

At this point, Christian could have made a strategic retreat. Instead, he found himself coaxing and seducing the stranger back into the moment. Not wanting to go there, really. Not wanting to even think about his doomed affair with Carl. Just wanting to bring this man pleasure...and walk away.

To that end, he redoubled his efforts on the deliciously uncircumcised cock in his mouth, working the slide action of the foreskin with his hand while polishing the slick head with his mouth and lips, using his tongue against the sensitive underside of the ridge.

It was the first time he'd ever been with someone uncircumcised, and he was reveling in the differences. Gently mouthing the foreskin after sucking it over the head, he nibbled with lips covering his teeth, pulling and licking. He ran his tongue along the inside of the loose skin, enjoying the increasingly uninhibited reaction of the man above him.

Stranger in Black. As it popped into his head, he would have

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smiled if he could. He couldn't have chosen a better name for the costume given this turn of events. The thought that he wouldn't recognize this man passing him on the street made him moan, which coaxed an answering groan from his partner.

Pulling back, Christian chanced a look up. He couldn't see the eyes behind the netted eyeslits, but he knew by the downward tilt of the mask they were riveted to him and now he did smile, thinking randomly that his lipstick was probably ruined.

Oh well. I'm no lady.

Not that he knows that.

A small part of him was uneasy at the continued deception, but he figured at this point, continuing to be a woman was in his best interest. Most straight guys wouldn't appreciate an unexpected sex change from someone giving them head.

Opening himself farther, he used his mouth to take his stranger even deeper, letting go to slide his hands around the backs of his thighs. He encouraged a light rocking motion and the weight on his tongue, the length his lips were stretched around, grew impossibly hard as Christian tasted the first bittersweet tang of pre-cum.

That, combined with the feel of the muscular hamstrings beneath his touch tensing even more, brought him to his senses. Christian pulled off swiftly, with no little regret, and took the man in hand once more, jacking his deeply colored shaft ruthlessly for a few strokes.

His partner rocked up on his toes and exhaled, "Ahh!" as he came in several bursts, covering Christian's hand and filling the other palm Christian had hastily brought up to the head at the last second, when it occurred to him he didn't want cum all over either Shenice's dress or the banquet room floor.

"Oh God." A snort of repressed laughter. "Here."

STRANGER IN BLACK

Christian looked up at the utterance and saw the handkerchief being held out to him. Looking back and forth for a moment between his hands and the proffered fabric, he burst out laughing himself, which he quickly stifled when he realized how not-female he probably sounded.

“Thanks.” He mucked up his hands as best he could, then knelt, awkwardly holding the used linen. After a moment’s thought, he shrugged and glanced around for his reticule, stuffing the wadded up fabric inside. *Sorry, Shenice. I’ll clean it later.*

The black-garbed stranger took him briefly by the biceps and helped Christian to his feet, but didn’t let go as he’d expected. Startled, he raised his face toward the mask.

“I owe you one.”

The husky voice rolled over Christian like a sweet wave, and his cock pressed its confinement in the hose even more. Christian cleared his throat and looked away from the unchanging, unreadable expression of the gold mask. “No worries. I enjoyed it, too.”

Pulling back until the man was forced to either let him go or hurt him, he was released and used his freedom to immediately put distance between himself and the other man.

“Chris.”

He stopped at the door as the other man approached him and offered his elbow in a courteous gesture.

“Can I escort you back to your date?”

The chivalrous gesture and offer made Christian’s breath shorten. Even though he knew the man thought himself to be doing the accepted thing for a member of the gentler sex, he couldn’t help but be touched. Unbelievably, the aftermath of their blazing, potentially embarrassing encounter was in no sense awkward.

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There was no uncomfortable silence, no insistence on more, no sneering once satisfied. In short, the man was acting like no man Christian had ever known.

He nodded once.

“You should probably fix your...ah...” The man ran a thumb over Christian’s lower lip and the caress had him darting his tongue out to catch a taste before he realized what he was doing.

Oh, to have met him under different circumstances.

But he wouldn’t even know him on the street. Didn’t know his name. In fact, other than knowing he wasn’t Carl, the man could be anyone.

He looked down at the purse in his hands and gasped, remembering the gloves. Christian twisted around, searching frantically for them for a moment before spotting them just peeking out from under his skirt where he’d thrown them on the floor. He turned away to put them on, and then fished in his purse—gingerly pushing the soiled handkerchief aside—for his lipstick and compact.

His swollen lips and smeared lipstick were those of a wanton. No wonder the suggestion had been made. He tidied his lower face up the best he could and thrust the makeup back into the purse.

Christian was again offered an arm, and this time he accepted by curling his gloved hands around the crook of the man’s elbow, feeling the strength under his touch even through the layer of clothing. A much stronger build than himself, and it called to him.

Should he ask for the man’s name? Try to see him again? Christian grimaced as they continued down the hallway at a much slower pace than when he’d dragged “Carl” this way a short time earlier. Yeah, that would go over well. *Hi there, I’m the woman who gave you head at the masquerade. Except I’m not a woman.*

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At least he'd have his memories. Something about the man tripped his triggers, and the cross-dressing and anonymity of it all was an erotic twist he'd not soon forget.

Yes, this incident would be jerk-off material for a long time.

They had just reached the end of the hallway and reentered the mezzanine when his escort stopped short. There, arms crossed and tapping her toe impatiently, was the woman he'd seen talking to the stranger in black earlier.

"We need to talk."

Not sure which of the two of them she was addressing, Christian gave his stranger a look, but his attention was focused on the small woman now walking right up to them.

"Come on." She pulled Christian's hand from his escort's arm, then tugged him along in her wake toward the...ladies' room. Of course.

He tried to put the brakes on, but short of yanking away and causing a scene, the determination in the woman's jaw and her almost painful grip on his hand told Christian he'd better just go along and get this over with. She was incredibly strong for her size. *Man.*

The mauve bathroom had a large sitting area with couches and mirrors over gleaming wood tables. All sorts of grooming products were contained in lacquered boxes—hairspray, lotion, a jar of cotton balls. The odd opulence momentarily distracted him. *Wow, were all ladies' rooms this nice?*

The woman pulled him over to a loveseat currently unoccupied and he took the hint and took a seat, glad to be seated for whatever was to come. He didn't have long to wait.

"I need you to stop seeing my fiancé."

Straight to the point. Christian had to admire that even as his

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shame lit a flush that travelled up his chest and neck, on its way to his face, thankfully hidden by the mask.

Swallowing, he glanced away and saw the two of them reflected in a gilt-framed, full-length mirror on the opposite wall. He was struck by the image, which looked like a painting of two women from another time and place, perhaps the Italian Renaissance. Seated on the red velvet, high-backed chaise, dressed in their gowns and masks, they presented a lovely sight. The incongruity of the woman in the reflection mirroring his movements was almost fascinating enough to distract him from the conversation.

Almost.

He turned back to her and offered a slight smile. “I don’t know your name.”

The woman in the silver cat’s-eye mask pursed her lips. “I’m Mira. And you’re Chris.”

Somehow he wasn’t surprised that she knew his name. And it occurred to him for the first time it wasn’t just his appearance that deceived—his name could be unisex as well.

She thought Carl was cheating on her with another woman.

Christ, could this night get any weirder?

* * *

Jarrold paced back and forth, dodging the occasional waiter with an empty tray or dressed-up couple strolling around aimlessly. Mira and Chris had been in the ladies’ for a long time. He stopped and glanced at his watch, then a presence to the left and behind him had him continuing to turn his head. David—Chris’s...friend? Date? How many men was Chris with?

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Trying to ignore the unexpected welling of jealousy that thought conjured up, Jarrod gave the man a nod, waiting for him to speak. But apparently David was doing exactly what he was doing—waiting impatiently for Chris’s return. They stood together for a few minutes before David let out a deep sigh.

“Come on, let’s at least get a drink. Who knows how long they’ll be in there?”

Jarrod thought for a moment, then shrugged. “That’s true. It’s kind of like a black hole. They keep going in, but no one’s coming out.”

David smirked. “Always in pairs.”

Jarrod found himself grinning under the mask back at the tall black man—now *him* he would recognize on the street. Maybe. The bald head wasn’t unusual on a guy with his height and build, but there weren’t that many out there...

Before they could make a move toward the bar—he wouldn’t have been able to manage a drink anyway with the full mask on—he spied a red gown and a white dress moving together slowly in their direction through the crowd.

“Well, at least they didn’t kill each other. Seriously though”—the other man’s voice took on a serious and slightly chiding tone—“you need to choose one and let the other go.”

He opened his mouth to protest, then snapped it closed. He’d forgotten he was still “Carl” to the other man. But Chris now knew, so he figured he could have the job of telling his companion for the evening. Idly, he wondered what had given him away to Chris. That brought to mind the inevitable thoughts about comparing himself to Carl.

Jarrod felt a small, primitive burst of pride. At least Chris had liked what he had seen enough to want to keep going, even after he

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figured out Jarrod was the wrong guy. And he'd seemed to revel in the act, really enjoy it...

He tried to push away the erotic series of memories tumbling through his mind, the mental snapshots he'd taken of Chris kneeling before him, expertly working his hard shaft with his hands and those full lips. He was lovely in drag, though Jarrod didn't have his normal appearance to compare it to. It wasn't a kink that had ever appealed to Jarrod before, but it somehow worked on Chris.

Jarrod wished he could see Chris's face as the foursome faced off in a somewhat tight circle, Mira inserting herself next to Jarrod and taking his arm, Chris a mere yard away, directly facing him. Mira looked...fine. Perhaps Chris had told her what she wanted to hear.

He looked from Mira to Chris as it seemed they all waited for someone else to be the first to speak.

"Oh hell." Jarrod sighed, goaded into breaking the silence, cursing himself for apparently being the weakest link in the bunch. "Did you all get everything straightened out?"

David looked at him sharply. "You're pretty full of yourself, aren't you?" he clipped out.

Chris soothed down David's arm. "He's not Carl."

"What? Then who the hell is he? What's going on?" David's angry tone faded to confusion.

Mira spoke up, taking charge in her usual gentle yet commanding way. "He's a good friend here to support me." She turned to Jarrod, "And yes, we did get everything out in the open. It seems Carl has been keeping secrets in both directions, and Chris had just recently figured things out as well. That's why she came tonight—to see me for herself and let him go."

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David interjected, “I don’t know why either one of you would date the snake.”

Mira gave a small, mirthless huff. “I’m not just dating him. I’m marrying him.”

“What the hell for?” David shook his head. “Once a cheater, always a cheater.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Jarrod muttered, then grimaced at the look he got from Mira. He couldn’t see the raised eyebrow through the mask, but he knew it was there.

Mira shrugged her slender shoulders. “Love’s a bitch.”

“You deserve better.” This from Chris, whose voice was soft with sadness. With her lack of protest to the use of feminine pronouns earlier from Mira, it was clear Chris was still trying to appear as a woman—to Mira at least. Maybe he was transgendered? Or just didn’t want to let Carl’s apparent bisexuality out of the bag. For whatever reason, Jarrod felt a wave of admiration for Chris’s handling of the situation, which grew in the next moment as the object of the conversation walked up and placed his hand on the small of Mira’s back.

“Hi, babe.” Carl pecked Mira’s cheek, then did a double take at Jarrod’s costume. “Hey, that was my costume, right? Uh, who...oh yeah, of course. Hello, Rainey.”

“Carl.” Jarrod’s brusque acknowledgement went right over the man’s head as he turned to focus his attention on the other couple.

“Carl Burkhardt, and this is my fiancée, Mira.” He offered his hand to David, who took it after a moment of hesitation.

“David. And this is Chris.”

“Good to meet you. How do you know Mira and Rainey here?”

“Oh, we don’t,” David replied smoothly. “Chris and Mira just met tonight. They bonded in the ladies’ room and here we are.” He

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spread his hands expansively, and Jarrod watched as Chris reached out and grabbed one like a lifeline. Chris's hands were shaking and his just-visible jaw clenched. Well, of course he was upset if this was the first time he'd seen Carl and Mira together. Time to break the huddle, for everyone's sake.

"David, Chris, it was great to meet you." His hand was accepted in a much warmer fashion by David than Carl's had been just previously. He took Chris's gloved hand and bent over it in what he hoped was debonair fashion. "I enjoyed our time together this evening." Too late, the *double entendre* hit him, but the words were already out.

Chris's lips parted but he didn't speak.

"Enjoy your evening." Jarrod turned to Mira and Carl. "See you two inside?"

"Sure, sure," Carl answered jovially. But his attention had already been diverted, and he waved at someone across the way. "Mira, there's someone I want you to meet." Without another word to any of them, he began to lead Mira away.

She separated herself and took a step back toward Chris. With a quick flurry of movement, she pulled Chris into a hug. "Thank you. And good luck," Jarrod heard her whisper.

"To you, too," Chris replied, and the emotion in his voice was clear.

Mira returned to an impatiently waiting Carl, who immediately herded her toward a cluster of people just inside the ballroom door.

As soon as the three of them were alone, Jarrod watched as Chris heaved a huge sigh and turned to David. "I'm done. I'm going to catch a cab home."

David shook his head. "No, I'll take you. You *are* my date," he teased, obviously trying to lighten the mood.

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Chris's lips curved up at the corners. "Yes, that's true. But you need to stay and network and so forth. I just want to go home and get out of this stuff. I did what I came here to do."

"Did you?" David looked down tenderly at Chris, who nodded up at him. "I'm so glad."

Jarrold gritted his teeth and moved to step away.

"Sorry about earlier, when I thought you were him. I was kind of an asshole." David cocked his head, his mask making the gesture somehow even more inquiring than the unconscious movement would normally appear. "So tell me. What was the point of being in that costume and answering to his name?"

"It was Mira's idea. To draw Chris out. She, ah, knew that Chris had seen him in it—" He chose his words carefully as glanced at an utterly still Chris, the feminine mask not giving anything away. He directed the rest of his response to Chris. "So she figured if you were to come, you'd come right up to him—or at least watch him, as you did. Then she could talk to you and say...whatever it was she said."

"To warn me off," Chris's voice was flat and tired-sounding.

Jarrold felt bad for the man. "Yes."

"What the hell is she even doing with him? He's a complete joker and he'll never stay true to her. Plus the fact that he's..." David cleared his throat and glanced at Chris. "Anyway..." he went on, not finishing his thought, which Jarrold knew had something to do with Carl being gay—or bi—something neither man knew Jarrold had already realized. "She seems like she could do a lot better."

"She could," he agreed simply.

"What about you? If she were free, would you ever want to be more than friends? Seems like you two are tight, and you come

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across like a decent person.”

Jarrold smiled, his first genuine smile since this whole whacky evening had gotten underway. “We’re much more suited to being friends than lovers. Trust me,” he added dryly.

* * *

His thoughts racing between disillusionment with Carl, remnants of lust for Jarrold, and the need to get out of the costume and get his sense of self back, Christian suddenly couldn’t wait a moment longer.

“I’ve got to go,” he interrupted David’s laughing reply to something Rainey had said. *They sure hit it off*, a prodding little voice poked at his brain. Both men immediately sobered and looked at him. Seeing that David was about to start arguing again, he forestalled his friend. “Yes, I know, you think you should take me home. But right now, I just want to be alone. M’kay? You might as well stay and enjoy the evening. Coat check?”

He held out a palm in a manner that brooked no argument, and David pulled the stub from his jacket’s inner pocket. Christian accepted the ticket with relief that his friend wasn’t going to argue any longer.

David’s lips quirked. “Goodnight, gorgeous,” he bade huskily. “Call me if you change your mind?”

Christian almost had to laugh at the teasing tacit offer from his *definitely* straight friend. “Oh, I will.” He winked, then turned to Rainey and offered his hand.

He caught a disapproving vibe from the man, and it got his back up a bit. *What right does he have to be judgmental of me?* He stiffened, and the warm goodbye he’d planned came out much

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cooler. “Nice to have met you.” His eyes swept from the gold mask down the long, black-clad frame. “Enjoy the costume.”

“Oh, I will,” came the equally cool response, an echo of own his words of a moment before. “I know you did.” He turned to walk away, but not before Christian heard him mutter under his breath, “A couple times.”

Christian couldn’t stifle his gasp of outrage at the man’s arrogance. His cheeks flamed and his blood pressure soared at the comment, which not only cheapened what he’d done earlier, but also made it clear that somehow this man knew about—or at least suspected—what had happened between Christian and Carl in the same outfit.

The rage flipped over to shame as he watched the man striding away toward the stairs. Glad for the barrier of the mask between him and the world, he gave David a nod and headed for the elevator. No way was he going to go ass over teakettle down the stairs, especially with the partial erection he still had from their time together in the conference room.

Could he really blame the guy for thinking he—she?—was some kind of slut? Here he’d obviously been with Carl, had blown a stranger in an empty meeting room, was bantering innuendo with his date...

If only Rainey knew how far from the truth he was. Stuck mooning after Carl most of his adult life, Christian had been practically celibate compared to most men he knew—gay and straight. Oh sure, he’d hooked up casually a few times at parties or bars over the years, but Carl had been the first regular boyfriend he’d had. If Christian could even call him that. According to David and Shenice—and the evidence of Carl’s fiancée—his one and only boyfriend, the man he’d loved since a teen, was actually just a

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skanky cheater who had his cake and was eating it too.

And blowing Rainey had obviously been a mistake of epic proportions. He mentally smacked himself upside the head. After all, who did that, outside of drunken club scene or something? Talk about putting a label on yourself right off the bat.

Oh, but it had been so good... He palmed himself through the layers of skirts, then quickly pulled his hand away as the elevator stopped and almost immediately opened with a chime.

Stop it. You'll never see the man again anyway.

Christian stepped out and the first person he saw...

Figures.

Christian kept walking and stopped at the coatroom before hitting the front door just in time to see the *Stranger in Black*, aka Rainey—*what the hell kind of name was that anyway?*—slide into the backseat of a cab.

He walked directly to the valet from earlier, the one who'd caught him as he tripped, and requested a cab. Christian stoically endured the inviting looks from the young man as he watched Rainey's cab pull away.

Okay, now you'll never see the man again.

Even with everything else on his mind, the thought echoed dully in his hollow-feeling chest.

CHAPTER 4

For several days, Christian had ignored Carl's increasingly frequent phone calls. So when Carl had finally just shown up uninvited at his door late one night, he steeled himself to take care of the final separation he had already prepared himself for mentally and let him inside.

"Hi, Carl."

His visitor smiled as though he hadn't a care in the world. "Hey, babe."

Carl made his familiar move to take Christian into his arms, but Christian smoothly side-stepped him and silently led the way into his living room. He was damn well not going to do this standing in the foyer. He had a feeling it might take a while.

"What's wrong?"

STRANGER IN BLACK

Well, maybe not as long as he thought since the usually oblivious Carl was already catching on to Christian's mood.

"I think we need to talk."

A slightly defensive expression passed over Carl's face. "What about?"

Christian sighed. He'd known Carl wasn't going to make this easy, so he may as well cut to the chase.

"Carl, I know about Mira."

Shock suffused Carl's face, which colored rapidly. Christian warily watched as Carl sputtered and swallowed, as if he'd choked on the news. "Wha...what are you talking about?" he desperately tried to bluff.

Shaking his head, Christian reflected that Carl was indeed a piece of work. He even knew her name, and Carl was still trying to get out of it? Had he always been such a jerk? God, he'd wasted the past decade on *this*? He should thank him for making it easier—and might later on—but right now, it just saddened him.

"Mira," he repeated patiently. "Your fiancée? The one you took to the Harris One Hundred ball this weekend? Cute little brunette in red?"

If Carl's face got any redder, he'd probably explode. "How did...I mean, were you...it wasn't me."

Christian's eyebrows flew up.

Carl latched onto that thought like a lifeline. Christian could almost see the wheels turning in his head as he stumbled into the excuse. "I wore a different costume than I brought over here to show you. I, uh, well, didn't want to go through the whole night without being able to eat or drink, so I switched costumes at the last minute. So whoever you saw in the black costume wasn't me," Carl finished triumphantly.

STRANGER IN BLACK

You got that right. That brought to mind the stranger, Rainey, and how gentlemanly he'd been, his touching concern for Mira...
How he'd felt on my tongue...

"Chris?"

Carl's voice pulled him back from his wandering imagination. Christian automatically nodded as he again began to ponder how to burst Carl's bubble, then he was pulled up against Carl's frame with a tug on his wrist. "You're the only one I want," he murmured against Christian's ear, sliding his hand around to the small of his back.

Maybe so, Christian thought sadly. *But that doesn't mean I'm the only one you have.*

Carl was nuzzling his neck, and even knowing the truth, even as pissed as he was at being lied to, he couldn't help years of conditioning from kicking in at the feel and scent of the man holding him close.

Then he remembered Carl's hand resting on Mira's back, and the masked visage of Mira, her calm voice explaining that she loved Carl.

Resolve stiffened his spine. He stepped back, wrenching himself away when Carl at first refused to let go.

Carl looked at him, the guilt stamped on his face, twisted with defiance. He wasn't going to admit anything anytime soon. And Christian had to get him out of the house before he did something really stupid.

"I have to go, Carl. You caught me on the way out," he improvised.

His guest frowned. "Where are you going so late?" The crease between his eyes deepened. "You have a *date*?" he asked incredulously.

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“No, of...” Christian just caught himself before saying *of course not*. “I just need to grab a few things at the store.” Trying to move things along, he strode into the foyer and grabbed his keys and phone from the hall tree. Shoving his feet into his Birks, he opened the front door and jumped. There, just about to ring the bell, stood David.

“Holy crap!” And that about summed it up as he watched David’s eyes narrow as he took in the sight of Carl behind him. “You scared the shit out of me. I was just heading out to the store, want to come with?”

“Who the hell is this? You *do* have a date! You’re cheating on me?” Carl yelled from behind him.

“Sure,” David agreed, ignoring Carl and answering Chris, searching his eyes questioningly. Christian shook his head in warning before turning to Carl and pointedly holding the door open. And waiting.

Carl made a sound of disgust, but finally stormed out the door so Christian could lock it behind him. House secure, he finally addressed Carl.

“This is my neighbor, and no, we don’t have a date. He just dropped by.” He deliberately avoided the “cheating” question, since he didn’t know if he could control himself if he went there. And there was no telling what David might contribute to that kind of discussion. “Bye, Carl.”

Christian and David walked to Christian’s car and got in, leaving Carl standing motionless on the front porch. “Are you sure it’s okay to leave him there?” David asked.

“Oh, he might be a bit of a blowhard, but he’s not violent. Not at all. Just really, really determined to be right about everything. Guess that’s why he makes a good lawyer.”

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“Well, that explains a lot. I love how he immediately assumed you were cheating on him. Guilty conscience catching up with him?” David chuckled.

“You don’t know the half of it.” And Christian explained the bizarre conversation where Carl had deflected all the proof of his infidelity.

David was quiet, and Christian glanced over at him. “What?”

His passenger nonchalantly shrugged one shoulder. “Oh, I was just thinking about Mira. She seemed really sweet, too sweet for a guy like him.”

Huh. “Yeah, I agree, but she says she loves the guy. Maybe she doesn’t care if he’s a cockhound.”

David’s jaw clenched. “That’s just not right. She shouldn’t have to settle for an asshole who can’t keep it in his pants.”

Christian laughed. “Tell me how you really feel, Dave. Ouch!” he yelped as David socked him on the shoulder.

“Don’t call me Dave. And you know I’m right. So, are we really going to the store, or do you want to grab some dinner?”

“Why, *David*,” he teased. “Are you asking me on a *date*?”

“You wish, hot stuff.”

Christian faked a double-take, then shook his head. “Sometimes I wonder about you. I really do.”

* * *

“Okay, enough is enough.”

Jarrold dragged his focus from somewhere in the middle distance to his friend’s concerned face. “What?” He must not have heard her knock from where he was sitting on the back deck.

Mira sighed dramatically and flipped her glossy, dark hair over

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her shoulder. "I'm the one with the cheating partner, so I'm supposed to be the brooding one right now. What on earth is wrong with you?"

Fed up with his guilt over the encounter with Chris and his lamentable parting jibe, he struck out at the convenient target. "Oh sure, play the woe-is-me card. You're the one who's choosing to stay with him. So either kick his ass to the curb or suck it up." As soon as the words slipped out, he cringed.

Mira burst out laughing. "Oh, my God, you're cranky. You need some exercise," she decided. "Let's go."

"What? I don't need any exercise. I worked out this morning."

"Here in your house, right? You need a change of scenery. Let's go to Cascade Village and walk around," she invited, naming a new shopping center nearby. "We can window shop, grab a bite. Maybe see a movie. There's that new one with the one guy you like..."

His gaze sharpened at her ramble. "Where's Carl tonight?" he interrupted.

She pressed her lips together for a moment. "He said he had to go out."

"You think he's going to see...Chris." *Crap, almost said "him." Better watch that.*

She nodded soberly.

"I think it'll be okay. Chris seemed pretty understanding and nice. I don't think you have anything to worry about."

Mira tilted her head from side to side in a familiar mannerism that Jarrod knew meant she was weighing her thoughts carefully. "You're right. But if he's still trying to see her... Do you think she'll tell him she knows?"

"I have no doubts." And he didn't. The reactions Chris had had

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when he saw Mira and Carl together were not those of someone trying to figure out how to get rid of the competition. They were signs of someone taking a hit, absorbing it, and wanting to heal.

Inexplicable blow job scene aside, he'd gotten a very positive impression of Chris, and his friend David had also seemed very nice, if a bit hostile toward Carl. Which wasn't a bad thing. You could always tell a lot about a person from meeting their closest friends.

He looked at his.

"Okay, let's go."

* * *

"This was a good idea. But I already ate dinner." Christian and David were walking along, occasionally pausing to read menus posted in the windows of the restaurants lining the outside shopping area.

"So did I. But I could eat again."

Christian gave David's bulky, muscular frame a once-over. "Your metabolism must be jacked up, all that muscle-mass." He got to the end of the menu and stopped short. "Italian. You could get dinner. I could get dessert."

"Perfect."

"That's okay, eating it in front of you?" David tended to avoid desserts due to his insulin-controlled diabetes. Christian would about kill for a good tiramisu and espresso right now, but he didn't want to tease his friend.

David waved a hand as if to brush the thought away. "Whatever. I'm not that big of a diva. If I got upset every time I saw someone eat something I shouldn't, I'd just stay at home." He

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opened the door to the Italian restaurant. "After you."

Christian ducked under his friend's arm, and they proceeded to get a table. David excused himself for a few minutes, and when he returned, he had a very strange look on his face.

About to ask him what was the matter, Christian was forestalled by the waiter's appearance with water and menus. They decided to share an appetizer, and when the waiter finally left, David immediately leaned in.

"I think Mira is in the second booth down from ours," he spoke in a low tone and jerked his head back toward the rear of the restaurant.

"What? Mira?"

"Shhh."

"Oh, come on. It's louder than hell in here. You mean, Carl's Mira? How can you tell?"

David looked a bit uncomfortable. "I don't know for sure. She just looks a lot like her. Her hair. Plus I...heard her voice, talking to her dinner date."

"Date? Oh crap." Now it was Christian's turn to whisper, leaning across the table. "Carl's not here?"

"No, it's not Carl. Another man."

Christian relaxed, chuckled and sat back. "Oh, now *that* would be funny. If Mira was cheating on *him*, too."

David scowled at him menacingly. "She would never do that."

Something dawned on Christian. "You like her."

David's face went impassive. "She seems very nice."

A grin slowly spread across Christian's face. "I mean, you *like*, like her."

"What are we, in junior high?"

"I'm going to go take a look."

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“What?” David looked panicked. “Wait, don’t just...don’t make it look obvious or anything.”

Christian rolled his eyes. “I won’t, sheesh. I just want to take a look. Mira has a very distinctive, uh”—he paused, before continuing in more sober tone of voice—“engagement ring.” David’s face fell before the impassive look returned. “So, I should be able to tell if I get a good look as I go by,” he finished lamely.

“What’s the point?” his friend pointed out glumly. “Whether it’s her or not, she’s engaged to that dickwad on the down-low. No offense meant,” David tagged on with a quick look of apology.

“None taken,” he responded drily. “I’m going.”

He scooted out of the booth. David mock-whispered, “Play it cool.”

“Oh for...” He dodged a waitress and waited while she led a family of four to a table, then trailed along behind them, eyes on the booths to his left. As soon as he cleared the high back separating the booth in question from the one between theirs, he almost stopped in his tracks.

A gorgeous man with very light blue eyes was staring straight at him.

He barely managed to keep walking, but walk he did. Christian knew he should tear his gaze away, should take a look at the dark-haired woman sitting across from the man, or more importantly, her hands. But his eyes stayed locked with the man’s for the several seconds it took to pass by his table, when he was forced to look forward so he wouldn’t crash into anything.

Well, that went well.

Stopping just short of the bathrooms, he glanced back, hoping to be able to see the woman from where he stood. What he did see sent him into a panic; they were rising to leave.

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Shit.

He couldn't go running back without looking like an idiot. Quickly, he pulled out his phone, thinking he'd text David, but it would never get there in time. They were already walking toward the door, and they'd be passing David in the booth any moment.

Opportunity lost, he went ahead and walked into the men's room and started to wash his hands. Finally, a connection ticked over in his head and he snapped his head up to stare at his shocked reflection in the mirror. If David was right and the woman was Mira...

Had that been the *Stranger in Black*?

Christian went hot and cold. Fuck appearances, he was going to go find out. He turned to grab a hand towel. When he turned back around, he wasn't alone.

* * *

Jarrold and Mira had been just finishing their dinner when a very large, bald black man passed their table. Immediately, his mind jumped to Chris's date David from the ball. This man was almost the same size, as far as Jarrold could tell, and had the same almost shiny bald pate. He stared as the man passed without looking at him, using the guy's distraction to try to find something to confirm his guess.

"What the hell? We come out to dinner, and you're scoping out men? It's a family restaurant, Jarrold," Mira reminded him teasingly.

He waited until he knew the man was out of earshot and leaned closer to Mira. "I think that was David." He paused a beat for emphasis. "*Chris's* friend David."

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Her eyes widened and she immediately rose to her feet, then just as quickly sat back down. “Damn. Missed him. Go in the bathroom and check him out.”

Jarrold choked back a laugh. “What? Family restaurant, remember?”

“Not that kind of check him out. I mean, try to see any body parts you might remember.”

His mouth went suddenly dry as he remembered Chris on his knees before him, holding one of *his* body parts in his hand. *If it is David, is Chris with him?*

Mira had seemed pretty certain Carl was going to be with Chris tonight, but maybe not.

When the man had walked back by, they’d both watched his focus zoom in on Mira and lock there. He almost stumbled and slowed to a saunter, even turning his head to keep looking as he passed.

“Oh yeah. That was him.” Mira sounded positive. “Go see if Chris is with him.”

“What? No!”

Her mouth gaped at his vehement refusal. “What do you mean, no? Fine.” A light crease between her narrowed eyes didn’t bode well for a peaceful end to their outing. “*I’ll go.*”

“Wait.” Jarrold gritted his teeth. “*I’ll go.*” But before he could move, a slender blond man came into view, moving slowly and staring directly at him as he walked past.

Chris. He was sure of it. The way he moved was burned into his brain, and that lower lip...

“I’m going,” Mira declared, throwing a few twenties down on the table. She ignored his protests and slid out of the booth, closing her purse and walking slowly toward the door. He had no choice

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but to follow her.

He glanced back at the men's room just as the door closed, then caught up with Mira. "Was it him?" he whispered close to her ear.

"Couldn't get a good look, he was facing the wrong way."

A thought occurred to him. "Turn around. Can you see David?"

She did as he asked. "Yes, but he's looking down, and it looks like he's alone. Wait, no there's two place settings. Maybe she's in the bathroom."

"Perfect. I'll walk back that way, and you stand here like you're waiting for me to wash up. Then you'll be in perfect position to see Chris or anyone else come back to the table."

"Good idea." She gave him a light shove. "So go already, or we'll look stupid just standing here."

He walked back past David, and yes, it was definitely him, which meant it was very likely the blond man in the bathroom was Chris. Inexplicably nervous, he forced himself to keep walking at a steady pace and pushed his way into the men's room.

The blond was just turning away from the sink to dry his hands. Jarrod stared at the man, trying to reconcile the sexy guy in front of him with the Chris in drag at the masquerade ball. Then he finished turned around and their gazes collided. The blond's jaw dropped in surprise, and there seemed to be recognition in his eyes.

Deciding to just get it over with, he asked, "Chris?"

For a moment, there was no reaction at all, and Jarrod thought maybe he had the wrong man. *But I swear, those lips...*

Then he saw the flush rising from under his collar, spreading up his neck to his face. Chris slowly nodded confirmation. "How—how did you know? I was sure you thought I was a girl."

His voice was the frosting on the cake. Trying not to get lost in the memories of the two of them alone in another public room, he

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answered simply, “Your hands.”

Chris looked down at his hands, still holding the damp towel, then back up. “So you knew...while I was—”

Jarrold gave a nod and couldn't keep from adding, “That's why I enjoyed it so much.”

That earned him a brief flare of heat in those wide brown eyes. And then Chris looked relieved as the confirmation of Jarrold's orientation registered. “Good. I mean, wow. This is pretty weird, running into you. Small world.” He finally threw the towel away. “But I don't get how you recognized me, even if you did know I was a guy.”

“Your...friend is pretty distinctive. David, right? He wasn't really disguised much that night with that simple Lone Ranger mask on. When I saw him, and then saw you... Well, I hoped I'd gotten it right.”

Oh nice, just tell him you're interested. Not only is he involved with one, maybe two guys, you weren't exactly a prince last time you saw him—getting off without returning the favor, and then throwing that dig about enjoying the costume in his face.

“David *is* just a friend, you know. And I've been avoiding Carl since then, just tried ending it tonight.” Chris seemed very earnest on that point. And why wouldn't he be? He probably figured Jarrold thought he was a big sleaze with how he'd left things. He ignored pursuing the meaning of the word “tried” for now to offer a much-deserved apology.

“Hey, I shouldn't have said what I did. And I shouldn't have taken advantage of you in the banquet room.”

Chris frowned at him even as one side of his mouth quirked upward. “It was more me taking advantage of *you*, from what I remember, Rainey,” he teased lightly.

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Jarrold frowned. *What the...* His brow cleared as he recalled that Carl had referred to him as Rainey at the ball during the introductions. “Jarrod, actually. Jarrod Rainier. Rainey’s just what Carl calls me. Hate it, to tell the truth.”

“Jarrod.” Chris appeared to test out the name. “Yes, well, speaking of nicknames, I go by Christian. It’s what I prefer now that I’m an adult and have some say in it. Carl...he calls me Chris out of habit.”

Habit?

Chris—*Christian*—must have seen the question in his eyes. “We’ve known each other since we were kids.” He looked down, perhaps out of embarrassment.

Since they were kids? *Oh man.*

“So you two have been together for that long?” Jarrod shook his head. It was almost worse than if Christian had been some random guy Carl had picked up. That kind of longevity bespoke a serious emotional connection.

“It’s... Not really, no. It’s complicated.” The door opened and another man came in, heading for the urinal. “I have to go. David’ll be freaking out.”

Jarrold felt a spike of jealousy, regardless of what Christian had told him about just being friends. “Why? He seems pretty important to you.”

Christian shook his head quickly as he glanced toward the other customer, then jerked his head at the door. They walked together just outside and stopped in the small hallway.

“No. We’re not... Nothing like that. He just likes...well, I probably shouldn’t tell you.”

“Tell me what?” Jarrod took a step just into Christian’s personal space, and the tension between them ratcheted up as the

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outside world faded away.

Jarrold's breath caught as the need he could only imagine behind the mask the other night was now naked on the face upturned to his.

What he wouldn't do for a handy empty banquet room right now.

CHAPTER 5

Christian finally had the opportunity to see his stranger's face without the mask, and he took full advantage. At close range, those light blue eyes had a tinge of green, and combined with the dark lashes and eyebrows, they were mesmerizing. He had strongly defined angles to his face, cheekbones, jawline, and even with his face obviously at rest, his expression still managed to look intensely focused as he looked down at Christian...expectantly?

Oh!

He scrambled to try to remember the question he'd been asked. "Um, what?" he finally managed.

Those lips curved into a rueful smile, then parted—probably to respond, but damn if it didn't look like the prelude to a kiss...

"Our starter and drinks are here."

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David's voice penetrated into the bubble of isolation as his friend's presence seemed to crowd the small vestibule. In fact, the three of them had to press out of the way as someone passed them by on the way back to the main area of the restaurant. Time to move. But he was reluctant to leave Jarrod now that he'd found him. He felt like he had so much to say and talk about, but he could barely get any words out.

"Do you want to join us?" he offered hopefully, watching the smile intensify for a moment before regret supplanted it.

"Sorry, I have Mira waiting for me by the entrance."

"She's actually at our table," David corrected, and they both looked at him fully for the first time. His dark skin had a rosy touch to it, and Christian arched a brow at him.

"Well, she was standing there by herself for a while, so..." David cleared his throat.

Christian, attuned to Jarrod, could tell the moment the penny dropped on David's attraction to Mira. But his expression didn't give away anything about his opinion of the news.

A little panicky thought yanked at his brain. "Wait. She doesn't know I'm a guy."

Realization dawned in both of the other men's eyes.

"She's going to have to find out sooner or later," David ventured.

Christian was already shaking his head. "No way. I'm not telling her in public. I shouldn't be the one to tell her at all. I mean, she already knows he's cheating. It's not my place to out the guy."

They both looked at Jarrod, who looked almost as panicked as Christian felt. "Crap." He pressed his lips together, then heaved a sigh, finally saying, "I'm not telling her in a restaurant. But she needs to find out sooner or later." He looked pleadingly at

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Christian, who caught his drift and held his hands out in a warding off gesture.

“No thanks. I already had to go through the leave-my-man-alone discussion in the fucking ladies’ room. In a dress. And I told the guy we’re through, not that he probably believes me. Anyway, I’ve done my part.” And he had. He was so over Carl’s drama, and he didn’t want to cause Mira any more pain.

There was little more to add standing around blocking traffic in the hallway, and the small group was starting to get pointed looks from the restaurant staff, so they walked back to Christian and David’s booth. The one the other couple had been at had already been cleaned and had a multi-generational family seated there, a testament to how long they’d been lingering.

Mira was munching on their calamari and looked up as the three men got to the table.

“You’re still hungry?” Jarrod asked her incredulously. “Where do you put it?”

“Hi, I’m Mira,” she introduced herself and smiled at Christian before shooting Jarrod a mock glare. Scooting over, she glanced up at David, whose side she was sitting on. “I love calamari. Hope you don’t mind.” She turned back to Jarrod. “And you’re the one who wasn’t that hungry, so I didn’t want to order a whole meal and make you sit there while I ate like a pig.”

She snagged another bite from the platter in the middle of the table and waved it around impatiently, indicating they should sit before looking expectantly at Christian.

Here goes. “I’m Christian. Nice to meet you, Mira. Um, yeah, that sounds familiar,” Christian rushed to try to distract her. He sat and slid over along the bench, hyper-aware of Jarrod taking the only open place next to him. He could almost feel the heat from his

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body across the inches separating them. “We were in different places hunger-wise tonight, too.” He forced his attention away from Jarrod’s presence and back to Mira, anxiously awaiting any sign of recognition.

“Well then. Assuming David was the one eating...?” Mira glanced up at David, who honest-to-God blushed as he nodded reluctantly. “Don’t feel bad—if you’re hungry, you’re hungry. Anyway, why don’t the two of us have some dinner while you two go take a walk or whatever? No point in you guys hanging around watching us feed our faces.” Her blatant matchmaking between Jarrod and Christian would have been welcome and pretty funny if there weren’t so many complications and past histories to keep straight.

As easily as that, Jarrod and Christian found themselves shooed out of the restaurant, leaving David and Mira to their meal.

Outside, they glanced at each other and laughed.

“Wow, she managed that nicely.”

“Oh yes, she’s a force to be reckoned with. Easier to just go along. I’ve seen her in court before. At first they look at this tiny, young Asian woman and you can just see them dismissing her in their heads. Then she opens her mouth...”

Christian grinned and nodded, picturing the scene. He’d had much the same experience with her the night of the masquerade ball, when she’d hauled him off to the ladies’ room. His smile faded somewhat as he made the connection.

“She’s a lawyer. With the same firm as Carl?”

Jarrodd nodded, his earlier amusement also disappearing. In its place, a bit of pity crept in—the last thing Christian wanted or needed.

“Hey, look. It’s over between me and Carl. Not that there was

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much to begin with.” They started walking along together in the warm summer evening, Jarrod a solid, quiet presence next to him. Despite the pity, there had been no sign of the judgmental tone they’d ended on the last time they saw one another, so Christian felt safe to continue.

“I told you we’d known each other since we were kids? We were just friends. At least on his part. As soon as I hit puberty and figured out guys did it for me, well, I kind of fixated on him.” It was hard hearing his foolishness spoken out loud, but Jarrod remained silent, not looking at him as they strolled, so he continued.

“It wasn’t until we were in college that anything ever happened, a sort of drunk hookup that spawned a few more. But he was not going to be gay. Refused to ever consider moving past secret fuck buddies. I finally realized what was happening, and our friendship and everything else just...disappeared eventually.” He didn’t mention how heartbroken and devastated this had left him at the time, but he figured Jarrod could read between the lines.

He wasn’t sure why he was telling Jarrod all this, but mostly, he didn’t want Jarrod to have a bad opinion of him. He wanted to explain how and why he could have been with someone with as little character as Carl now that his own eyes were finally open to his faults.

Jarrod turned toward the central plaza. It was completely dark now, a perfect early summer evening, and the fairy lights in the landscaping and trees added another dimension to the starry night sky. “If it ended like that in college, how did you come to be together now?”

Christian huffed a short laugh. “Just randomly ran into him one day. Kind of like we did today. For all that this is a city, it’s still

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small enough that it happens. It was last winter, and he seemed...different. Mature. More accepting of being together with a man, enough so I thought he'd probably come out, though we didn't specifically talk about it. He'd obviously been with other guys in the meantime..." Christian trailed off, really not wanting to give voice to another man's skill in the bedroom. "We started dating. Or so I thought."

Jarrold stopping next to an empty bench by the water feature in the middle of the shopping area and they took a seat, companionably silent while watching the fountains spray for a few minutes.

"Anyway, turned out he was already with Mira, at least I assume they've been together the whole time, if they're engaged by this point." He glanced up in question, and Jarrod nodded confirmation. Christian continued, looking away again. "I'm not conceited enough to think it was me he really wanted. I was just a sure thing." He felt miserable about his role, even unknowing, in interfering in Mira's relationship.

He also fervently wished that Jarrod, the first guy he'd truly clicked with on multiple levels, wasn't appallingly privy to all of Christian's dirty secrets—that, and thought of him as a complete man-whore. Christian had blown him, sight unseen, at a formal function, for God's sake. Very much an impulse he regretted. Oh, not the act itself—no, that had been *hot* and the memory settled low and warm in his abdomen at the very thought of it. But just the fact that he'd been on his knees practically the moment they met probably precluded any true respect from Jarrod, and he keenly felt the loss.

"Don't think less of yourself just because he's an ass. You're not the first person to let a memory, or your heart for that matter,

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overrule your head.” Jarrod’s words were reassuring, and just what Christian wanted to hear. But then, history had shown him to be gullible in that respect.

He glanced at Jarrod, who was looking down at him from far closer than Christian had expected. He pulled back instinctively, then wished he hadn’t as it seemed to break the mood weaving itself around them in the romantic setting.

To make up for it, he found himself offering, “You weren’t hungry for dinner, but do you want something sweet?”

“Sure,” Jarrod replied agreeably, then closed the distance between them and took his mouth in a gentle kiss.

Christian parted his lips on a surprised inhale. Never had he kissed a man outdoors—his only public kisses had been in the sanctuary of gay bars or clubs. The novelty leant gravitas to the simple act he’d never before experienced. Particularly in light of Carl’s determination to keep their relationship a secret, the almost-platonic action stirred him well beyond what he felt comfortable with showing in public.

When he would have pulled back though, Jarrod was the one to separate them with a small parting nibble on Christian’s lip, not once having gained access to his mouth.

“I’m really sorry about that parting crack I made at the ball.” Jarrod’s angular features were contrite. “That was low of me, and I’ve felt like an ass ever since. I’m really, really glad we ran into one another so I could apologize.”

Christian smiled wanly, his own actions coming back to haunt him. “It’s okay. I was pretty much acting like a slut. You probably don’t believe I normally don’t do things like that. Why would you? I mean, I just...”

“Shhh,” Jarrod hushed, and kissed him again, maybe to quiet

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him or to soothe him. Whatever reason, he didn't care. He just felt the approval, the acceptance in the caress, and responded to it, opening to this time let Jarrod's tongue sweep in to sleek against his own.

* * *

Jarrod groaned as he finally got a full taste of Christian. It was enough to make him want to forget their location and press the blond down on the bench beneath him. He contented himself with a long, intimate kiss that just bordered on making out like a horny teenager. God, when was the last time a kiss had turned him on so much? He'd been thinking about Christian daily for a week now, regretting that he'd never had a chance to make Christian feel good, make him come apart in his arms.

A phone tone made both of their eyes fly open at the same moment. Caught in his desire, he gazed at Christian from close range as they separated. Christian fumbled for his phone and finally looking down at the screen. A smile curved his lips.

"Is that from David?"

Christian nodded and showed him the screen.

Catching ride w Mira, take J home? Have fun. ;)

"Seems like they hit it off." His own phone rang at that point with a familiar ring tone. "Hi Mira," he answered without looking.

"Hey there. Okay if I take off?"

"I'll be fine. Christian just got David's text. Anything I should know about?" he teased.

"Shut up. He's a fine-looking man, but I'm taken at the moment. Just giving him a ride. Home. A ride home."

"I'll ignore that for now. Did you just call him fine-looking to

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his face? Don't embarrass the guy."

"What?" she demanded, then ruined the effect by laughing. "You know me. Not much of a censor. He's pretty fun to tease. Almost as fun as you."

"Ha ha. If you're sure you're comfortable with this. We're just ten minutes away from the restaurant..."

"Don't worry about me. You two have fun. It's about time you met someone you had the hots for. Who knows, maybe you'll get lucky."

He stared straight at those sexy, slightly puffed lips. *If she only knew.*

"Maybe," he vaguely agreed. "Gotta go."

"All right, I get the hint. Call me tomorrow. Bye."

Jarrold said goodbye and hung up. He turned toward the fountain and watched the water pensively. Here was a chance to get things off to a more normal start. But he had to remember that Christian had just gotten out of a relationship, however toxic, with someone he'd loved for a long time. It would likely be a long time before he'd be ready to take on a new relationship. Intimate start notwithstanding, they were still barely more than strangers.

His cock didn't seem to agree, half-hard with apparently remembering some of the things they'd already done as strangers. *No repeat performance is likely in the near future, so quit it.*

"It's okay. I'll just give you a ride. Nothing more."

The hesitance in Christian's voice had him rushing to reassure. "I'm not expecting anything. That doesn't mean I wouldn't enjoy it if it did, but it might be nice to take things slow. And I'd appreciate the ride. Wouldn't want to disappoint the matchmakers."

That earned him a genuine grin from his default date. "Let's head out then."

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* * *

“Nice house.” Christian was impressed. It was one of those older neighborhoods that had stood the test of time. All the houses on the surrounding blocks were around eighty years old, but were beautifully maintained and cared for. He parked on the street in front of Jarrod’s home and turned off the car. “You know, it just occurred to me. I have no idea what you do for a living. I think I know more about Mira than you.”

Jarrod chuckled. “That’s probably true. I have a remodeling and restoration business.”

Christian took a closer look at his house. “Did you do your own?”

Jarrod nodded. “That’s actually how I ended up here. This used to be the eyesore of the neighborhood. Want to come in for a few minutes? Never did get that sweet earlier.” His gaze dropped to Christian’s lips and he licked them in reflex. Heat flashed in his eyes, and all Christian wanted in that moment was another kiss like the one by the fountain. “We can talk over some baklava and coffee maybe?”

Mmm. Honey and Jarrod. He took a deep breath and nodded.

The interior was as lovely as the outside, and even to Christian’s untrained eye, looked very much as the original must have. Until they got to the kitchen.

“Wow.” Whereas the other areas he’d passed through had been reminiscent of the past, the kitchen was thoroughly modern and looked like something out of *Sunset Magazine*. “You must love to cook in here.”

“I do, but don’t do it that often. Only when I’m lucky enough to have company. Most of the rest of the time, I keep meals pretty

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basic. In the summer, I grill out a lot. Less cleanup that way.”

“I hear ya.” They chatted about general things until Jarrod had finished brewing coffee and had a couple of large pistachio-laden pieces of baklava on a plate. They settled back in the living room with their dessert, choosing to sit side-by-side on the couch.

After they’d eaten most of the pastry, Christian asked, “So tell me how this place went from eyesore to this.”

Jarrold leaned back with his mug. “Started out as an estimate. The woman living here hadn’t maintained or updated it, and when she passed away, her heirs thought about remodeling. So I came in to give them a bid. It was a mess, but you could tell there were great bones under the awful décor and lack of updating. They hadn’t planned on spending so much, so they ended up putting it on the market.”

“And you bought it,” Christian guessed and took his last bite of the pastry.

“Yep. I’d been living in another house on the other side of town. And even when I bought it, I figured I’d just fix it up and flip it. But I just fell in love with the neighborhood and the residents. So I ended up renting out my other one and moving in here, even before I finished the work. It was pretty primitive at some points, especially when I got busy working on other, paying projects. But I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“Neither would I. Not that I’m an expert or anything. Can I have the grand tour now that we’re done with dessert?”

“I’m not quite done yet.”

Christian looked in confusion at the crumb-strewn plate, then back at Jarrod, who leaned in close. Awareness hit in a wave, and he parted his lips as Jarrod raised a hand and stroked Christian’s lower lip with his thumb. He then held up the thumb with a wicked

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smile, showing Christian the flake of pastry he'd removed before using his own tongue to snag the piece.

Blushing furiously, Christian started to reach for the napkin sitting on the table next to him, but Jarrod grabbed his wrist instead.

"Let me," he commanded, his voice low and intimate.

Christian watched helplessly as Jarrod lifted his hand toward his mouth, then moaned as first his finger, then his thumb were sucked into the wet, warm heat of Jarrod's mouth. "Mmm."

"Oh, my God." His cock went almost instantly hard at the feel of the suction, and he shifted, restless, wishing he could straighten it out from the downward bend it was trapped in by his briefs.

"Let's make sure your lips are clean," Jarrod murmured before he ran his tongue along each lip in turn, then returned again and again to his lower one before Christian couldn't stand the teasing touch anymore and used his free hand to curl around the back of Jarrod's neck. He pulled him forward into a hard, satisfying kiss that Jarrod almost immediately took control of.

Without quite knowing how he came to be there, Christian found himself on his back on the couch with Jarrod's muscular form braced over the top of him. Their legs were interwoven, which gave both men a thigh or hip for much-needed counter-pressure. Rocking together, they kissed themselves breathless, hands wandering wherever they could reach.

Christian opened himself to Jarrod, hooking his leg around Jarrod's hip, and Jarrod settled into the cradle of his thighs with a needy groan. His rock-hard shaft nestled alongside Christian's own, and it wasn't but a moment before they were thrusting together.

The barrier of their clothing was becoming more and more of a

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nuisance, and Christian turned his head to the side. Jarrod immediately attacked his neck, pulling a moan from Christian before he finally said, "Please, my pants."

"Off? Or just open?"

Jarrod's eyes blazed down at him with unchecked desire, but he'd stilled, awaiting Christian's answer. He knew what Jarrod was asking, and though the thought of Jarrod's beautiful, thick uncut cock filling him was almost too much temptation to resist, he didn't want to reinforce his somewhat easy reputation as far as Jarrod was concerned.

"Open."

Jarrod immediately shifted his weight, and the couch was just wide enough for the two men to each lie on their sides facing one another. He made quick work of opening his own fly and pulling his erection free of the material before reaching to do the same for Christian. Giving his palm a good lick, he grasped both of their cocks in turn, giving them a polish to spread the pre-cum and saliva until both were slick. One more lick, and he took both erections in one large hand, jacking them together.

Caught between Jarrod's palm and his cock, the stimulation was almost instantly unbearable, especially after all the verbal and physical foreplay they'd indulged in. Breaking out in a sweat with the effort involved in thrusting but trying not to embarrass himself, he rapidly approached the breaking point.

"Don't hold back. I want you to come. Come all over my hand, all over my cock. Come on." Jarrod kept up a litany of talk, all the while watching Christian from just inches away, and Christian could no longer resist. He thrust a few more times into that tight grip as the tension built between his spine and balls, and then arched and shot, stiffening as he came, head thrown back.

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“Oh yeah,” Jarrod encouraged and milked him through the aftershocks before releasing Christian and using his cum to finish with a few more strokes of his own shaft. Christian watched, fascinated as before, as the foreskin drew up and over, then down, again and again until a jet of white heralded Jarrod’s orgasm.

Having satisfied his desire to see Jarrod come, he covered Jarrod’s lips with his own and kissed him through his climax and beyond, continuing to rock and rub their spent cocks together in the slickness of their combined ejaculate. They rubbed together for a few moments more, then stilled in their embrace. The kiss similarly waned into merely resting their foreheads together.

Christian basked in the afterglow, enjoying the momentary connection, both spiritual and physical, with Jarrod.

Oh God, he’s almost too good to be true. Please don’t let me screw this up.

CHAPTER 6

Several weeks had gone by in which Christian barely saw anyone. Which was great when it came to Carl. He continued to email and call, leaving message after message, but thankfully hadn't come to the house, at least not when Christian was at home. It was almost as if he didn't quite dare test that boundary, knowing that Christian knew about Mira, though he still hadn't admitted to anything.

David was alternately busy with work—not unusual—and with spending time with Mira. They'd really hit it off, though David swore during the few phone conversations and visits he'd had with Christian that they were simply friends who enjoyed spending time together. Christian could tell his friend felt more than friendship for her, but spared David the commentary or any teasing, thinking

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it was probably hard enough for his friend, wanting someone he couldn't have.

Been there, done that, ripped up the T-shirt for rags.

Unfortunately, Jarrod was also a victim of work. Summer was a very busy time for him, and he'd lined up several jobs long ago that took up double digit hours almost every single day. They'd managed to have an average of one date a week, and tried to call each other every day. It didn't help that Christian had a couple of weeks on swing shift at his job as a radiology technician, so his evenings were nonexistent on his work days.

He'd finally moved back to days, which presented the opposite problem of needing to be in bed at a decent hour so he could be at work by six A.M. But he was willing to forgo his beauty rest if it worked out that he could actually be with Jarrod.

Jarrod had just wrapped up a time-suck of a job, so to celebrate, Christian was having him over to grill out. Since Jarrod had also been neglecting Mira, they'd invited both Mira and David over for the barbeque as well. Christian was just hoping they didn't linger. He'd missed Jarrod, and it seemed every day, the longing grew stronger. With neither of them having to work in the morning, he was hoping tonight would be the night when he'd finally know the pleasure of Jarrod's thick cock fucking him, his body pressing him into the mattress, joining them as closely as was physically possible.

Christian was palming his partial erection through his cargo shorts when the doorbell rang. Hoping for Jarrod, he was nonetheless pleased to see David. "Hey. So where's Mira?"

"She'll be here soon. She couldn't decide which salad to get from Whole Foods, so she's running behind." David was wearing that sappy expression Christian was getting used to seeing any time

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Mira was mentioned. Forcibly restraining himself, he bit his tongue and went back to poking holes in the freshly washed potatoes before sticking them in the microwave.

David helped himself to a beer from the six-pack he'd brought along, offering one to Christian. "What can I do to help?"

There was a knock on the door, and Christian walked toward the foyer, drying his hands on a towel, calling back, "Um, I bought some of that spinach dip. Can you get that out and then open the chips? The big bowl's under the—"

"Got it!" David called.

This time it was Mira at the door. "Hi there, great to see you again."

She gave him a short hug. "You, too. Here, I brought a salad. Well, two. I couldn't decide."

They laughed together as they walked to the kitchen. Mira gave David a big hug, then punched him on the arm when he teased her about buying every salad in the store. Christian left them bickering comfortably on the back deck when the front screen door opened and he heard Jarrod call, "Hello!"

"Hi," Christian greeted as he came around the corner. Wow. In a tight-fitting black T-shirt that showcased his muscular form and worn jeans that showed off his assets, Jarrod was looking unbelievably hot. Christian didn't stop until he'd walked straight into those strong arms. "Missed you."

He tilted his head up to receive a long, sweet kiss. Jarrod took his time, making it as deep and thorough as he always did. Christian was slightly grinding against him when Jarrod reminded him huskily, "Don't forget we have company."

"They're outside. And they won't even notice if we hide in the bedroom for a while."

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For a moment Jarrod looked tempted, and Christian's arousal deepened. Then he gave Christian one last kiss and set him from him.

He pouted dramatically at the separation. "Spoilsport."

"Oh, I'm going to spoil you all right. Spoil you for any other man." To Christian's delight, Jarrod was goaded into pulling him back up flush against his body, and he circled his hips against Christian as he grabbed a double handful of his tight ass.

"Mmm. I think I can handle that."

"What? This?" Jarrod took one of Christian's hands and moved it to cover his flourishing erection. "Feel what you do to me."

"Oh, I am." Christian was busy tracing the ridge of Jarrod's cock through the front of his jeans, then cupping his balls while Jarrod nibbled his way down Christian's neck.

"What the fuck?"

Jarrod and Christian both jolted in shock and Christian whipped his head around to face, not one of their guests, but Carl, standing at the front screen door just feet away. "Oh crap."

"What the hell is going on here?" Carl opened the door and walked inside uninvited.

"Burkhart, just a minute. I don't think Christian invited you in."

"Holy shit, Rainey?" Carl looked stunned to see the identity of the man with Christian. Then his anger returned. "You're cheating on me with Rainey?"

Christian saw red and he tore into Carl, letting out all of his frustration at the treatment he'd received from the man he'd once thought he loved—until he'd discovered what a pure love could feel like. *Fuck, what a time to realize I love Jarrod.*

"No, asshole. I'm not cheating on you because we are *not*

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together. *You* were cheating on your fiancée with me, and I ended it. Period. End of story.”

Too late, Christian remembered that said fiancée was in his backyard.

Oh fuck, I've got to get him out of here.

“Chris, babe, you can’t do this to us.”

He approached Carl. “You need to go. Right now,” he urgently added, trying to keep his voice low, but it was too late. He heard a feminine gasp from behind him.

“*Chris?* Christian is...” She broke off and went silent as realization hit, and Christian’s gaze bounced helplessly between Mira’s shocked and crumpling face and Carl’s deathly pallor at the unexpected sight of his girlfriend.

David stood just behind Mira, bristling at the sight of Carl. Jarrod was watching Carl intently, as if waiting for him to make a move so he could stop him. Mira was weeping openly now into her hands. And Carl was still as a statue, as if in shock. Christian didn’t know who to go to or speak to first. Adrenaline buzzing through him, he turned back to Carl, who had gone from pale to bright red.

“Mira, honey...”

“No. You don’t have the right to call me that.” Even with tears falling, Mira’s voice was steady and clear. “You lost that right when you broke your promise to me. You promised it was over with Chris, and now here you are, talking to him about *us*.” She wrenched the engagement ring off her finger, walked right up and offered it to him. When he didn’t take it right away, she pressed her lips into hard line and stuffed the ring down his front pants pocket. “You know, it doesn’t even bother me that he’s a man. What I care about is how little you must respect me to be here right

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now. I'm done. Please don't contact me again."

Her spine was stiff as she walked into the kitchen out of sight. With a quick glance at Jarrod, who nodded, David walked quickly after her.

Down to the three remaining men, Christian watched as Carl turned to him with a vulnerability he'd never seen in him in all the years they'd known one another.

"Chris, I..." His eye flicked to a watchful Jarrod. "Can we speak alone for a minute? Please?"

Wishing this would all disappear, but also feeling hard-pressed to turn him away because of their shared history and because of the *please*, Christian turned to Jarrod, who looked back at him impassively. The mask from the ball came to mind. His expression just then rivaled the costume for hiding what he really felt inside.

Jarrod must have seen something in his face, a hint that he was leaning toward granting Carl's request, because he made the decision for them by walking to the entrance to the kitchen. After a brief, unintelligible exchange with the other two, Christian heard noises that told him they'd all moved outside to the deck.

Carl was still watching him when he turned back and, feeling weary with the whole situation, Christian led the way to the living room couch.

"I don't know what to say," Carl admitted, his eyes suspiciously bright. "I really fucked this all up."

Christian nodded in silent agreement, sensing that Carl needed to verbally unburden himself. As he suspected, Carl continued without needing any encouragement.

"You always scared the crap out of me. The way I felt for you." He twisted his hands together, not looking at Christian. "Even back when we were teenagers, something about you tied me up in knots,

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and then in college when we actually, you know..."

He nodded again, not sure if Carl would be able to say it.

"It was way better than it had ever been with girls. But I told myself that didn't mean anything, I just hadn't found the right one that did it for me. You know? Then after college, I dated some women and saw some guys, and didn't really feel much about any of them. Until Mira. She was something else, so smart and confident. And she liked *me*," Carl emphasized with amazement, as if he couldn't think of why she would have. This less-than-confident shell of the man Christian had known was at once pathetic and heartbreaking.

"I couldn't believe it when she said she'd marry me. I'd hit the jackpot. And then I ran into you, and everything I'd once felt for you came back to me."

Christian felt the back of his throat start to burn a bit at the raw emotion pouring from Carl.

"So here I was, engaged to the woman of my dreams, and reunited with the love of my life. And I just, I couldn't...decide." Carl hung his head, defeat in every line of his posture. "Mira was amazing and the safe choice. But you," Carl looked up again, "being with you was so intense, so sexy, and I could feel the love you had for me. I couldn't give you up. And I can't let you go now."

Alarmed, Christian sat up just as Carl moved forward to try to kiss him. Evading his mouth was hard with the hands firmly gripping his biceps, but he finally managed to move out of reach, putting a hand out to Carl's chest as a deterrent.

"I'm really flattered. And I want you to be happy, honestly. We've been friends for way too long for me to not wish you well. But I just...don't feel that way about you anymore. I don't say this

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to be hurtful, but I lost a lot of respect for you when I learned about Mira. And it killed any love I ever had for you.” Christian felt horrible when he saw the anguished wince that bald declaration caused, but he didn’t want there to be any room for misunderstanding.

Carl looked up at him miserably. “So not only have I lost your love, but I’ve lost you as a friend.”

Christian searched Carl’s eyes as he asked, “Would you want to be just friends? Or would it be easier to have a clean break?”

Swallowing, Carl admitted, “I can’t imagine not having you as a friend, Chris.” His eyes pleaded with Christian’s. “If you think you can, I mean.”

With a part of him glad they might come out of this with some positive feelings, he gave Carl an impulsive hug. “Of course I can.”

“Oh, thank God. Thank you. You won’t regret it, I promise you.” Carl had latched on to him as if he would never let go. “I’m going to treat you like gold. Never going to let you down again. Thank you so much, babe.” Trying to extricate himself, a motion out of the corner of his eye had Christian looking over to see Jarrod taking in the scene with pain in his eyes.

As if the act of their gazes meeting broke his paralysis, Jarrod immediately headed out the front door without a word or backward glance.

* * *

He’s taking him back.

In shock over the reunion between Carl and Christian he’d just witnessed, Jarrod left the house and walked down the block with

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no thought as to where he might go. He turned one corner, then the next, walking with his hands shoved in his pockets and his head down.

Now that Mira's out of the picture, he's taking him back.

He huffed mirthlessly. He hadn't seen that one coming. Jarrod had been so certain that he and Christian were tight. Were falling in love.

Hard to compete against a newly free man you've loved for over a decade.

He didn't know how he'd even expected to be in the running.

Jarrod walked for at least a mile with a steady flow of self-castigation as he replayed the scene he'd witnessed over and over in his head.

Finally, a few things started to tick over in his consciousness.

Had Christian been trying to get *out* of the embrace? It seemed like he'd been struggling. Maybe just to keep from being discovered. He had looked shocked to see Jarrod standing there.

Finally calming down a bit, Jarrod tried to think if anything in the time he'd known Christian, from that every first night they met, would ever point to him giving Jarrod up to go back to Carl. Jarrod ran through their conversations and their dates, their quiet moments together and their passionate encounters.

And came up with...nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

So what did that mean? Maybe there was nothing there. After all, it wasn't Christian professing himself to Carl. Maybe Carl still hadn't gotten things through his thick head. Or maybe he'd misunderstood Christian's innate niceness.

Was Jarrod really going to be one of *those* guys?

The guys in books and movies who rush off and screw things

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up because of a stupid, big misunderstanding?

Hell no.

He turned around.

* * *

When Jarrod got back to Christian's house, it was very quiet. He let himself in, and walked through the living area and into the kitchen. Through the window over the sink, he could see Christian sitting alone on the glider, rocking himself back and forth.

A lump rose in his throat at the solitary sight.

He strode quickly out the door and saw Christian stiffen at the sound of his footsteps on the deck. Jarrod stopped right behind him and placed his hands on Christian's shoulders. He heard Christian swallow before he spoke.

"He was talking about me still being his friend. And only his friend, nothing more. I just couldn't cut him off completely. But...I will if that's what it takes to make you believe..."

Jarrod couldn't wait anymore. "I believe you. I did all along. Even when I heard that with my own ears, it just didn't make sense. It took me a few blocks for the shock to wear off, but once it did, I knew you wouldn't just take him back. Not after all we've come to mean to each other."

He let go of Christian's shoulders and walked around to kneel in front of him, taking him into his arms. Christian took it a step further by wrapping not only his arms, but also his legs around Jarrod, tucking his head into the lee of Jarrod's shoulder. He fit to him as closely as a puzzle piece to its mate, and Jarrod felt the snick of things falling into place in his heart and head.

They rocked there for a few minutes in silence before Jarrod's

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stomach rumbled, making them laugh quietly.

Christian pulled back to grin at Jarrod. "Hungry? I can call Mira and David back and we can eat."

"Maybe after."

Christian's expression heated. "After what?"

"After I fuck you silly."

* * *

They moved to the bedroom in fits and starts, kissing heatedly for periods, groping and caressing. Plus there were all those handy walls for Jarrod to press Christian up against along the way.

Too impatient for a striptease, Jarrod quickly stripped Christian down to nothing but skin. About to whip his own shirt off, he stopped when Christian grabbed his arm and shook his head. "Leave it on."

Bemused, especially since Christian was running his hands up underneath the fabric to stroke his pecs and abs, he cocked an eyebrow at his partner, inviting an explanation.

"You look so fucking hot in black. My stranger in black. I think I have a new fetish."

Jarrod's grin slowly spread across his face. "Just wait till you see my boxer briefs then." He undid his fly and shimmied his jeans down to the floor, stepping out of his jeans and slides at the same time.

"Mmm." Christian hit his knees on the floor in front of him, and looked coyly up at Jarrod. "This seems familiar."

Jarrod's was breathing through his mouth already and still felt like he couldn't get enough oxygen. "Come on," he growled, and Christian responded by mouthing Jarrod's erection through the

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black fabric, bathing his cock in warm, moist air through the cotton.

He flexed his fingers, itching to push his briefs down to free himself. Christian seemed to know the moment he couldn't take any more, and finally eased the fabric down enough to release Jarrod's cock and balls. He didn't waste any more time teasing, for which Jarrod was eternally grateful, and took him deep into the warm cavern of his mouth in one swift move.

Jarrod arched his back, trying hard not to thrust unexpectedly. Christian's hands kneaded up his thighs and around to his glutes at he worked his shaft skillfully with just his mouth, finally pulling off with a slight *pop*.

"Up." When Christian had complied, Jarrod force-stepped him back until they reached the bed, then pressed him down and crawled up over him, erection bobbing out in front as he knelt astride Christian's languid form.

Working his way with mouth, lips and hands first down Christian's chest and pecs, he stopped and teased his dark pink nipples into hard peaks, flicking at them relentlessly with teeth and tongue as Christian bucked and moaned.

A lick and a promise down that flat abdomen, and he reached the deeply colored erection straining toward his touch. Christian was almost holding his breath, and rather than tease, he put him out of his misery. He deliberately licked his lips, then took the plum-shaped head into his mouth, tasting his way around all the edges and crevices before pushing his way down the rigid shaft.

There was only so much they both could take before needing penetration, so at Christian's direction, Jarrod located the brand new box of condoms and bottle of lubricant. Cupping the tightly drawn sac with its dusting of light blond hair, Jarrod then trailed

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his touch down farther to Christian's tight pink entrance.

Not sparing any lube, Jarrod loaded up his fingers and stroked across Christian's hole a couple times before lightly pressing against it. With a slight change in angle, he pressed again and gained entrance. He slid in slowly, working his finger in and out until it relaxed enough to take a second digit. Meanwhile, Jarrod alternately bathed Christian's sac and cock with his mouth and tongue until Christian was thrusting violently, needing and ready.

He stroked his own shaft a couple times before opening the packet and rolling the condom down his erection. With a quick application of lube to himself, he then fit the tip of his cock in place and pressed inside.

Christian was as sexy and gorgeous as Jarrod had ever seen him, lying there with passion flushing his cheeks and chest, beautiful prick plumped out against his abdomen, and legs pulled back and opened to him. As his body again relented, Jarrod thrust slowly forward until he was completely enclosed in that warm, tight grip.

"God, you feel good."

Christian didn't reply, just stroked down to Jarrod's lower back. At the encouragement, he began to move, and it wasn't long until he was gritting to restrain himself. He caught the same vibe from Christian, so he took his cock in hand and began to pull in time with his thrusts.

"Oh fuck, oh-so-close..."

"Yeah, come on."

"Waiting for you," Christian managed.

"Go. I'm there." He picked up the pace, sweat rolling down his back now with his effort and the mid-summer humidity. He felt the first clench, and looked down in time to see the first strand of cum

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fly across Christian's abdomen. Looking at his lover's ecstatic face for the rest of his climax catapulted Jarrod into his own completion, and he pressed deep and held, filling the condom with burst after burst.

Collapsing onto Christian, who opened his arms to welcome his weight, Jarrod struggled to get his breath back. His thoughts coalesced into one home truth: Christian was the one he was meant to be with...forever.

"Forever," he echoed aloud. And he heard his answer come back to him—without any need for explanation—in the voice he'd never stopped thinking about from the time he first heard it.

"Forever."

DEVON RHODES

Devon started reading and writing at a young age and never looked back. After a creatively sapping career in the business world, she gratefully took some time off to be at home.

At 39 and holding, Devon finally figured out the best way to channel her midlife crisis was to morph from mild-mannered stay-at-home mom into erotic romance writer.

She lives in Oregon with her husband and two children, who are (mostly) understanding of all the time she spends on her laptop, aka the black hole.

For all the latest, visit her blog at www.devonrhodes.blogspot.com.

* * *

**Don't miss *The Swap*
by Devon Rhodes,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

When layoffs hit Jim LaRue's company, his first concern isn't for his own job, it's for his friend and co-worker, Tommy Graves. Tommy's coming off a bad year, finally made better by the purchase of a new house. Losing his job would mean losing the house, however, and his newfound lease on life. Jim can't let that

happen to the man he's secretly come to love, so he proposes a swap to his boss—forefeit his own job to save Tommy's.

Now suddenly out of work, Jim reluctantly accepts a job helping Tommy remodel his house. Having the work is great, but it also chafes Jim's pride to be employed by his friend, and creates one of several obstacles in their budding romance.

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