

The background of the cover features a muscular man in a black leather jacket, shirtless, looking down. In the upper left, there is a ghostly, blue-tinted image of another man's face. The background also shows a city skyline at night.

Shades
Of The *Past*

STEPHANI HECHT

All paramedics know how dangerous their job can be. Kiefer just never expected to experience that truth so early in his career when he lost his cousin and job partner to a tragic accident. Now floundering in both life and his role as a paramedic, Kiefer is in jeopardy of losing everything he worked so hard for.

In all his years as a Pontiac City Fireman, Ray's seen a lot of hurt. Nothing affected him more than the day he found Kiefer, emotionally shattered and near catatonic. Ever since then, Ray hasn't been able to get the paramedic out of his mind. When he finds out that Kiefer is making a cross-country trip to return some items to his deceased cousin's mother, Ray jumps at the chance to go along. What Ray doesn't expect is to fall for the medic. Will he be able to help Kiefer heal enough to give them a chance or will Ray suffer his own heartbreak?

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Shades of the Past
EMS Heat Nine

By

Stephani Hecht

Dedication

*To all the brave EMS workers who've made the
ultimate sacrifice.*

Chapter One

The call that came out was one that all in the EMS community anticipated, yet feared. Six words that never failed to strike horror in any of them, be they fireman, policeman or medical staff. *Mass casualties. EMS personnel involved.*

By the time Ray and his fire company arrived on scene, things had progressed from chaos to a master cluster fuck. Several other emergency vehicles were parked haphazardly around, and people seemed to be running about without any organization. Civilians mixed in with EMS workers as a large house fire provided for an illuminating backdrop.

Ray hopped from the truck, his heavy boots landing on broken glass and other debris. Twisted metal and clothing hung high in numerous tree branches and the windows of several neighboring homes sported broken panes.

“What in the hell happened here?” Ray demanded to nobody in particular.

Adam, a passing police officer, answered, “A

meth house exploded with two medic teams on scene.”

Ray’s stomach curdled. Now he understood why his buddy Vaughn had freaked out so much when they got the call. His boyfriend, Dustin, must have been one of the medics involved. Ray quickly scanned the mess of a scene, a sigh of relief going through him when he saw Vaughn embracing what appeared to be an unharmed Dustin.

“Were there any casualties?” He studied what was left of the home. Damn, if anyone had been inside when it went up, they would be lucky to walk out with their lives.

“One civilian and one medic died,” Adam replied.

“Who was the medic?”

Even in a city as large as Pontiac, EMS workers tended to get close, or, at the very least, know each other by name.

“Jill Hines. Her cousin, Kiefer, was in there, too, but he somehow managed to make it out.” Adam nodded to the curb.

Ray glanced over and his heart seized in his chest as he took in the small figure huddled there. Somebody had taken the time to throw a blanket around Kiefer’s shoulders, but other than that, the medic looked neglected and forgotten. His head was tipped down, sweat plastering his short,

brown hair to his skull. Even from a distance, Ray could see the shivers racking the man's thin body.

"When I pulled on scene, the poor kid was crying over Jill's body. Some bloodsucking reporter took a bunch of pictures of them before I intervened. Goddamn vulture wouldn't even let the guy mourn his partner in peace. "

"They were more than partners, they were also cousins," Ray replied.

While Jill had been a medic for a few years, Kiefer just recently got his license. He was so new to the system that Ray only met him once before, and that had been just at a mild fender bender scene.

"Well, I made sure to escort the reporter away," Adam replied with a savage grin.

Ray glanced back over at Kiefer. The man sat so still, not even reacting when there was another small explosion from the house. It seemed as if he'd just shut down and nobody was home.

"Has anybody checked him out for injuries?" Ray demanded.

Adam shrugged, "Everything is so FUBAR, who knows."

Well then, Ray would just have to remedy that. Since he also had his basic EMT license, nobody would question him going to check out a patient. He walked over to Kiefer and knelt down next to the man.

If Kiefer noticed Ray's presence, he didn't show it. He just continued to stare at the ground. From his new position, Ray saw how vacant Kiefer's blue-eyed gaze appeared. A sheen of sweat covered the young man's way-too-pale, soot-streaked face and his teeth chattered together so loudly Ray could hear it even over all the other commotion surrounding them.

"Hey, Kiefer. How are you doing?" Ray asked in his most soothing tone.

When Kiefer continued with that whole vacant stare thing, concern rocketed through Ray. At the same time, he wondered how in the hell nobody noticed the half-catatonic medic in their midst. Sure, it may be a bit chaotic, but somebody should have at least taken Kiefer into one of the rescue vehicles and assessed him.

"Are you hurt anywhere?" Ray tried again.

Kiefer still didn't reply to Ray's question. He just pulled the blanket tighter around himself as he let out a soft whimper of distress. Ray still took that as a sign of hope, because *any* response was better than none at that point.

Ray scooted in a bit closer and reached a tentative hand out. "I'm just going to palpate your body for any broken bones. Okay?"

That got a nod. Not much of one, just a fraction of movement, but it was enough for the moment. Ray slipped his hands under the blanket and

began to slowly run his hands over the man's body, feeling for deformities while at the same time looking for any reaction of pain from Kiefer. Finally, as Ray reached his ribs, Kiefer let out a low hiss of agony.

"We need to get you to the hospital so they can x-ray these," Ray said, still using his best it'll-be-okay voice.

Kiefer mumbled something that got lost in all the other noise.

Ray leaned in more. "Can you repeat that?"

"I can't leave her."

They both glanced over to the body that was now discreetly covered by a blanket. Ray's chest tightened in sympathy. It would be hell to lose a partner, but to have that person also be a relative made it ten times worse. Ray put an arm around Kiefer's shoulders.

"I'll make sure she's taken care of, I promise. Jill wouldn't want you to sit here in pain. She'd want you to go in and get checked out."

"No, she wouldn't," Kiefer replied, this time louder.

"Of course she would."

"I called her a twat," Kiefer declared between clenched teeth.

"I'm sure she knew you didn't mean it."

Kiefer went on. "It's such a mean, vile word. I never use it. But today she made me so mad that I

lost control and it just slipped out.”

“Hey, we all say things we don’t mean in the heat of the moment.”

“But it was the *last* thing I ever said to her. When we went into the house, I immediately knew something was off. The place reeked of chemicals and there was all this equipment lying around the place. You know, the kind of stuff they train us to look out for in meth houses. I pointed it out to her and she told me just to shut the hell up and stop being such a pansy all the time.”

Ouch, Ray hated to admit it, but he probably would have called Jill a few choice names after that kind of insult, too. He may have told Kiefer that, but the medic continued to ramble on, not allowing Ray to get in a word of his own.

“She was always calling me names like that. Our whole family did. They liked to always make sure that I knew what a freak I was, the weakling who needed to have help all through life. I knew I was right this time so I kept insisting we leave. She got so mad at me. Then she called me a drama queen faggot and I lost it and told her that at least I wasn’t some bitter twat who couldn’t get a man to look at me twice. After I said that I turned to leave and the house exploded just as I reached the door.”

Ray had no doubt that action had been what saved Kiefer’s life. Kiefer let out a soft keening

noise as he rocked back and forth a few times.

“Why couldn’t she listen to me? If only for this one time.”

Going from what he’d heard about Jill, she never listened to anybody, period. She’d been such a bitch to work with that, before Kiefer, she’d gone through more partners than Lady Gaga went through costume changes. Ray decided to keep that opinion to himself. The last thing Kiefer needed to hear was that his now-deceased cousin was the shrew of the EMS community.

Ray tightened his one arm grip on Kiefer’s shoulders and pulled him into a half-hug. The younger man didn’t fight the hold. Just the opposite, he let out a shuddering sigh as he sank into Ray.

As Kiefer’s body seemed to mold into his side, Ray became aware of two things. One, that Kiefer made for a perfect fit. Second came the startling realization that Ray would do anything to protect the medic from being hurt again.

Ray paused, blinking a few times in surprise. Now where in the hell had that come from? While he loved his job as a fireman, he’d never felt this fiercely protective of a patient before. It was all he could do not to turn and take Kiefer into a complete embrace, just so he could shield the man from all the pain he was going through.

Shocked and shamed at his inappropriate

thoughts, Ray told himself to pull away. Before he had a chance, Kiefer reached out and fisted one hand in the front of Ray's shirt as if to anchor them together.

Ray glanced down at that hand, noting the scrapes that marred the knuckles, no doubt an injury from when the explosion threw him forward. Soot and dirt mixed in with the dried blood. All Ray wanted to do was to take Kiefer and clean him up, to wash away both the dirt and the bad memories.

"I should have never left her," Kiefer declared.

"If you hadn't, you would have died with her."

"I could hear her screaming. Smell it as her body..." Kiefer let out a shiver.

"Shh...don't think about that now," Ray urged.

"I let her down and she died because of it."

"It was a terrible accident. The ones to blame are the people who set up the lab in the first place."

Another medic, Saxon, came rushing over. "Hey, Kiefer, how are you doing?"

"He has some tenderness to the ribs," Ray reported as he reluctantly let Kiefer go.

Saxon nodded as he went down to his knees. Opening his large medic bag, he pulled out a mask. "Let's get some O2 on you, buddy. Did you inhale any smoke?"

When Kiefer made no move to grab the mask,

Ray reached out, took it and held it to the man's face.

"I don't know if I took in any smoke. I passed out for a while."

Ray and Saxon exchanged concerned glances as that new bit of information opened up the possibility of all other kinds of injuries. Saxon took a quick set of vitals before asking, "How's the asthma?"

"You have asthma?" Ray demanded as he shot a worried glance at Kiefer.

Kiefer gave another of his shrugs. "I've had it ever since I was a little kid."

Saxon slid his stethoscope under Kiefer's shirt and listened for a few moments before letting out a soft sound of frustration. "I can't hear for shit with all this commotion going on."

"My lungs feel a little tight," Kiefer admitted.

That seemed to be all Saxon needed to hear. Moving quickly, he barked out orders and, before Ray knew it, a cot and another medic were there. Ray helped load Kiefer onto the cot. His stomach flipped when he noted the blue tint forming around Kiefer's lips.

Kiefer now clung to the oxygen mask, his body fighting for every breath he took in. Panicked, Ray realized how quickly Kiefer's condition was spiraling down. He helped the medics rush the cot to a rig.

As they reached the ambulance, a third medic ran forward to help and Ray found himself being nudged to the side as they quickly got to work, stabilizing Kiefer. An IV was started while another medic hooked Kiefer up to a monitor as yet another one started a breathing treatment.

Ray felt his heart sinking with each sentence the medics exchanged.

“Shit, he’s going tachy on us.”

“Get an intubation tube ready, we may have to use it.”

“Call St. Anthony’s and let them know we have a priority one coming in.”

“Damn it, his pulse ox is dropping, we need to scoop and run.”

“Stay with us, Kiefer. If we have to do CPR on your ass, you’re seriously going to piss us off.”

“Let’s get going.”

The back doors to the rig shut, blocking Ray’s view. He continued to stand there, his chest tight with fear as he wondered what was happening to Kiefer. As the rig pulled away, Ray had the insane urge to run after it. He even took a few steps forward before he caught himself.

As the lights and sirens came to life, Ray bit his bottom lip in worry. He had a feeling that even if Kiefer did survive the night, the man had lost a piece of himself in the explosion. One that may never fully heal.

Chapter Two

Five months later

Kiefer looked sad again.

As soon as Ray walked out of the smoke-filled house, his gaze had begun to search for the thin paramedic. Ray had heard the call from dispatch, saying they were sending a rig to check out the inhabitants of the home. He'd also heard the number of said ambulance...625.

For the past five months, those three numbers had been burned into Ray's brain. Not because he had a special affinity for that particular rig, or because he'd decided they were his new Powerball lottery combination either. No, it all had to do with one certain medic assigned to that ambulance.

Kiefer.

Ray's gaze finally found and locked in on the medic. Even under the crappy illumination of the

flashing sirens and weak streetlamps, Kiefer looked perfect. So much so that Ray's breath hitched a bit.

Kiefer stood at the back of his rig. The doors were open and a small girl sat on the edge, her bare feet dangling in the air. Her tear-streaked face turned up into the medic's direction as a tiny smile covered her face.

The medic wore a heavy, blue raincoat over his usual dark navy uniform. Even though the rain no longer fell in a heavy torrent, drops of water still clung to Kiefer's dark hair. He'd allowed the front to grow a bit longer so a lock fell over his deep, blue eyes. Although a smile graced his young face, it never reached his troubled gaze. Not that Ray expected it, not after everything that'd happened to the guy.

One minute. That's how long it'd taken for Kiefer's life to become forever changed. Sixty seconds of terror and the man's life had gone into the crapper. The worst part is, while Ray wanted to help the kid out, he'd quickly found out there was squat he could do.

After he took off some of his heavier equipment, Ray grabbed a teddy bear from his fire truck and made his way over to the ambulance. With each step closer he took to Kiefer, Ray's heart pounded a bit harder and his stomach clenched nervously.

Damn, he really needed to get a grip. Kiefer never looked at him as anything other than a friend and here Ray was nearly tripping over himself—all from the prospect of being able to have Kiefer’s attention, if just for a moment. It was crazy because even if Kiefer showed a spark of interest, the kid wasn’t emotionally ready to start any kind of relationship.

Try telling that to Ray’s heart though, because it’d long ago given itself up to Kiefer.

Ray forced himself to put on his best smile as he reached the ambulance. Tearing his gaze from Kiefer, Ray handed the bear to the girl. “Hey, this little guy was looking for a new friend. Do you think you could help him out with that?”

Okay, so maybe the line was a bit hokey, but it worked because the girl beamed up at him as she clutched the bear to her chest.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Your bear can ride in the ambulance with you to the hospital,” Kiefer added. “As soon as your daddy is done getting his vitals taken, we’ll leave.”

It was only then that Ray noticed a man lying down on the gurney inside the rig. Kiefer’s partner, Brody hovered over the patient. While the situation didn’t seem too urgent, Ray knew the medics would still be in a hurry to get to the transport complete. Even though the family had

managed to evacuate their home quickly, the danger of smoke inhalation lingered.

As if reading Ray's concerns, Kiefer handed the girl an oxygen mask. "Here you go, sweetie, I want you to try to keep this up to your nose for me."

Another fireman came over with a car seat. Kiefer took it with a murmured thanks. When he went around the rig to the jump seat, Ray rushed forward to help. They both were silent as they worked together to buckle in the car seat. It really wasn't a two-man job and Ray realized Kiefer probably could do the task in his sleep, yet the medic didn't protest the help.

Once they had it in place, Kiefer glanced over his shoulder. "Brody, I have the seat ready if you want to pass her up."

Ray remained and helped belt the little girl in. It wasn't until they'd completed that task that Kiefer finally spoke directly to Ray, "Thanks, Ray. I really appreciate the help."

Not that he'd anticipated anything more. In the five months he'd been slowly falling for Kiefer, the medic continued to seem oblivious to Ray's presence at all. Ray tried to tell himself that it was nothing personal. That Kiefer continued to be so wrapped up in his grief that he hardly talked to anybody. That even though Ray still yearned to protect and shield the man, Kiefer probably just

saw Ray as another work buddy.

The continued brush offs hurt though. Not only that, but they were proving to be a massive blow to his ego.

Ray swallowed hard before he replied, "No biggie. What are friends for?"

That got him a smile, although as before, the happiness never reached Kiefer's eyes. "Well, we better get going. It's been a really busy night so I'm sure they don't want us to waste any time at our calls."

That excuse made perfect sense since Pontiac was always hopping on the weekends. Ray still couldn't help but feel like he'd been given a gentle, yet firm go-away-now. He gave the girl's head a pat before he left the rig.

After he shut the side doors, he went around to make sure the rear ones were closed, too. Upon completing that task, he gave the rig a slap to let Brody know it was safe to start driving.

As he watched the rig pull away, Ray felt himself at a loss. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't seem to get through to Kiefer. While he'd hoped time would help the medic get over his loss, if anything, Kiefer seemed to be withdrawing more into himself.

The worst part of all, Ray didn't know how in the hell he was going to get through the protective shield Kiefer had constructed around himself.

Something told Ray that Kiefer needed him more than ever, too.

* * * *

Kiefer finished up his run report, then stretched his arms into the air to work out some of the kinks in his back. The small room that served as the EMS room at St. Anthony's hospital was empty so he used the silence to soothe his hammering nerves. Nerves that'd been in high gear ever since Kiefer looked up and saw the fireman approaching his rig.

Damn Ray and his constant need to interfere with Kiefer's life. Why in the hell couldn't the fireman take the hint and leave him alone already? Kiefer knew he'd put out enough back-away messages to put off any sane person, yet Ray continued to persist.

It's not that Kiefer didn't like the guy. Ray possessed one of the sweetest and kindest personalities Kiefer ever came into contact with. And it wasn't as if he didn't find Ray attractive either. Hell, if anything, Kiefer found himself *too* turned on by the other guy.

No, in the end, it just came down to the old it's-not-you- it's-me excuse. After everything that he'd gone through in the past few years, Kiefer didn't ever want to become close to anyone again—

period. He had a distinct feeling that if he lifted his guard even a tiny bit, Ray would manage to slip in, too.

So if Ray just so happened to have a hot, muscular body that was made for licking or dark, brown, silky hair that just begged to be played with or full lips that looked like they were made for nibbling on, then Kiefer would just have to ignore it. Because the last thing Kiefer needed was to get involved with Ray. It would only result in the fireman getting hurt or worse.

Of course, it would be much easier if Ray didn't look so fucking sexy in his bunker gear. Just like it would be easier to continue to ignore the fireman if he didn't insist on flashing that engaging smile of his. The one that always made Kiefer's breath catch in his chest. Even Ray's protective nature, which should have grated on Kiefer, was a turn on in its own way.

Kiefer let out a low growl of annoyance as he slapped his metal clipboard shut. If he wanted to get over this damn infatuation he had with Ray, Kiefer wasn't doing himself any favors by mentally listing all the man's assets. What he needed to do was tick off a list of all Ray's faults. The problem was, no matter how hard Kiefer thought, he could only come up with one—the strange attraction Ray seemed to have for some loser paramedic who couldn't even keep his

partner alive.

The door opened and Kiefer didn't even bother to stifle his groan of annoyance when his cousin Chauncey walked in, followed by Brody. Going by the grim expressions on their mugs, they weren't there for the free coffee and donut holes. Great! Just what Kiefer needed, two added pieces of stress in his day. Brody he could put up with since they were partners and Kiefer didn't have a choice. But adding Chauncey into the mix was something Kiefer didn't want to deal with at the moment.

"If this is another intervention, I'm not interested," Kiefer said, cutting them off before they could even begin.

A trauma nurse, Chauncey had the same dark looks and blue eyes as Kiefer. Unlike Kiefer, he also had around thirty pounds more muscle mass and an easygoing nature that always automatically made him the center of attention in any situation. To have somebody tell him no before he even had a chance to voice his opinion must have rankled him.

Not that Kiefer gave a damn. At least not much. While he loved Chauncey, he'd grown tired of his well-meaning cousin always butting into his life. The same went for Brody. Sure, they may have grown close since they'd first been partnered together four months ago, but that didn't mean he

knew what was best for Kiefer.

Chauncey took the seat opposite of him, his blue-eyed gaze, dark and troubled. "Brody told me Ray was on scene at your last call."

Kiefer shot his buddy a dirty look. "Tattletale."

Brody didn't act repentant at all. He even had the gall to give a small shrug. "Hey, I just happened to mention it when I was giving my patient report to Chauncey."

"He only helped me put in a car seat. I don't see what the big deal is."

"Funny, I struggle with equipment all the time, but no sexy fireman steps forward to help me," Brody mused, before he narrowed his eyes at Chauncey. "And I didn't mean that as a pun, so keep the smartass comments to yourself."

Kiefer wanted to argue that with his dark blond hair, tight, sexy body and big, brown doe eyes, Brody could have had his pick of helpers. In the end, Kiefer kept that comment to himself. The last thing they needed was for Brody's head to get any bigger than it already was. The guy may be damn good looking, but he knew it and at times, had a bit of a cocky attitude. If it weren't for the fact that the other ninety percent of the time Brody was a sweet guy, that personality trait would have annoyed Kiefer.

Chauncey spread his hands out and put on an innocent expression. "I wasn't going to say

anything about you and the way you mishandle equipment. Unlike every other gay man in Pontiac, I've never slept with you so I can't speak for your lacking bedroom skills."

"I've never slept with him either," Kiefer was quick to point out.

"Okay, so that makes two men who haven't tapped that," Chauncey tilted his head in Brody's direction. "I'd be willing to bet that we're the only gay guys in Oakland County that can make that claim, too."

Brody pressed his lips together in annoyance before saying, "Thanks for the ego boost, but we didn't come in here to talk about me."

"No, you came in here to interfere in my life, yet again," Kiefer cut in dryly.

"We're just worried about you," Chauncey explained, his expression softening.

"You can save it. I'm fine."

"I don't mean to be a jerk, but no you're not. You haven't been since Jill died."

Kiefer's gut churned at the mention of their cousin's name. He clenched his hand around the clipboard as he took several deep breaths to calm his racing pulse. "I'm fine," he repeated. Maybe if he said it enough times, it might actually be true for once.

"That's just it, you're not. You look like you haven't slept in weeks, you're losing weight and

you keep spacing out," Chauncey pressed.

Anger surged through Kiefer, throwing his already erratic emotions further out of control. "What more do you want from me? I'm already going to the shrink like work ordered me. Plus, I make sure to call you twice a day like you ordered. I just can't snap my fingers and be happy all the time. It's only been five months and you can't expect me to get over something like that overnight. It's going to take some time."

"Look, I know it hurts. She was my cousin, too."

Kiefer lowered his head to hide the shocked expression no doubt playing across his face. While he loved Chauncey, the guy really could be clueless sometimes. That still didn't mean he wanted to unleash all the crap brewing around himself.

"I understand that," Kiefer replied, still not lifting his head. God, if he let them get a gander at the expressions he knew were dancing around on his face, then he'd never get any peace. As it was, Chauncey had been bugging Kiefer to move in with him. If they knew just how close to the edge Kiefer felt at the moment, Chauncey would never let him leave his side.

"We're not the only ones worried about you," Brody added. "Management called me in the other day."

That finally made him snap his head up. Shit, a call into the office never spelled good news. "What did they want?"

Brody began to nervously shuffle his feet. "There've been some rumors."

"What kind of rumors?"

"That you're doubting yourself on scene. How there've been a couple of close calls because you keep second guessing going into certain situations. Plus, you've raised some concerns about the way you overact to things." Brody held his hands up. "It didn't come from me, I promise. I think a few of the other crews have been talking."

The sad thing was Kiefer knew he couldn't deny the tales. After the explosion that killed Jill, he'd been overly cautious of finding himself in yet another dangerous situation, so much so that he stayed awake at nights as all the scary possibilities ran around in his head.

"That I don't get. You'd think management would be a little more understanding. Especially so soon after losing one of their medics," Chauncey defended.

It was good to know that Kiefer had his cousin's support on something.

"I think it was the Bertha incident that pushed them over the edge," Brody replied dryly.

Now it was Kiefer who glared. "How was I supposed to know that she didn't have a gun in

her bra?"

Brody threw his hands up in exasperation. "Because said bra was the size of a butterfly bandage."

"Yeah, well I've seen some really tiny guns before. Plus, I didn't have time to think of stuff like that because everything went down so quick. I just saw her rooting around in her boobs and I reacted."

"You jumped to conclusions."

"She was yelling at me for not giving her drugs. If I recall right, she may have even said, *I'm going to make you mother fuckers pay.*"

Brody gave him a droll stare. "Bertha always says that. I think she's told me the same thing at least a hundred times. I never screamed like a girl and dived behind my cot, like you did."

"Okay, maybe I overreacted," Kiefer conceded. "But that was only one time."

"No, it wasn't. Stuff like that has been happening at least once a week," Brody argued in a gentle voice.

"So what are you trying to say? Do you want a new partner?" Kiefer demanded, his throat aching from repressed emotion.

Brody reached over and grabbed Kiefer's hand. "No, believe it or not, I really like the one I have. I just want to see him get better."

Kiefer looked back down at the table. Damn

them for caring so much about him and damn them for being right. He did need to get his shit together before he lost his job.

"I have next week off. I'm planning on driving to Jill's parents to return some of her stuff to them. Once I get back, I promise to try harder at getting my crap together. If you want, I'll even go to that support group you guys have been bugging me about."

Instead of relieving them, that added piece of news made Chauncey and Brody tense up as they exchanged worried glances.

"You're driving all the way to Florida by yourself?" Chauncey demanded.

Kiefer shrugged, wondering what the big deal was. "Since we lived together before she died, I have a lot of her belongings. It's way too much for me to take on a plane, so I have no choice but to drive it down."

"Do you think that's a good idea?" Brody pressed.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Kiefer challenged.

"I remember the way they treated you at Jill's funeral. They were really upset."

Hurt sliced through Kiefer at the memory. They'd been more than just mean, they'd yelled at him. Told Kiefer that it should have been him who died, not her. They'd finished it off by telling him they'd never forgive him.

“Maybe not, but my aunt and uncle have the right to all their daughter’s things returned to them. It’s the least I can do for them. Especially since...” He was unable to go on.

Brody gave his hand a comforting squeeze. “It’s not your fault that you lived and she didn’t. I’m sure your aunt and uncle think the same thing.”

Ah, but that’s where Brody was wrong. Jill’s parents had made it perfectly clear they blamed Kiefer for not protecting her better. They’d also made it obvious how much they now hated him, too. He had no doubt that his reception to Florida would be met with much hostility. But then Brody hadn’t been there when Kiefer’s aunt and uncle had unleashed their fury and said all those mean things.

Chauncey had been and going by the angry glint in his eyes, he still hadn’t forgiven them for attacking Kiefer that way. Not surprising, since Chauncey had been the only family member who’d rushed to Kiefer’s aid that day. Even Kiefer’s own parents had stood by in silence as the family fuck-up had gotten a verbal thrashing.

That still didn’t mean Kiefer had a choice in the matter. Hate or not, he would return Jill’s things. It may not be much, but it was a small piece of the heavy debt he owed her.

He swallowed hard before asking Chauncey, “I know it’s a huge favor, but do you think that

maybe I could borrow your car for the trip? I don't think my truck would make it."

Actually, Kiefer was *certain* his old, beat-to-hell truck wouldn't make it and the future of his whole trip depended on Chauncey saying yes. Chauncey pressed his lips together and, for one heart-breaking moment, Kiefer felt certain his request was about to be denied.

Then a sly smile crossed Chauncey's face as he exchanged a raised-brow look with Brody. Kiefer's stomach did a nice, neat flip. It never boded well for him when his cousin got that I'm-a-schemer expression on his face.

"Sure, you can use my car, but only on one condition."

"What?" Kiefer asked warily

The last time he'd agreed to be Chauncey's bitch, Kiefer found himself on a double date with a guy named Ton. Old Ton had lived up to his nickname and then some, too. Not only that, but the guy had reeked of onions and garlic, which had actually turned out to be a small blessing since the guy kept trying to sneak up and steal kisses.

"It's poker night at Vaughn and Dustin's," Chauncey announced.

"Okay," Kiefer replied, his tone still laced with distrust.

It didn't help soothe his nerves to see Brody

grinning like a fool. Whatever scheme Chauncey was cooking up involved Brody and while those two could annoy the hell out of each other, they could also be damn powerful allies when they banded together.

"You're going with us to the game tonight," Chauncey declared.

"I am?"

"You are."

"I don't know how to play poker."

"That's okay, all I want you to do is go there and make nice with everybody. You don't even have to pick up one card."

Kiefer narrowed his eyes as suspicion zipped through his body. "Who else is going to be there?"

Chauncey gave a slight shrug. "Oh, I don't know...Forrest, Patrick, a couple of their Flint buddies, Ray."

That last name hit Kiefer like a blow. He let out a low hiss of aggravation as he slapped his hand down on the table. "I should have known you wouldn't drag me there just to watch you guys play cards."

"What's the big deal? Ray seems like a nice enough guy."

"I'm not interested in getting involved with anybody. Besides, I thought Ray was your friend."

"He is."

"So why would you want him dating your

mess of a cousin?"

Chauncey leaned over the table until their faces were inches apart. "You are not a mess, a loser, or any of those other names you seem so fond of calling yourself."

"Yes, I am. I've always been a fuck-up and that's not going to change."

"Kid, you really need to stop listening to our relatives, because they don't know shit about you. The Kiefer I know is smart, sweet and a damn good medic. At least, he will be once he gets his head out of his ass."

When Kiefer didn't argue or agree, Chauncey went on, "Now, if you want to borrow my car, then you'll go to that party tonight and you'll make nice...with *everybody*. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Kiefer snapped back angrily.

"I knew you'd see things my way."

"You do realize what you're doing is blackmail?"

"Yes, but if that's what it takes to get through that thick skull of yours, so be it. Like it or not, you're coming back to the land of the living. I don't care if I have to drag you there, kicking and screaming."

Chapter Three

When Ray arrived to the weekly poker game at Vaughn's house, he was surprised to see a couple of different vehicles parked out front. A nicer sports car sat next to a rusted, black truck that looked so sad it nearly begged to be taken out back and shot, to be put out of its misery.

That was interesting. Usually the same handful of medics and firemen attended the games. Ray couldn't remember the last time they had a new face in the crowd and now it looked like there would be at least two. Ray only hoped they were better players than Dustin. While Ray loved Vaughn's boyfriend, Dustin's mind tended to drift during games, making it so easy to beat him that there was no challenge behind it. Just last week the guy got so distracted that he actually held half his cards backward, displaying his hand to the entire room. When called out for it, Dustin had just shrugged, flashed his aren't-I-so-cute smile and kept them that way.

“Do we have some fresh fish today?” Ray asked as he came in through the back door leading to the kitchen.

Vaughn glanced up from the stove. “Yeah, Chauncey is here.”

Ray paused, not daring to acknowledge the small flare of hope building inside his chest. “Oh, really? Is he by himself?”

The grin Vaughn gave him in return was way too knowing and smug. “No, Kiefer’s with him.”

Not wanting to give Vaughn the satisfaction of knowing he’d thrown him for a loop, Ray kept his face blank. “Really? I didn’t think poker was their thing.”

“I agree. Even more so considering that Chauncey is really into the bar scene. From what I hear, this kind of thing is pretty tame as far as he’s is concerned. As for Kiefer, I don’t think he gets out, period.”

“Yeah, well that’s probably because he’s still getting over everything,” Ray quickly defended.

Vaughn paused as he stared at Ray. “Maybe, but I don’t think even Jill would have wanted him to mourn her this long.”

Dustin, who’d been rummaging around in the fridge, made a disgusted sound. “Knowing Jill, she probably would have. She used to love to go on and on about how the whole family thought that Kiefer was nothing but a loser.”

"Why would they say that about him?"

Dustin shook his head, his dislike evident on his face, which was surprising since Dustin was pretty easygoing. "From what I gathered from Jill, Kiefer's family is one of those high-expectation types. You know, where everybody goes to college, gets high paying jobs and failure is not an option. Kiefer managed to graduate from high school with top honors, but after that, he kind of floundered."

"So what? Plenty of college freshmen do that."

"Ah, but none of them come from his family. To make it worse, Kiefer started to drink and party too much so he flunked out of not one, but two colleges. Then he dabbled in drugs for a bit before they intervened and carted him off to rehab to clean up his act. I guess Jill helping him get his paramedic license was a last ditch effort."

"Then when Jill died, they all naturally turned to the easiest target to blame," Ray surmised with a bit of nausea.

"You got it. None of them bothered to stop to think that since Jill was senior partner, she should have known better than to ever go into that house. They just lashed out at Kiefer and he took it in silence."

"Why doesn't Chauncey say anything to them?"

"He has." Dustin tossed a worried glance over

in the direction of the living room before continuing in a much quieter voice. "Kiefer doesn't know this, but Chauncey had a huge blowout with their family over this. It was so bad that they disowned Chauncey."

"Damn, what kind of family do they come from?"

Dustin gave a tight smile. "Have you ever heard of the Morgansons?"

"You mean as in the governor of Florida?"

"Don't forget they have a senator and a congressman in the family, too. That's just their more recent accomplishments. Politically, they go back for generations."

"If Kiefer's related to them, then why is his last name Simpson?"

"His mother is a Morganson, same with Chauncey's and Jill's," Vaughn explained.

"Chauncey told me that was the one blessing he'd been given from his mother. That he'd rather die than carry the name and not just because they're Republicans," Dustin gave a weak laugh at Chauncey's attempt at a joke.

Yeah, that sounded like something Chauncey would say. Pretentious name aside, the guy was pretty levelheaded.

"There's something else you should know," Dustin added, darting another glance at the living room.

"What?"

"Chauncey's worried about Kiefer."

"He's not the only one," Ray replied honestly.

"We all know, which is the reason why Chauncey dragged Kiefer here tonight. He's hoping you can get through to him."

Ray shook his head. "I'm not too sure about that. Every time I even try to talk to him, Kiefer shoots me down. I don't think Kiefer even knows I exist."

Dustin shook his head. "You're wrong about that. I've seen the way he looks at you."

"You mean in annoyance?"

"No, like you're his hero. Sometimes it's the only emotion he shows."

That had been the last thing Ray ever expected to hear. In fact, it came as such a shock that he glanced down at Dustin's bottle, just to make sure the little guy hadn't had too much to drink.

"It's true," Dustin persisted. "And he needs you now more than ever."

Fear shot through Ray. "Is there something wrong?"

Dustin nibbled on his bottom lip. "If he doesn't get his act together soon, the ambulance company is going to let him go. If it weren't for the hiring freeze, I think they would have already done so."

"Shit," Ray breathed, his heart breaking for Kiefer.

After everything he'd gone through, the last thing he needed was to lose his job, the one thing he had left. While his family may have looked at it as a last option, Ray saw the way Kiefer acted out in the field. The brief flashes of happiness when he was able to help somebody out. The rush of excitement in his eyes when they got a really, tricky call. The smile of satisfaction when he managed to save a patient's life. Despite the tragedy, Kiefer loved his job and it would kill him to have it ripped away from him.

"I'll try, but I can't make any promises," Ray finally said. He put his beer into the fridge and went out into the living room to join the others. A game had already started, but Kiefer wasn't one of the players at the table. Ray cast his gaze over the living room and found Kiefer on the couch watching a movie.

Ray decided to join him. May as well get his rejection done and over with, so he could go lick his wounds in private. As expected, when he plopped down onto Vaughn's enormous black, leather couch, Kiefer barely glanced in his direction.

Kiefer looked as good as always, even though he wore nothing fancy, just a pair of faded, slightly baggy jeans and a green t-shirt. He had his bare feet tucked to his side as he stared at the television, seemingly transfixed by whatever was

on the screen.

"What are you watching?" Ray asked.

"Attack of the Killer Tomatoes," Kiefer replied, never tearing his gaze from the screen.

Ray noted, not for the first time, the pronounced bags under Kiefer's eyes. It made him wonder if the medic was getting any sleep at all. Dustin's words came back to Ray as he studied Kiefer. The medic couldn't be a day over twenty-three, yet he'd already gone through a lifetime of hurt.

"Did you just say *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes*?" Ray teased in hopes of earning a smile from Kiefer.

"Hey, don't judge. It's classic," Kiefer defended, good naturedly.

Ray gave a slow nod. "Yeah, sure it is."

Kiefer glanced in his direction. "Are you doubting my taste in movies?"

The way Kiefer's lips quirked up into a half-grin showed he was teasing. Damn if it didn't make Ray's heart stutter a bit, too. In all of their brief interactions, Kiefer had never so much as cracked a joke. Now he almost seemed to be flirting, if only a little bit.

"This movie is bad, there's no doubting it," Ray countered.

Kiefer smiled. Not one of those halfway numbers of his either, but a real, full-blow grin

that made his eyes seem to dance. "Come on, don't be so harsh. Name one other movie where you can see a man dressed up in a giant tomato costume."

Ray pretended to think it over. "You know what? I can't. So I guess that does make it a classic."

That comment garnered him a chuckle, the warm sound shocking him. Ray wasn't the only one either. Every gaze in the house turned in their direction, everyone wearing identical looks of stunned disbelief that Kiefer was actually laughing.

Kiefer cocked his head to the side, the move making him look both cute and sexy at the same time. "See? I knew you'd eventually agree with me."

They settled into a comfortable silence as they continued to watch the craptastic movie. Somewhere along the way, Kiefer scooted a little closer so their arms almost brushed together. While he was certain Kiefer hadn't done it on purpose, Ray still relished the closeness.

Ray breathed in deep, savoring the warm scent of Kiefer. It was a mix of soap with a lighter, sweet scent that seemed to be unique to the man. It made Ray want to pull Kiefer in tighter so he could bury his nose in the crook of the man's neck and really suck in the smell. More so, it made Ray want to

explore and taste every part of Kiefer so he could see if the man was just as sweet as he smelled.

Near the end of the movie, Chauncey came over and flopped down on the other side of Ray. Like Kiefer, Chauncey wore jeans, though instead of a t-shirt, the older cousin opted for a red button-up shirt that set off his tan skin tones perfectly.

Ray wondered, not for the first time, why, out of the two, he was more drawn to Kiefer. In the past, Ray always went for guys like Chauncey. He'd preferred some muscles on his men and a bit of maturity, too.

After pondering that for only a moment, Ray shrugged it off. He liked Kiefer because he was...well, Kiefer and that was enough for Ray. Because, try as he might, he couldn't think of any other guy he'd rather be with.

"Please tell me you're not subjecting Ray to this crap?" Chauncey said as he slowly shook his head.

Kiefer let out a soft snort. "You were the one who introduced me to this movie in the first place."

"Yeah, ten years ago. I had hoped you'd outgrown it a long time ago."

"Just like you outgrew Flash Gordon?" Kiefer challenged with a smile.

"Flash is cool."

"You just like the way he looks in tight pants."

"That's true, too," Chauncey readily agreed.

They watched the movie for a few more moments before Chauncey once again broke the silence, "So, Ray, Vaughn says you have next week off."

Ray wondered over the complete about-face the conversation was taking, even as he sensed Kiefer tensing. "Yeah, the city is making us all take a week off, unpaid, as part of their budget cutting plans," Ray answered carefully.

Going by the speculative gleam in Chauncey's eyes and the daggers Kiefer was shooting at his cousin, Ray had the feeling he'd just been tossed into a minefield. The bad part was Ray didn't know how in the hell to get out of it. Now he knew what a rabbit felt like right as it was cornered by a fox.

"Are you doing anything special?" Chauncey asked.

"No, I was just going to hang out at my house. Why?"

"Don't you even think about it, Chauncey," Kiefer hissed.

Chauncey either didn't hear Kiefer or chose to ignore him.

"I was wondering if maybe you'd be interested in a little road trip," Chauncey ventured.

"How little?" Ray asked.

"To Florida."

"You do realize that Florida is like a twenty-six

hour drive from here. That's not so little," Ray pointed out.

"Not if you have a fun driving buddy."

"Chauncey! You have no right to butt in like this," Kiefer protested, a flush coming over his cheeks.

Ray looked from one cousin to the other. "Does anyone want to explain to me what's going on?"

"Kiefer is insisting on driving to Jill's parents to return some of her belongings and I think it would be a good idea if somebody went along with him to offer some moral support."

Kiefer's eyes narrowed. "I don't need anybody to hold my hand."

"Fine, then just take him along to help you out with the driving." Chauncey shrugged. "It's a long way to Florida, so I'm sure you'll need a break from time to time. Besides, if you want to take my car, you need to take a driving partner. I'm not going to have you crash my baby because you fall asleep at the wheel."

"There you go with the blackmail again."

"Those are the conditions. Take them or leave them," Chauncey replied flatly.

"I don't mind going. It would be nice to actually go someplace on my vacation, even if it's just a road trip," Ray hastened to add.

Kiefer shook his head. "I couldn't ask you to do that. It's too much."

"I don't mind. Like I said, I don't have any other plans. Since the city is forcing me to take the week off, I may as well actually do something constructive with the time."

Uncertainty flashed over Kiefer's eyes as he nibbled on his bottom lip. "Are you sure? It's not like I'm going to Disney or anything. I'm going to return my dead cousin's belongings to her parents, so things may get intense."

"I understand. I still want to go with you."

Kiefer continued to hedge for a second before finally giving a small nod. "Okay, but only if you agree to let me pay for everything. Since you're giving up your vacation to help me out, it's the least I can do."

The concession didn't settle well with him, but Ray decided to let it slide for the time being. A couple of hours ago, he'd been ecstatic that Kiefer had been willing to say more than a few words to him so he wasn't about to test his luck by pushing things too far. "Okay, so when do we leave?" Ray asked.

"Early Monday morning. I have a late shift to work Sunday, but that should still give me a few hours to catch some sleep," Kiefer said.

Ray wanted to argue that Kiefer looked as if he needed more than just a few hours as naptime, but he once again held his opinion in. He glanced up at Chauncey, stunned to see the pleading

expression in the man's eyes. It was almost as if his expression was speaking basically the same words Dustin had in the kitchen, *Please, find a way to his heart. Fix him, please.*

Ray gave a barely perceptible nod. He knew at that moment how right he'd been the other day at the fire scene. Kiefer did need him now, more than ever. The tricky part was going to be, how in hell would he get Kiefer to actually open up enough to take the help?

Chapter Four

The sun began to rise on the morning they left. Ray didn't know if that was a good omen or not, but at least it beat a storm.

He hoisted his duffle bag higher on his shoulder as he peered down the street, looking for an approaching car. Soon, he spotted some headlights as Chauncey's car pulled up.

Kiefer pulled to a stop before lowering the passenger side window. He gave Ray a smile. "You sure you still want to do this?"

"Of course, I didn't pack my best underwear just to come down and back out at the last minute."

Kiefer laughed. "Okay then, get in."

Ray tossed his bag into the back seat before climbing in. "Where exactly in Florida are we going to?"

"Key West."

Ray let out a low whistle. "Wow, I hear there's some pretty nice neighborhoods there."

"You heard right. Most of my family lives there."

"So how did you end up in Michigan?"

Kiefer's lips twisted into a bitter smile. "Because that was as far as I could get away from them short of leaving the country."

After they pulled out into traffic, Ray asked, "So, I take it you're not a big fan of your family?"

"I'm sure you probably already heard the worst of it. I know better than anybody how gossipy the EMS field can be."

A warm flush covered Ray's cheeks. Busted! "Okay, maybe I heard a few things."

"What, exactly? That they're the next Kennedy's or that they hate my guts?"

Ray hesitated a beat. "Both."

The sun began to glare through the windshield, nearly blinding them. Kiefer put on a pair of sunglasses before replying, "Don't feel too bad, I earned most of that hatred. I've done some pretty shitty things in my past."

"You mean when you were an addict?"

Kiefer glanced over, but the sunglasses hid whatever expression may have been dancing over his blue eyes. "So, you heard about that, too?"

"Just that you dabbled."

"For once the gossip is understated. I was a full-blown junkie. I started off with Oxy and then worked my way through just about anything that

would give me a high."

Ray blinked a few times, but didn't say anything.

"You're probably wondering why I'm telling you all this, aren't you?" Kiefer asked.

"Actually, yes I am," Ray admitted. Not that he didn't want to know everything there was to know about Kiefer, he just never expected the man to share every single one of his dark secrets before they reached Pontiac city limits.

"Maybe I'm doing it to scare you away?" Kiefer ventured in a neutral tone.

Ray studied him for a few moments. "I don't think so. If you just wanted me to go away you would have never let Chauncey bully you into taking me, blackmail or not."

"Okay, then perhaps it's so you know what kind of hostility you're going to be facing when we get to my family?"

"I don't believe that's it either." Ray leaned in closer. "You know what I think?"

"No, but I have a feeling you're going to tell me."

"You like me, more than even you realize, and you're making sure that I won't leave you when things get tough, like everyone else in your life has."

Kiefer pressed his lips together, but didn't argue, so Ray took that as a win. He leaned back in

his seat and laughed. God, Kiefer was so transparent Ray didn't realize why he hadn't seen through him long before. All this time he hadn't been giving Ray the brush off because he didn't like him, just the opposite. Kiefer felt the same attraction and it scared the hell out of him.

"What's so damn funny?" Kiefer demanded.

"You are. Here I am trying to figure out a way to make you notice me when all along you already had."

Kiefer's mouth dropped open in shock. "You seem awfully sure of yourself."

"I noticed you didn't deny it though."

"Fuck you," Kiefer mumbled, but the corners of his mouth twitched into the beginnings of a smile.

"Maybe you will get to. That is if you're good," Ray teased.

Now it was Kiefer who laughed. "Oh my God, that has got to be one of the cheesiest lines a guy's ever tried to use on me."

"Did it work?"

Kiefer pressed his lips together for a second before replying, "Let's just say that I'm warming up to the idea."

They drove for several hours before finally stopping for a late lunch. It was just a fast food joint, nothing special, but Ray didn't mind. It felt too good to be able to get out and stretch his legs

to worry over something as silly as high cholesterol and heart disease.

After they ordered their burgers and fries, they found an empty booth and sat down opposite of each other. Ray noticed that Kiefer actually seemed hungry, his hamburger disappearing at an impressive rate. Ray waited until Kiefer had finished and was nibbling on his fries to start up a conversation.

"I was curious about one thing. How was it the press didn't make a big deal over Jill's death? I would think because of your family it would have been huge news."

"Jill's mom disgraced the family by marrying a Democrat."

"Oh, such a rebel," Ray drawled.

"It gets worse. Jill's dad only managed to become mayor of a small town before he finally gave up on politics. Now they just live off my aunt's money and they're under the radar press wise."

"How about you? Did any of your actions ever land you on the front page?" Ray asked.

Kiefer shook his head, then took a drink of soda before replying, "No, my dad was really good at covering that stuff up. Besides, they got me into rehab before I did anything really bad. I never even got arrested or anything."

"You almost sound disappointed by that."

"I'm not, it was just sometimes awkward when I was in recovery. All these people were talking about when they hit rock bottom and the worst I ever did was show up high to one of my dad's parties."

"Have you used since you got out?"

"Nope, I haven't been tempted either. Not even when Jill died."

Ray recalled how close Kiefer had come to dying that day, too, and a chill went down his spine. "How's your asthma been?"

"Not too bad. I still have some bad days, but I always carry my inhaler with me. Right in my front pocket along with my condoms and lube."

"I don't get you," Ray admitted.

The smile faded from Kiefer's face. "What do you mean?"

"Up until the other night you wouldn't talk more than two words to me and now you're actually flirting with me. What's up?"

A heavy silence fell over the table. Kiefer looked down at his cup as he nervously fiddled with the plastic lid. "It was something Chauncey said."

"Great, knowing him I can only imagine what it must have been."

"He said I needed to get back to the land of the living."

"He actually used those words? It sounds like a

line from a dramatic movie or something.”

“Maybe it does, but he has a point. For the past five months, I’ve just been going through the motions. As soon as I realized that, I recognized something else. That’s how my dad lives.” Kiefer glanced up, his eyes wet with unshed tears. “I’d rather be dead than be like him. He’s a mean bastard who doesn’t care about anything else but money and power. I don’t remember much of my childhood, but I do recall always being terrified of him and his temper.”

Ray reached across the table and took Kiefer’s hand, a jolt of alarm going through him when he noticed how cold the man’s flesh felt. “You could never be anything like him, Kiefer.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I’ve seen you with patients. When you’re on your game, nobody is more caring and empathetic than you.”

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better.”

“No, I’m telling you the truth. You have a real gift, you just need to learn how to use it all the time.”

“The thing is, I’m not empathetic at all,” Kiefer argued.

“Why would you say that?”

Kiefer took in a shuddering sigh as his bottom lip quivered. “Because if I’m so caring, how can I still be so mad at Jill? She’s dead and all I can

think about is how pissed I am that she refused to listen to me that day. What kind of caring person thinks like that?"

"Look, you have every right to be mad at her. In fact, you *should* be angry at the mistake she made."

"Huh?" Kiefer blinked a few times as he wrinkled his nose in confusion.

"She made a rookie mistake. One that nobody who'd been on the job as long as she was had any business making. Worse yet, she refused to listen to her partner's instincts and you almost lost your life because of it."

"So you don't think I'm a terrible person?"

"No, I happened to think you're pretty great?"

Kiefer gazed up from under his lashes, a hint of a happiness finally reaching those sweet eyes of his. "I think you're great, too."

* * * *

Later that evening Kiefer gazed out of the window of their second story hotel room and reflected back to the day's events. Behind him, Ray slept in one of the double beds, completely oblivious to the fact that his roommate had been torn awake by yet another nightmare.

Letting out a deep sigh, Kiefer rested his forehead against the cool glass. Off in the distance,

he could make out the mountains surrounding the small Kentucky town that marked the halfway point of their journey.

Eighteen hours. That's how long it'd been since he'd picked up Ray and in that small amount of time, Kiefer's life changed. He'd known it would be a mistake to lift his guard, even a little, yet he'd done it. As expected, Ray managed to slip in and now he was firmly entranced into Kiefer's heart.

Shit, who was he kidding? Ray had been there long before the damn road trip. He'd found a way in that day of the tragedy. The moment Kiefer glanced up at the fireman who'd come to his aid, he'd been a goner. Kiefer had just been too afraid to admit the truth, even to himself, until that moment.

Ray rolled over and sleepily blinked his eyes a few times. "What are you doing up?"

Kiefer only debated a moment before admitting, "I had a bad dream."

"Do you have them a lot?" Ray asked as he got up on one elbow.

"Yeah" Kiefer replied in a near whisper.

"You want to move over to my bed? I promise not to get to frisky. I'll just hold you."

When Kiefer nodded, Ray pulled back the corner of the sheet and scooted over to make room. Kiefer crossed the room and slid in under the covers. They both had on sweats and t-shirts,

but Kiefer still became painfully aware of the heat of Ray's body pressing against him. It brought a soothing calm over Kiefer as he snuggled in to gather up even more of it.

"Are you teasing me on purpose?" Ray demanded in a strained voice.

When Kiefer looked at him in confusion, Ray thrust his hips forward so his hard length brushed against Kiefer's thigh. A small gasp slipped passed Kiefer's lips as his own cock stirred in response.

"I'm sorry...I didn't mean to..." Kiefer stammered before he buried his face into the pillow.

Ray gave him a gentle nudge. "Relax, I was just kidding. Feel free to wiggle against me any time you want."

Kiefer dared a glance up at Ray, a warm feeling going through him at the tender expression on Ray's face. Impulsively, Kiefer stretched his head up and stole a quick kiss on the lips.

"Tell me something about you. I feel like we've been talking about me all day," Kiefer urged as he got into a comfortable position.

"My life isn't that interesting. I was born and raised in Clarkston, Michigan. I even still have a house there."

"Are your parents alive?"

"Yeah, I was their youngest kid though, so

they're in their sixties."

Kiefer tilted his head up. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-six. I have eight brother and sisters."

"No way! I've always wished I had siblings. The closest I ever got was Chauncey and we lived a half hour away from each other as kids."

"It's pretty nice, although they can be a nosey bunch sometimes."

"I can relate to that since Chauncey is always butting into my life."

"They're all going to love you," Ray said as he reached out and lightly tapped the tip of Kiefer's nose.

"You seem awfully sure that I'm going to stick around long enough for you to take me home to meet your parents," Kiefer quipped.

For the first time, he only meant the comment in jest because he was finally willing to admit that now that he had Ray, he wouldn't be letting the fireman go any time soon.

"They'll be seeing a lot of you because we're never going to be apart again," Ray declared, unknowingly echoing Kiefer's thoughts.

When a lengthy pause went by without Kiefer voicing an objection to that comment, Ray cocked a brow. "It's about time you started seeing things my way."

Kiefer turned his head up for a kiss. This time Ray met him halfway, one hand going out to cup

the back of Kiefer's head. Kiefer let out moan, the sensual slide of Ray's tongue against his lips setting his body on fire.

That one taste made Kiefer hungry for more and before he knew it, he on top of Ray, his legs straddling the older man's hips. They continued to kiss, only coming up when they needed to breathe. While all their clothes stayed on, Ray's hands still managed to find their way under the back of Kiefer's sweats.

Ray palmed Kiefer's ass, but made no move to take things further. Kiefer decided it would be up to him to make sure at least some of their building tension got relieved. Diving in for another kiss, Kiefer slowly rocked his hips forward.

Pleasure shot down his spine as their erections ground together. Even through their clothing, it felt like pure bliss and Kiefer knew one pass just wouldn't be enough. So he did it again and then a third time. By the time he settled into a smooth, yet fast rhythm, they were both letting out moans and gasps.

All the while Ray continued to knead and squeeze Kiefer's ass, his grip tight but not to the point of painful. Soon Ray was pushing up to meet Kiefer's thrusts, their kisses becoming frantic as their mutual pleasure crested.

Kiefer let out a cry of passion as his orgasm slammed into him. Hot, wet, sticky cum coated the

front his underwear, but he didn't give a damn. All that mattered was how damn good it felt to be in Ray's arms.

Ray thrust up one more time before he shuddered as he whispered Kiefer's name, signaling his own release.

Kiefer let out a shaky laugh as he buried his nose in the crook of Ray's neck. Ray smelled lightly of sweat, passion and the hotel soap. Kiefer inhaled a few times, imprinting the scent to his memory, so he could savor the moment forever.

"We should probably get up and change. You made a mess," Ray said.

"Me? I'm pretty sure at least half of this spunk is yours," Kiefer replied with a gentle love bite to Ray's neck.

Ray slid his hands under Kiefer's shirt. He ran his palms up Kiefer's back, earning a shiver of appreciation. Kiefer snuggled in deeper. "Can we just lay here for a few minutes? It feels so good to be in your arms."

It did, too. For the first time in five months, Kiefer could actually close his eyes without hearing Jill's screams echoing through his head. He let himself get lulled, both by the warmth of Ray's body and the sensation of Ray's hands gliding over his body. Before he knew it, Kiefer drifted off to sleep, for once the dreams were all pleasant, too.

Chapter Five

Kiefer stood in front of his aunt and uncle's house and looked up at it, as if seeing it for the first time. It'd been years since he'd been there and so much happened to him then that he felt everything had changed. Or better yet, maybe it'd been him who'd changed.

Where once he would have been proud of the large house, its white pillars, large circular drive and fountain, now it seemed to be too extreme and opulent. It felt almost gaudy when compared to some of the modest homes he'd come across as a medic.

"Wow, we're a long way from Pontiac," Ray mused as he stared up at the home.

Yeah, and Kiefer couldn't wait to get back to his new hometown either. Give him the cold, the pollution and the loud traffic because it sure as hell beat what waited for him behind those mahogany double doors.

"Are you sure you want to do this now? We

could go back to the hotel and come again in the morning when we're fresh," Ray suggested.

After driving for the second straight day, they both felt tired and in desperate need of showers. Those needs still didn't deter Kiefer from his goal.

"No, I want to get this over with, so I can get on with my life."

After he said that, he reached out and squeezed Ray's hand to let him know that Kiefer hoped that life would be together. Ray answered the gesture with a squeeze of his own. Kiefer gazed up into Ray's face. The utter devotion he found there made his chest tight with emotion.

"You're the most important thing in my life. You know that, right?" Ray said.

"This is a hell of a time to drop this one on me," Kiefer sputtered even as his heart soared with happiness.

"I was going to buy you a card to mark the moment, but I didn't get the chance to stop by the store," Ray drawled in return.

"You could have made one yourself. I have pens and paper in the car."

Ray reached out, hooked an arm around Kiefer's waist and hauled him in close. "Stop joking around to avoid the issue and just tell me that you care about me, too."

Kiefer put on a big show of sighing as he rolled his eyes, the entire time, he was working hard to

hold back his laughs of joy. Who would have thought that someone as good looking, sweet and wonderful as Ray could actually care about a mess like him? It made Kiefer believe that maybe fairy tale endings could happen in real life after all.

“Fine, you mean a lot to me, too. You stupid dork.”

Ray chuckled before he leaned down and gave Kiefer a hard kiss. “I knew I’d win you over eventually. I just had to keep going until I wore you down.”

Kiefer suddenly grew serious. “Ray, I fell for you the day you found me alone and shattered by that house. It just took me until recently to realize it.”

“Funny, because I fell for you at exactly the same time,” Ray replied with same gravity.

They moved in for another kiss, but were interrupted when the door opened to reveal his aunt. The oldest of the three sisters, she happened to also be the meanest. As always, she wore high-end designer clothes, from her button-up white blouse to her black Capri pants. Even her loafers were quality and probably cost her more than Kiefer made in a week.

She must have recently had a face lift because her mouth and brows had a drawn look to them that made her look more hawkish than usual. Her white blonde hair was styled into a tight bun,

making her face look more severe.

"Oh, I thought you were Chauncey," she said by way of hello.

Normally a greeting like that would have grated on Kiefer. Now as he stood in the comfort of his lover's embrace, it made Kiefer want to, well...laugh. Even though he tried hard to fight it, a soft hiccup still managed to slip past his lips. Panicked, Kiefer bit the inside of his cheek to hold back the rest of it, but then he made the mistake of looking at Ray. When Kiefer saw his amusement echoed in Ray's warm, brown eyes, he lost the battle and dissolved into laughter.

Once he got started, he couldn't stop. It didn't help when Ray joined in. Their laughter lasted for several moments, during which his aunt looked on with marked disapproval. At least Kiefer thought that's what her facial expression said, with all the work she'd had done, it was pretty hard to tell.

"Sorry, Aunt Dru," he said once he had breath enough to talk. "I guess after the long drive, we're kind of punchy."

"What in the hell are you doing here?" she demanded, completely ignoring the apology. She cast a cool glance at Ray, "And who in the hell do you have with you?"

"Sorry, I forgot my manners. This is my boyfriend, Ray," Kiefer said, the title slipping easily past his lips because it felt so right.

Ray nodded a greeting at Aunt Dru, but she chose to ignore that as well. Kiefer sighed. While he hadn't expected anything different, it would have been nice to have at least one pleasant exchange with a family member who wasn't Chauncey.

"I brought the rest of Jill's things to you," Kiefer explained as he hitched a thumb in the direction of the car.

She gazed over at the vehicle, her expression flat. "Oh, that junk. Just leave it in the garage."

She turned around, walked back inside and slammed the door behind her. Kiefer and Ray stood in stunned silence for several breaths.

"That bitch. How dare she treat you that way," Ray fumed.

Kiefer shrugged. "I'm used to it by now."

"It doesn't bother you that you drove all this way and she couldn't even say thank you?"

Kiefer searched deep inside himself and found that it didn't. The normal sting from being rejected by his family had vanished, to be replaced by the warm, happy feeling of knowing he did have somebody who cared about him—Ray.

"No, it doesn't bother me anymore. Now that I have you, I don't need their acceptance anymore," Kiefer replied honestly.

Ray pulled him in for a deep, lingering kiss that made Kiefer's head spin as desire rolled over him

in slow gentle waves. Still holding him, Ray said, "You never needed them or their damn acceptance. Despite all their money and power, you're ten times the person they ever will be."

Kiefer glanced up at the mansion. "They can keep their damn money. I'll take you, my job and home any day."

"Then let's get this stuff unloaded so we can get back to it. Before we make that drive home, I'm going to take you back to the hotel, strip you naked, and take a shower with you before I spend the rest of the night showing you just how much I desire you," Ray promised before he rained a trail of kisses down Kiefer's neck.

Kiefer tilted his head to the side, a happy sigh slipping past his lips. "Now that sounds like my kind of road trip."

They quickly unloaded all the stuff and shoved it into the garage before getting back into the car. By unspoken mutual agreement, Ray slid behind the wheel and drove.

The entire way to the hotel, Kiefer couldn't keep his hands to himself, the desire to reach over and stroke and tease Ray a constant need. According to the GPS, their destination was only five miles away, but it still seemed to take forever to reach it.

By the time they got to the hotel, checked in and found their room, Kiefer felt ready to burst

through his skin. As Ray worked the lock, Kiefer couldn't resist the urge to reach down and palm his own cock and a low rumbling groan vibrated from his chest.

"Ah, babe, we're kind of out in a very public hallway," Ray teased, his eyes growing dark with passion.

"Then you better hurry up because I'm two seconds away from dropping to my knees so I can suck you off."

Ray paused, passion flashing across his handsome face. "Fuck, you keep talking like that and I'm going to come in my pants again."

"Then we better get inside because I have a whole dictionary of dirty words memorized and I plan on using every one on you."

Ray smirked and got the lock open. Turning back, he grabbed Kiefer by the front of the shirt and dragged him inside before slamming the door behind them. When Kiefer made to drop to his knees, Ray stopped him.

"Shower first, fucking second."

Kiefer tilted his head to the side. "Are you trying to tell me I stink?"

"No, I'm saying that while I like dirty sex as much as the next guy, I want our first time to be perfect."

"I guess I can live with that explanation. Will you at least come in with me so we can wash each

other up?"

Ray leaned down and pressed their lips together. "Are you kidding? If I have my way, you'll never take a shower alone again."

"Good, because there's this spot right in the middle of my back that I can never seem to reach. If you're in there with me, you can—"

The rest of Kiefer's snarky comment was cut short by a yelp of surprise when Ray picked him up and tossed him over his shoulder. Kiefer let out a laugh as he slapped Ray's butt. "I know you're a fireman, but does that mean you have to carry me this way?"

"Yes, just be glad I don't do it all the time."

Once they reached the bathroom, Ray set Kiefer back on his feet before reaching to turn on the shower. As the water warmed up, Ray began to slowly strip the both of them. Kiefer stood there and let Ray do all the work, partly because Ray seemed to get a thrill from being in charge and also because it felt so good to have somebody take care of him.

Ray took his time, making sure to kiss, lick, or bite every bit of newly exposed flesh, he even made sure to give Kiefer's cock a few experimental strokes. The teasing continued until they were both nude and Kiefer was so jacked up that a steady stream of whimpers came from his throat.

Ray led him to the stall and under the spray of

warm water. No words were spoken as Ray began to slowly suds both of them up. Kiefer never felt so close to anyone before.

“Turn around and brace your hands on the wall,” Ray ordered.

Kiefer obeyed, his fingers curling against the tile. He tensed, but all Ray did was stare at him.

“Is everything okay?” Kiefer finally asked.

He became painfully aware of how skinny and pale he probably looked under the unforgiving bathroom lights. He couldn’t help but wonder if Ray found him lacking. After all, the fireman probably had his pick of guys so why should he settle for some former junkie who was more bones than muscles?

“You’re so beautiful,” Ray crooned as he ran a finger down Kiefer’s spine.

“You don’t have to lie to me to make me feel better.”

Kiefer let out a surprised gasp as he felt a finger slipping down the crease of his ass.

“I’m not lying. I know of a ton of guys who agree with me.”

Intrigued, Kiefer looked over his shoulder. “A ton? Really?”

Ray gave his rear a light slap before sliding his finger into his crack. “Yes, I can think of at least five guys from my station who would love to trade places with me.”

"Five? Wow, I didn't know there were that many gay firemen in Pontiac."

"That doesn't matter because you only belong to one—me," Ray growled as he slid a soap-slicked finger inside Kiefer's hole.

Kiefer let his head fall back, a moan rippling from his throat. "Yes, just you."

"Good boy, don't ever forget it."

Ray added another finger, scissoring them out and giving Kiefer the most delicious burn. Kiefer's cock screamed for some relief, but he left it untouched, knowing he was only seconds from coming.

"I won't ever forget. I promise," Kiefer panted as he thrust back against Ray's fingers.

Ray sawed his fingers in and out of Kiefer for several pleasurable moments, before he finally pulled them out and stepped back. Kiefer prepared himself to feel the press of Ray's cock next, but it never came. Instead, he reached around Kiefer and turned the water off.

Grabbing some towels, Ray gently dried Kiefer off before taking him by the hand and leading him to the one king-size bed in their room. He gave Kiefer a tender kiss before issuing his next order, "Lie down on your back."

Kiefer climbed on the bed and got into position while Ray went over and grabbed something from his duffel. When he turned back around, a jolt of

excitement went through Kiefer as he saw the bottle lube and condom in Ray's hand.

Ray gave Kiefer's body one long lust-filled stare before climbing on the bed. He opened the condom and slid it down the length of his cock. After he added some extra lube, Ray got between Kiefer's legs.

"I want to look at you the first time," Ray explained as he hooked one of Kiefer's legs over his shoulder.

"I like that idea."

After that, no more words were spoken as Ray lined up the tip of his cock and thrust inside Kiefer. Pleasure ripped through Kiefer's body as he stretched to accommodate Ray's width.

"Now you totally belong to me," Ray declared once he was fully seated.

"I like that idea, too," Kiefer replied.

That must have been the right thing to say because Ray began to fuck him in earnest. Kiefer gripped Ray's shoulders and gave himself over to the passion. While Kiefer had always loved a good screw, this time was so much more fulfilling and Kiefer knew nobody could ever even begin to compare to Ray. That after this encounter, no one else would ever be able to satisfy him in the same way again.

Then Ray shifted position so his cock pegged his sweet spot and Kiefer lost it. He shouted out

Ray's name and shot off, his semen coating both of their stomachs. A second later, Ray joined him, a soft whimper of pleasure coming from the strong man as he filled the condom.

Ray collapsed on top of Kiefer as they both caught their breath. Kiefer relished the close contact, even going so far as to wrap his arms around Ray to hold him in place. As he closed his eyes and buried his nose in the crook of Ray's neck, much like the night before, Kiefer realized that he'd finally started to heal. Damned if it didn't feel good, too.

Epilogue

Ray slammed his cards down on the table with a muttered curse. "Damn it, I'm out."

Vaughn gave a wicked grin as he collected chips from not only Ray, but the other two players at the table. "I don't know what's gotten into you tonight, but I hope it keeps up at least until the end of the game."

Ray glanced up at the clock, frowning as he noted the late hour. "Kiefer had his evaluation at work today and he should have been here over an hour ago."

"I wouldn't worry too much," Dustin soothed. "Management may have just been running behind. Besides from what I hear, ever since you and he have been together, Kiefer's been doing much better on the job. There hasn't been an incident in months."

"Four months to be exact. Ever since they got back from Florida, Ray and Kiefer have been pretty much inseparable," Vaughn corrected with

a knowing smile.

"Does he still sleep over at your place every night?" Dustin asked.

"Yeah." Ray didn't add that was because otherwise Kiefer suffered from nightmares.

Not that Ray was complaining, since he loved being able to hold his lover at night. In fact, Ray had plans on asking Kiefer to move in with him permanently.

The front door slammed shut as Kiefer burst inside.

Ray held his breath in anticipation until a wide smile spread over Kiefer's face. "I take it that things went well?" Ray still asked.

Kiefer rushed over and somehow managed to wiggle in between the table and Ray. Straddling Ray's lap, Kiefer sat so they were facing each other. "It went better than just well, it went fantastic. Not only did I pass my review, but they agreed to help me set up a scholarship in Jill's name. Now every year we're going to be able to send a high school graduate through paramedic training."

"Cool, how did you get the funding for that?" Dustin asked.

Kiefer shrugged. "I have some trust fund my grandmother set up for me. Since I don't want the money, I thought I may as well put it to good use."

"I'm so proud of you," Ray said right before he cupped the back of Kiefer's head and brought him down for a kiss.

After they broke apart, Kiefer finally spoke the three words, Ray had been dying to hear, "I love you."

Ray paused a moment as a swell of happiness went through him. "I love you, too."

"Good, then show it by kissing me again," Kiefer urged with a crooked grin.

So Ray did just that, not even caring that they had a very avid audience. He even tilted Kiefer back a bit, so they could really get into it.

As Ray savored the sweet taste of his paramedic, he couldn't help but marvel at just how lucky he was. Not only was he able to save Kiefer from his past, but they found their way to each other in the process. Ray couldn't have asked for a better life.

About the Author

Stephani Hecht is a happily married mother of two. Born and raised in Michigan, she loves all things about the state, from the frigid winters to the Detroit Red Wings hockey team. You can usually find her snuggled up to her laptop, creating her next book.

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