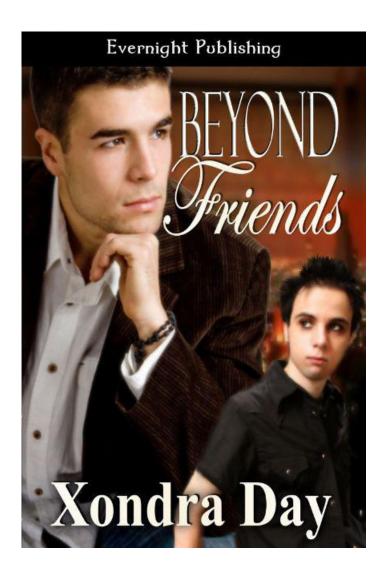
Evernight Publishing

BEYOND

Xondra Day





Evernight Publishing

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DEDICATION

You bring joy to my life. This one is for you. Love ya!

BEYOND FRIENDS

Xondra Day

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Chapter One

All Jack Warner wanted was sleep. Wondrous, mind-numbing sleep. Yet, he lay in bed tossing, turning, and of course, flipping the pillow to rest his head on the cold side—old habit.

"Damn it," he muttered, his frustration grabbing hold, gripping him. In less than five hours he had to be up and back at the bookstore, his store. And, while he loved being his own boss, he was worn out from working there with only one part-time employee to cover the little time he chose to take off.

Jack glanced at the bedside clock again, letting out an exasperated sigh before closing his eyes. It was another night just like the last, and the one before that. If things didn't change, he was going to crash hard.

Many thoughts drifted through his head as he lay in the dark. If Michelle, the parttimer, didn't have classes today, she might come in to cover for him. But she had specifically stated she only wanted the occasional evening shift. Days were out for her.

He rolled over onto his left side facing the wall. *Sleep,* his mind screamed. *Damn it,* his mind cursed.

After five minutes, he kicked off the bed clothes and dressed in blue, plaid boxer shorts, then headed into the kitchen.

His eyes drifted to the coffee maker, but he resisted temptation. If he had even one cup, then he'd surely be up for the rest of the night.

The bright light from the fridge caused him to squint as he looked for something to snack on. Finally, after much consideration, he settled on cold cuts and a loaf of stone-ground bread, combining both with a slather of mayo and honey mustard. Sitting at the kitchen's island, sandwich in one hand and a tall glass of milk in the other, he thought about the work day ahead of him.

After finishing and rinsing out the glass, he headed into the living room, flicked the TV on with the remote, and then settled on the couch.

Nothing, nothing, and nothing. He surfed some more, deciding on an old black and white movie.

Jack watched as the heroine sashayed her way across the screen with cigarette in hand a la Bette Davis, while the hero chased after her, professing his love and devotion. She pushed him away, expending a breath filled with smoke.

He smirked watching the rest of the scene unfold, resting his feet on the coffee table. *If only life was like that. Simple, romantic, fun.*

During his twenty-two years of life, he could honestly say he had yet to experience anything remotely romantic. His existence was a quiet one filled with routine. Not that routine was bad. In fact, he reveled in it. Routine meant stability and there was nothing wrong with that. A half hour passed and then he slept. The last image in his mind of the actor and actress coming together, embracing, and then the pivotal kiss.

Business at The Bookworm was brisk the following morning, Saturday being the busiest day of the week. The mall shoppers came out in large numbers. Times like this made Jack wish he had been smarter and hired a full-time employee instead of a part-timer. The fatigue from lack of sleep was catching up to him, and in the mirror this morning it showed physically.

"You look like shit," said a voice, startling him.

Looking up from the stack of books he had started to organize, he forced a smile. *Rain.*

"Day old shit," said Rain again.

"Thank you," he muttered. "We all can't be as beautiful as you, Queen Rainy." His voice tweaked with just the slightest hint of sarcasm.

"That's Ms. Rain, thank-you-very-much," snapped the young guy, with one hand planted on his hip. "Touchy, touchy. I was just kidding, Jack."

Jack forced a half-smile in the direction of his long-time friend, Rain Underwood. He worked at the salon next door as a receptionist and shampooing heads.

"New hair," commented Jack, passing his friend heading to the back of the shop with books in hand. "It's nice. I like it."

Rain grinned, his hand moving to his head through the newly dyed raven locks. "I took a chance, but Ginny, the head stylist, assured me it would be fabulous."

"Fabulous is the word," said Jack, sliding the books onto the shelf in the horror section.

"Oh, the latest King." Rain slid against him as he snatched the hardcover from the shelf. He flashed Jack a wry grin and then quickly glanced away. "I'm buying this," he announced.

It wasn't a secret that Rain held a strong physical attraction towards him. And it wasn't that Jack didn't share that interest. Yet, the two of them had never connected; besides the casual flirting and that one night not all that long ago.

With Rain yammering in his ear about some celebrity fuck video and the latest in hair care products, Jack's mind drifted back to that night. What started out as a night of just hanging out had turned into a hell of a lot more.

Six months earlier.

A knock fell on Jack's front door. It was late, and he couldn't help but wonder who would be calling at such a ghastly hour.

But there he was, standing in the rain on the front porch, forlorn and utterly pitiful. Jack shook his head spying Rain through the peephole. He unlocked the deadbolt and motioned for his friend to come in.

"Thanks," murmured Rain, his head down, hands shoved deep into the pockets of his tight-fitting, low-riding jeans. His voice shook a little as he spoke. "I didn't know where else to go."

Jack shut the door behind them. He turned, reaching out to touch Rain's right arm.

The guy was quick to pull away, but not before Jack felt that his clothes were sodden with the night rain. "You're soaked to the skin. Have you been out walking in this?"

Rain shrugged his shoulders. Suddenly, he looked very young to Jack.

Eighteen and still very much a kid in many ways, thought Jack.

"I'll get you some dry clothes." Jack motioned for Rain to follow him. "Something's happened. Did someone hurt you?"

Rummaging through his closet, Jack tossed a white t-shirt along with a pair of flannel sleep pants at Rain. "Get into those before you catch your death. I can't believe you were out in this." He stood there, waiting for answers to the questions he'd asked.

"I wasn't exactly out walking around in it. I had no money on me, and when he kicked me out, I didn't want to go home, so I came here."

Jack sucked in a breath as he watched Rain remove his wet jacket and form-fitting tshirt. Rain noticed him looking and flashed a half-smile pointing to one pink, pierced nipple. "I don't think I told you. I had them pierced last month."

"Man." Jack shook his head in disbelief. "That had to hurt." Rain moved closer to him, his pale skin shimmering under the dim lighting, still slick from the rain.

"It wasn't bad. I kinda liked the pain. At first, sitting there in the chair, I half wondered if I'd be able to handle it. But she was quick and in a couple of minutes it was over. And now, when I play with them like this." Rain tugged slightly on both silver rings. "It feels... rather nice."

Jack was entranced. He desperately fought the desire to run his fingers across Rain's chest. To feel his cool, slick skin, touch those nipples. He imagined them becoming erect as he toyed with the rings, pulling, tugging...

This was all so wrong in so many ways, yet he had to fight to regain control of the situation.

"So what happened?"

Rain pulled the dry t-shirt down over his head straightening it across his chest. He then unbuckled the belt to his jeans, sliding them to the floor along with a skimpy pair of black underwear. Jack turned away, blushing.

"Something wrong?" asked Rain, stepping into the dry sleep pants. He snickered.

"Anyway...you knew I was seeing that guy, Jon."

"Yeah, you mentioned him a couple of times."

"You can look now, I'm decent."

"My stuff is a little big on you. Sorry about that. So, you were saying?"

"I had a date with him tonight. It was our third, and I guess he expected more than just a little something. When I didn't give him what he wanted, he tossed me out." Rain's voice started to shake. "I mean, I should have known. It's not the first time this has happened to me. I'm just so damned stupid to believe that anyone would want me for more than sex." Tears fell from his eyes and he wiped them away, smearing the black eyeliner that perpetually rimmed his eyes. "You must think I'm a fucking loser."

"Good grief, come here," said Jack, pulling Rain to him. "You're not the loser, they're the losers. You should know that by now. It's nothing to do with you. Those men...they're scum."

"I keep telling myself that," whispered Rain, his head resting on Jack's shoulder, his arms hugging Jack tight. "But somehow, I can't force myself to believe it."

Jack wasn't oblivious to the feelings that were beginning to stir inside him with having Rain this close. With the guy pressed against him, things were happening and, unless he did something quick to prevent it, well...it was going to be quite obvious. Boxer shorts did

very little to hide an erection.

"You're going to be fine. You can stay the night in the spare room, if you want." Rain nodded, and then pushed back from him slightly. "Can I sleep in here with you?" *Not a good idea…*

Jack hesitated, not wanting to offend. The guy was in a very vulnerable state and he didn't want to upset him anymore than he already was. But the two of them in a bed together...

"Ok."

"Thanks." Rain kissed him on the cheek and in a flash was under the bedclothes holding them up.

Together, side-by-side, Jack could feel that familiar stirring between his legs. His balls tingled as Rain rolled onto his side and faced Jack.

"How come we never..." asked Rain.

"Never what?" questioned Jack, playing dumb.

"You know..." Rain rested one hand against Jack's chest, toying with the fabric of his t-shirt.

"We're friends, I guess. Friendship is important." This was true, but he couldn't deny he'd thought about Rain many times in various situations that were much more than friendly.

"I do value our friendship," said Rain. "Still, I can't help but wonder what it might be like if we, you know, played around a bit. I like you in that way Jack. And I think you feel the same. I saw how you looked at me tonight. It's ok if you want to touch me. I want you to touch me."

Rain slipped one hand under Jack's t-shirt, his fingers dancing lightly across the guy's stomach, moving lower. Jack bit his bottom lip, stifling a moan.

"You like that," whispered Rain, his hand breaching the snug, elastic waistband of the boxers.

Jack moaned. He did like it, and there was no use in denying it.

"These need to come off," murmured Rain. Jack raised his hips allowing him access.

His mind told him they shouldn't, but his heart and his cock spoke louder.

"You're so fucking gorgeous. From the first moment I saw you at the bookstore, the first time I came in, I thought that, and I still do.

"I've imagined many times getting between your legs like this and grabbing your cock, taking you deep in my mouth. And what about you, Jack? Have you ever thought about me like that?"

Jack tossed his head back against the pillows, looking up at the ceiling. Rain now had him in his tight grip, stroking him hard, up and down, tugging on his foreskin. "Yes. Yes I have." He let out a deep groan feeling Rain's tongue slide up and down his throbbing shaft.

"Details," demanded Rain. "I want details, Jack. Talk dirty to me."

"I," stammered Jack. "I want you to suck my cock. I want to shoot down your throat while you look up at me—fuck!"

The image burned in his head. As he scooted up to look down at Rain, he was taken aback to finally see it playing out.

"You taste yummy." Rain looked up at him, his green eyes wide with desire and lust. "Keep watching me, babe. This is the best cock-sucking you'll ever experience."

The newfound confidence Rain was exhibiting was a total eye-opener. Never had

Jack seen him like this.

Jack watched his cock slide deep into Rain's mouth, lips stretching, his piercing eyes watching Jack with every slick movement.

"Sexy fucking stud," exclaimed Rain, withdrawing Jack's dick from his hot, glistening mouth. "I love your big cock. You taste so fucking good, man."

The bed clothes slid to the floor, exposing Rain's lithe, clothed body. Jack grinned. The guy looked cute all bundled up in his oversized stuff. "Mmmm, lemme see you naked."

Rain slipped to the end of the bed and stood. He hauled the t-shirt over his head, tossing it aside. A huge wicked grin crossed his lips. "You like?" he asked, one hand sliding across his chest.

"Very much so." Jack nodded.

Slowly, Rain lowered both hands to the waist of his sleep pants. He edged the waist lower until Jack could see the slightest hint of light, brown fuzz dancing below his navel.

Hot, hot, hot!

"You're teasing." Jack inflected a serious tone into his voice.

"Me a tease? Never." Rain lowered the waist a little more until his cock sprang free. Climbing back onto the bed, he covered Jack's naked body with his until there was nothing separating them but hot, horny flesh.

They gazed into each other's eyes. Their lips connected, tongues melded together. The friction between them increased as Rain forced Jack's legs further apart until they were rutting against each other.

"If you keep doing that, I'm going to come," murmured Jack.

"Then come, I want you to come. We have all night."

"You're evil."

Rain licked his lips. "I can still taste you."

"I never once thought this would happen."

"Then you can think again," laughed Rain, grinding his hips into Jack. "On second thought, don't come yet. I want you in my mouth again, I want to drink you, swallow you, taste your hot load."

And that's how the night ended. Rain was true to his word. He did provide Jack with the best blow-job he'd ever received. Well, it was the only one he'd ever had. But Jack kept that information to himself.

They woke the next day intertwined in each other's arms. Jack was late for work, but Rain had the day off. The odd thing was, Rain pretended like nothing had happened between them, which left Jack in a total state of confusion.

"Earth to Jack. Are you with me?" Rain waved a hand in front of his face. "Where the heck did you go?"

"Sorry. I'm just so freaking tired. I guess I spaced out for a moment. You were saying?"

"Check this out for me." Rain handed him the hardcover, and they went back to the cash register at the front of the store. "My coffee break is up anyway. They'll all bitch if I overextend it."

Jack handed Rain his purchase and watched him sashay out of the store. Rain looked back at him and waved. Jack returned the wave and sighed. Six months had

passed since their encounter and nothing.

Glancing up at the book-shaped clock hanging on a nearby wall, Jack decided it was best to get the sale displays out before the bulk of the customers showed. He went to work, hoping it would keep his mind off others things. "You're late," barked Ginny.

"And you're a dyke," snapped Rain, taking his place behind the receptionist desk, flashing her one of his signature wicked smiles.

"Loves ya too, sweetie," she called to him. The older woman sitting in the chair having her hair permed looked more than a little confused listening to their interaction.

"Now, under the dryer you go and I'll set the timer," explained Ginny, and the older woman nodded. "I'll be back when you're done."

Rain looked up from the appointment book to see Ginny gawking at him. "What?"

"So, how was Mr. Gorgeous?" she asked, her eyes wide. "If I wasn't a lesbian, I'd be so on that."

"Well you are, and he isn't into girls, so the chances of that ever happening in this lifetime are slim to none, thank God."

"Oh, come on. What's up with you two, anyway?"

"If I could answer that, then all my problems would be solved."

Rain still remembered that night and whenever he did, his pulse quickened and his heart raced. It was a night that would live on with him for eternity and one that would most likely never be repeated.

"You two should just fuck. Once that's out of the way, the rest will flow."

"Thank you, Aristotle, but we already have, sort of."

"Oh my God! You have not." She grabbed the chair next to him and sat down. "We have. Six months ago and nothing since."

"Things went bad?" Ginny's eyes begged for more juicy tidbits of information.

"Not from my side. I provoked him into it. And I don't think he's into me. He hasn't made any further advances or shown the slightest bit of romantic interest. Hell, I'd go for him in a heartbeat, but I value what little self-esteem I have left."

Ginny reached out, patting him on the hand. "Have you ever thought of just being honest with him?"

"I don't want to fuck up what we already have. He's my best friend and sometimes when I drop off the deep-end, he pulls me up and slaps me back to reality. I probably need that more than I need a lover."

Ginny nodded, fiddling with a pen. "That makes sense. I don't know what else to tell you." She stood. "I have to check on my client before the damned hair burns off her head."

Rain looked at the cover of the new King novel and then slid it into a drawer when a customer walked in.

The guy was total model quality. He had that clean-cut jock edge, all muscles yet not overdone.

"Can I help you?" asked Rain, giving the guy the once-over. *Eye-candy plus and then some, with a cherry on top!*

"I need a haircut."

"Then you've come to the right place. Would you like a shampoo first?" He prayed for the guy to say yes. Sliding his fingers through this hottie's hair would be delightfully sinful.

"I guess—I mean, yeah sure. It's just as well to do it all, eh?"

"Indeed," replied Rain. "Name?"

"Nate."

Rain scribbled the name down into the appointment book. "Follow me." Putting some extra bump into his walk, he led Nate through the back of the salon to the shampoo sinks.

"This shampoo is great," explained Rain, setting the temperature for the water. "And the scent is divine."

Nate had his eyes closed, he nodded, leaning back.

Taking his sweet time, Rain massaged his fingers through Nate's curly, blond hair, working up a lather, paying special attention to the neck area. What he wouldn't give to massage Nate's fine-formed shoulders, his chest, and other areas of interest.

"It tingles," said Nate, stirring Rain back to reality. Nate looked up with a sheepish grin, his baby blues sparkling under the salon's lighting. "It's nice."

"You have wonderfully thick hair." Rain caught the guy's stare, but Nate quickly looked away, his face flushed.

Straight? Maybe? But definitely heteroflexible.

"Been here long?" asked Nate.

"Just a bit. It's a shitty job and temporary."

"I just moved here myself. I come from a small town. It's been something trying to adjust."

Rain rinsed Nate's hair and then applied a little conditioner. Pushing the boundaries a little, he decided to take things one step further. "I've lived here my whole life. I could show you around." If the guy refused him, no biggie. It was easily shrugged off.

Rain rinsed thoroughly, squeezing the excess water from Nate's hair, dropping a towel over his head. "You can sit up, we're done here." *In more ways than one.* Nate had yet to address him since he'd made the offer.

Nate grabbed the towel, tousling it through his hair. "You'd do that?"

"Show you around? Sure, why not."

"Thanks, man, I'd appreciate it. I'll give you my cell number on the way out. You can call me and we'll arrange to do something."

"I'll be waiting." Rain motioned for him to sit in the stylist's chair. "The stylist will see to you in just a minute. We have magazines, coffee...can I get you either?"

Nate smiled. "I'm good, but thanks for asking."

Rain walked back through the salon where another stylist sat in their small break room fiddling with her nails.

"Marilee, you have a client. It's a walk-in."

She looked at him, holding out one hand, flashing her bright green fingernails. "The color's called Envy. Isn't it fucking fetching?"

Rain looked at his nails, which were currently painted dark blue. "Cool, I may want to borrow that sometime."

She nodded. "Anytime, darling."

"The hair looks great," complimented Rain.

Nate grinned, nodding. "She did a nice job." He handed Rain the money for the cut. "And here's my number." Rain watched him scribble it down on a piece of paper. "I'm in class till two most days. But my nights are free, when I'm not working."

Rain sighed as he watched Nate leave the salon, his tight jeans flexing across his firm bubble-butt. Rain licked his lips. He'd call him Sunday night. Tonight he already had

plans. Plans which included getting his best friend out and about.

Jack wasn't the social type, but it was time for him to break out of that mold. And Rain figured he was just the one to help him.

Manhandle was the perfect spot to achieve this. With lots of hot, more than available men, great dance music, and booze. They'd party their asses off, and, hopefully, Jack would enjoy himself.

Whenever he thought about Jack, his heart sank a little, partly because he regretted their one night together. Well, regret wasn't the right word. He didn't regret showing Jack his true feelings but, in the end, it hadn't come out right. It was the wrong time and place, and, while the fooling around had been amazing and hot as hell, it wasn't how he wanted Jack to see him.

Jack wasn't just a wonderful friend but a wonderful human being. He was full of kindness and compassionate even if he did appear to be a bit naïve at time. But that was part of his charm. Thankfully, their friendship did survive, he would have been totally lost if it hadn't.

Rain tucked Nate's phone number deep into the left back pocket of his jeans. He looked across the thoroughfare of the mall to The Bookworm. Jack was talking to a customer, some dude. "Right," said Rain, aloud to no one in particular. "Slow day, Ginny," he called out.

Ginny popped her head around the corner, nodding, holding a comb in one hand. "Tell me about it," She then said the words, "horrid perm," low, in reference to her client, her eyes wide with unimagined horror.

Rain started to laugh, hard.

A hot shower or a bath? Those two choices were all that Jack wanted to face. He opted for a shower. The pulsating massager would feel heavenly on his weary, work-worn muscles.

Shedding his clothes in the bathroom, Jack adjusted the temperature of the water. He liked it hot.

Under the pulsating spray, Jack let the crap from the day wash down the drain. Tonight he'd veg in front of the TV, pop in a DVD, and order pizza. He felt thoroughly exhausted. He didn't even have the energy or desire to masturbate.

Dressed in a pair of sleep pants and an old, worn t-shirt, Jack settled on the couch with a blanket pulled across his lap. He flicked the TV on with the remote and was just about to call in the order for pizza, in fact, he had the phone in hand, when he heard a knock on the front door.

"Open the freaking door. It's cold out here," yelled a voice.

Jack rolled his eyes as he unlocked the deadbolt.

"Hi," said Rain, his voice peppier than usual.

"What are you doing here?" Jack frowned.

"Mr. Grumpy isn't in the best of moods, I see." Rain jutted out his bottom lip, reached out, and brushed his hand under Jack's chin.

"I'm not grumpy."

"If you say so." Rain strutted down the hall into the kitchen. "You might want to be a good host and offer me something. A drink perhaps?"

"You're eighteen, so wouldn't I be breaking a law if I did that?" Jack glared at Rain

who now spun around the corner of the countertop revealing a brown paper bag from behind his back.

"I brought my own." He revealed a green bottle. "Are you going to allow me to drink it here, or is that breaking another law?"

It was times like this when he wanted to slap the shit out of Rain. "The glasses are in the cupboard."

Rain shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it onto the countertop. He removed two champagne glasses from the cupboard, handing one to Jack. "I don't drink alone, just so you know."

No TV, no DVD, no pizza, and no quiet time. Fuck no!

The bubbles from the champagne tickled Jack's nose as he sipped. This was odd. Rain never came over on a Saturday night. The guy *always* had plans. Plans which never included him.

"You're staring."

"Am not," replied Jack.

"You're staring at me right now. See something you like?" Rain spun around in a circle, almost spilling his champagne.

"Yup."

"Really?" A look of surprise overtook Rain's face.

"The shirt's great. Is it new?" Jack smirked.

"Nice, real nice. You're a fucking comedian. Seriously, Jack, you should take that show on the road."

"I'm considering." Jack threw a wink at him. "Come on. Let's sit in the living room." Taking a seat, Rain sat back, his eyes on Jack. "You need to change." "Why?"

"I came here for a reason. We're going out."

Jack shook his head. "I have to work in the morning. I'm not leaving this house. I'm fucking exhausted."

"You're always tired. Do you know what your problem is?"

"No, but I'm sure you're going to tell me." Jack braced for the onslaught.

"You need to get out. You need to meet people."

"By people you mean guys."

"I mean you need to let loose, have some fun." Rain downed the last of his champagne and then disappeared into the kitchen for more, returning with the bottle.

"I have fun," protested Jack. "I do fun things."

"Working all the time, spending your nights in front of the TV, or whacking off to Internet porn isn't fun."

"Who says I watch freaking porn? Good grief!"

"Go get dressed, wear something sexy. We're going to Manhandle."

Manhandle. The mention of that bar sent butterflies coursing throughout Jack's stomach. He'd ventured there once by himself since coming out. In the end, he lasted less than an hour before taking off. The men, the groping, it had all been far too much.

Standing before the open closet, the irony was that all he wanted to do was step inside and hide...from Rain.

He hadn't a sweet clue what to wear. He hated to admit he needed Rain's help.

"And there." Rain stood back, eyeing his handiwork. Jack looked damned handsome. "It's a little jockish, but given what you have in your closet, we don't have much choice. The t-shirt is stylin' and the jeans fit in all the right places." His eyes lowered to Jack's crotch. He bit down on his bottom lip, remembering. "Let's do your hair next."

Guy's a fucking dreamboat and doesn't even realize it.

"Just a flick here and another there. I think we're done." Rain paused for a second. "Your hair has a tinge of red. It really shows under the light."

"My mother's side of the family is Irish."

"Hot-blooded."

"If you say so."

"I do." In and out of bed.

Jack grinned and rolled his eyes. "You're too much."

Slipping one arm around Jack's waist, Rain smiled. "It's part of my charming nature. You know you love it."

He leaned into Jack. There it was, the scent he identified with him. Clean soap with a muted undertone of musk and spice. So manly, so sexy, and so Jack! Rain pressed his lips against his friend's cheek and tingled at the feeling of light, day-old stubble.

Jack turned to him, his eyes warm, his lips curling, showing the light indentations of his killer dimples. "What was that for?"

"You're a good guy, Jack. Don't ever forget it."

A moment of silence passed between them.

"Now, let's drink the rest of that bottle. We have lots of time. The place doesn't start up till late."

Hand-in-hand, they made their way back into the living room.

Chapter Three

Manhandle; there it stood in all its glory. A large brick complex set smack in the middle of the downtown core in the bar district. A large, red, neon sign in the shape of a flexing bicep flashed overhead with Manhandle slashing across, both blinking in unison.

Tacky, thought Jack, taking his place in the line-up alongside Rain, who was already bopping to the base flowing from inside the building, his eyes wide with excitement.

"I love this song."

Jack looked ahead, straining to count how many bodies stood in front of them. "We'll be forever trying to get in."

"No we won't, you wait here."

"But-" protested Jack, watching Rain edge his way through the line-up. He was back in a flash pulling at Jack.

"Come on. I know the bouncer, we're in. Let us pass, people," he yelled as they moved through the line. "VIPs coming, move out of the fucking way!"

Once inside, Rain led the way to the bar. "Hey, handsome," he called to a muscular demigod with the body of David and the face of an angel who stood behind the bar. The bartender leaned over the bar and pulled Rain over to him by the arms, lifting Rain off his feet. They kissed.

"Hey, cutie, long time no see. I missed you." The bartender glanced at Jack and nodded. "So, who's the friend?"

Back on his feet, Rain blushed. "This is Jack. Jack, this is Freddy, the greatest bartender known to mankind."

"He's biased," said Freddy with a half-grin. "So, what'll ya have?"

"I'll have a double rum and cola. Jack?"

"A beer. Coors." Jack handed the bartender a twenty when he returned with the drinks.

"Thank you, sir." Freddy's fingers grazed his palm as he accepted the bill. Jack pulled away, embarrassed.

"Let's grab a seat." Rain pulled him by the arm, forging their way through the large crowd.

"Hey, babe," called a soft voice as they took their seats. "I was waiting for you to show." A young guy stood before them, no older than Rain and dressed almost identical with the standard tight t-shirt and jeans, his hair styled in an organized disarray. His bottom lip possessed two piercings along with his right brow, and his eyes were rimmed in eyeliner, smudged to perfection. When he spotted Jack, his eyes went wide with delight. "And who's this?" he asked, sucking through a straw dipped in his neon blue cocktail.

"Jeremy, this is Jack, a good friend of mine. Jack, this is Jeremy, just someone I know."

"Mind if I sit here?" asked Jeremy, already in place. His eyes raced up and down, drinking Jack in. "I've never seen you here before. Are you new?"

"I don't come here often. It's my second time." Jack swigged his beer. "Rain dragged me out. I'm to have more fun."

Rain looked on, both amusement and annoyed.

"Fun is always good. I love fun," chimed Jeremy, batting his eyelashes at Jack. Rain scrunched up his face. "Fuck, Jeremy, you're such an obvious flirt." Jeremy glared at him. "I don't hear him complaining." He looked back to Jack. "Do you mind?"

Jack shrugged. "Not a bit. I'm here to have fun, right? So, let's have some." And with that Jack downed the last of his beer and grabbed Jeremy by the arm. "Let's dance."

"Fuck yeah." Jeremy followed, looking back at Rain with a satisfied smirked painted across his lips.

Another drink. He definitely needed another or perhaps two. Rain stood on the edge of the dance floor watching Jeremy slither his way up and down Jack. And it was pretty blatant that Jack was loving every bit of the slut's outrageous display.

Whore!

Why was he feeling this way? He had been the one to drag Jack here. He wanted Jack to have fun and, by gosh-darn, he was having it all over the place out there. Another drink would loosen him up. He felt kinda buzzed from the champagne and the rum and cola. But to hell with it. He'd have fun, too.

Freddy welcomed him back. "That guy is so freaking hot! Where did you find him?" "He's just a friend." Rain was fast becoming tired of that word.

"Right, Rain. I know if I had that at home, I sure as shit wouldn't be here tonight." "Like I said, just a friend."

"Another rum and cola?"

Rain nodded. "Make it a triple."

"Do you like that?"

Jack gasped as Jeremy tweaked his nipples through his t-shirt. Their bodies twined together, Jeremy grinded against his right leg, swaying seductively to the beat of the thudding music.

"How can I not." His cock throbbed, straining his jeans.

Jeremy wrapped his arms around Jack's neck and leaned in close. "I can feel you," he whispered. "You're my wet dream come true. I've dreamed about guys like you. Guys who will take control, and make me do very naughty things. I want that, Jack. I want to be naughty with you."

Jack shuddered. His earlobe disappeared into Jeremy's mouth, the guy's tongue caressing, his mouth sucking.

All around them guys in various states of dress and undress danced along with the music. Some just danced while others were close, very close, and some went way beyond that.

"I need to take a leak," said Jeremy. "Come with. I hate going into the bathroom here on my own. There are so many pervs around here." His eyes went wide to accentuate his point.

So cute!

On their way, someone grabbed Jack's ass as he passed, another tried for his crotch, while the third muttered something beyond repeating in his ear.

With his buzz kicking in, the place wasn't so bad after all. In fact, he was enjoying himself, and Jeremy was definitely an added bonus. The guy was sweet and cute to boot, even if he did come on a tad too strong.

Jeremy opened a stall door. "In here."

"Me?"

"Of course, silly." Reaching, Jeremy pulled him inside. He then turned to face the toilet, unzipping. Jack stood behind him feeling out of place.

"Ah, that feels great," announced Jeremy, relieving himself. "Put your arms around me Jack. I like feeling you close. You feel so strong and, mmmm."

Jeremy turned, his fly open, his cock hanging out. He reached up and wrapped both arms around Jack's neck. "Touch me," he begged. "It's ok. Touch me."

Jack reached down between them and curled his fingers around Jeremy's throbbing dick. He was smaller than Jack but not by much. Jeremy groaned, licking Jack's neck when he made contact and started stroking, squeezing, and flicking his thumb across the oozing, engorged head.

"Oh yeah," cried Jeremy. "I never...fuck...uummm, I'm so hot for you. Take me home with you."

Jack's balls clenched, his mind reeling with dirty thoughts, thoughts that he wanted to play out. He decided to do something totally out of character. For once, he was sick of being Mr. Sensible and boring. Mr. Predictable died tonight. "Let's get the hell out of here and into a cab. My house isn't far."

After almost forty-five minutes of searching for Jack, Rain was ready to give up. *Fuck!*

With one last glance around, Rain had had it. *Fuck him.* Chances were that Jeremy had dragged him off somewhere. That was Jeremy's style. *So fucking typical.*

Well, two could play that game. And if Jack was off having himself a good time, then he should, too. If you didn't look after yourself, chances were no one else would. It was the law of the land.

A hand came out of nowhere, curling around his waist. He looked back, grinning. "Rico, just the man I want to see." And Rico was definitely all man, from head to toe and all points in between.

"Hi, baby." Rico pulled him tight, his hands coming to rest on Rain's slim hips. "Damn, you're looking so fine, baby. I could eat you up with a spoon."

They'd fooled around many times before. Rico was far from a stranger. And while it would never go beyond fooling around, Rico was a decent guy, and sex to boot!

Rain pressed back, feeling Rico's bulge grinding against his buttocks. "You are glad to see me." You dirty, hung bastard!

"Always."

Rain moaned as Rico slid one hand under his t-shirt, dipping slighting down into the waist of his jeans. Tonight, he'd have fun, as much as he wanted and could handle. Coming from Rico, that'd be a lot.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," suggested Rico. "My place. Now!"

"Mmmm, I love it when you take control." Rain turned to him. "I'm all yours."

Their eyes locked, a fire burning between them.

"Just wait till I get you home." Rico flashed a wicked grin. "That sweet lil' ass is mine." He grabbed Rain's left buttock. "So fucking sweet. Come on." Jack stumbled past the front door once it was unlocked. He wasn't a drinker, and the effects from the alcohol he had drunk we're apparent with each blurred movement. "Come on in," he called to Jeremy, who stood behind him in the front hall, both hands firmly planted in the pockets of his jeans.

"Nice place." Jeremy strolled up to him. "Wanna show me the bedroom, stud?"

"Sure thing. It's just down the hall on the right. Um, do you want a drink or anything?" "I'm good."

Jack turned on the bedside lamp and closed the blinds on both windows. They stood there looking at the other. Silence.

Jeremy kicked off his sneakers and tossed his jacket onto the floor. He then sat on the edge of the bed, beckoning to Jack. "Come here." Jack did as he was ordered.

Jeremy slinked his hands under Jack's t-shirt, forcing it up and over Jack's head. Now bare-chested, Jack waited for the guy to make his next move. Jack's breath quickened as he sprang to life in every way imaginable.

"God, I wanna taste you," he whispered, wrapping both arms around Jack's waist. Jack groaned as Jeremy licked his chest. Looking up, the guy grinned. "This is just the beginning, handsome."

Jack wound his fingers into Jeremy's silky, soft hair, cradling his head as he moved lower, his face grinding against Jack's denim-encased bulge. Jack moaned, his hard-on throbbing, demanding release from its confines.

Jeremy stood and braced his hands against Jack. "I want you to touch me." His eyes pleaded as he spoke. He sucked in his bottom lip, the lip ring moved slightly, pressing forward.

With one hand, Jack pushed Jeremy back onto the bed and then settled down by his side. He touched Jeremy's cheek, marvelling at the smoothness of his skin. "So soft," he murmured, proceeding to pepper kisses on the spot he had just touched until his lips found the corner of Jeremy's mouth. They met, their lips meshing together, hot tongues and wet, moist lips, each proclaiming their need for one another.

With one hand stroking Jeremy's hair, Jack's other fell to the man's crotch. He fumbled with the guy's belt and then released him, feeling his cock spring free against the palm of his hand.

"Fuck," cried Jeremy, jutting his hips upward. "I'm so fucking horny I could bust one right here and now."

"I love your body." Jack squeezed Jeremy's cock, feeling the foreskin slide up and down. Jeremy shed his t-shirt, his eyes never leaving Jack.

"I'm small."

"No, you're perfect as is. Size is overrated."

Jack reached down between the man's legs; he shaved. Jeremy groaned. Jack's hand slipped further, pressing one finger between his firm ass cheeks.

"Play with my asshole, you hot fucking stud." Jeremy kicked his jeans off and then spread his legs wide, allowing Jack perfect access to everything he had to offer.

"Naked now," ordered Jeremy, eyes closed, head tilted back as Jack pressed one finger against his tight, twitching hole. "I wanna suck your cock while you finger-fuck me."

In a flash, Jack was naked, guiding his cock into Jeremy's wanton mouth. Technically, he was still a virgin, he hadn't fucked a guy yet, but he was sure he was a top. And looking down at this guy's perfect ass, he knew he couldn't wait to slide his hard cock deep inside where his finger now took residence. When Jeremy clamped down hard on his cock sucking him deep, his heart raced.

Chapter Four

Rico's apartment was small, located just a short walk from Manhandle. He held Rain tight as they walked into the bachelor pad.

"Make yourself comfortable and I'll get us a couple beers," said Rico pointing to the sofa bed. It was already set up.

Back from the kitchen, Rico handed Rain a beer, but not before he opened it. His biceps flexed under the room's subdued lighting.

Settling back onto the sofa bed, laying on his side, he looked at Rain, his brow furrowing. "Something's wrong."

Rain shrugged, reaching over, tracing one finger along the tribal art that ran the length of Rico's right forearm. "What makes you think that?"

"You barely spoke during our walk here, and normally I'd have to kiss you to get you to shut up. Plus, we'd already be naked in bed, sexing each other."

"Am I really that bad?" Rain looked away for a moment, his eyes focused on nothing in particular. Deny as he might, his thoughts kept running to Jack, who most likely right now was...

Stay focused, get your fucking mind off it. And why the fuck are you jealous? You don't even want Jack.

"Bad isn't the right word, sweetie. You know how I think of you. I love having you in my bed and I adore your personality. When you're down or something's wrong, it shows."

"I'm fine. I really am, but thanks for caring." Rain moved closer to Rico. "Tonight, I'm all yours."

Jeremy stuck his ass up in the air and wiggled it suggestively at Jack. He looked back, winking. "Breed me. Fuck my hot, little ass with your huge cock."

Jack spread Jeremy's cheeks and slid one finger over his now lubricated pucker. Sliding a condom over his cock, he took careful aim and pressed forward.

Jeremy moaned, his hands gripping a pillow. He grunted, pressing back onto Jack. "Hold it there for a sec. You're so fucking big."

Jack froze. "Am I hurting you? I can stop."

"No!" Jeremy braced himself against the bed, his head tilted to one side. "I need to get use to it. Man, you have me filled to the max."

Jack didn't dare move, but when Jeremy pushed back even more, he had to fight the primal urge not to fuck the guy's brains out.

"Ok, that's real nice. Start fucking, I like it nice and deep, baby."

That was all Jack needed to hear.

He pulled back and sank down, plunging into the hot, tight depths of Jeremy's ass. With every stroke, Jeremy moaned, encouraging him, exciting him, causing his balls to tighten and draw up.

Leaning forward, Jack ran his hands over Jeremy's smooth back. Jeremy arched up towards him, Jack's cock firmly planted deep within his hot, tight hole, connecting them.

Jeremy reached back, pulling himself up.. "Kiss me," he groaned, his cheek rubbing against Jack's, his mouth begging.

Jack had him by the hips. He pounded Jeremy's ass, his pace quickening while he

stifled Jeremy's cries with his mouth.

Skin slapped against skin. The room filled with the animalistic scent of sex and musk that only came from two men fucking.

They were beyond ecstasy, beyond everything. Possessed by the need to get off, they licked, kissed, groped, and fucked with a passionate lust that had Jack ready to explode at any given moment.

They ground against each other, Jeremy whimpering with each thrust. Jack grunted as the fire rose within his loins.

Rain just wasn't in the mood and he knew why. Try as he might, he couldn't erase Jack from his thoughts. It didn't help matters the way Rico had taken to teasing him once he started to talk about Jack.

"You're amused," he said, glaring at Rico who handed him another beer.

"I guess I am," admitted Rico. "I've know you for a bit now, and I've never seen you torn up about anyone."

"I'm not some heartless bitch, you know."

"Never said you were. So, this dude Jack. Have you told him how you feel?" "No."

"So, this guy hasn't a clue?"

"We've fooled around, once. I still flirt with him, but I think he just thinks that I'm messing around. He's a great guy. I value him so much. And right now I'm guessing I fucked up big time taking him to Manhandle. The last I saw of him Jeremy had him on the dance floor."

"That boys got issues," Rico said with a chuckle. "But I don't think you have to worry about Jeremy laying any claim to Jack. Jeremy's only out for one thing and nothing more. Trust me. The lil' fuckers hot in bed, all the same." Rico licked his lips.

"Enough of this. I don't want to talk about it any further," declared Rain.

"So, what do you want to do?" asked Rico.

Rain flashed him a trademark *Rain* smirk. "Unbutton those jeans and let me think about it."

He'd had it!

Jeremy's ass was weakening him. At any moment he was going to blast deep inside the guy. Never in his life had he experienced such an awesome, intense feeling.

Jack closed his eyes. A deep, guttural groan that sounded more like a growl escaped his lips. He held Jeremy's hips, pulling him back, not allowing him to move as he shot off.

"Oh man, oh man," cried Jeremy.

Jack pulled out, tossing the used condom on the floor and then, in one swift movement, he turned Jeremy onto his back. He then scooted down between the guys legs, grasping Jeremy's throbbing cock, sliding his tongue across the head.

Jack felt the strong desire to please, to give Jeremy more pleasure, to drive him over the edge into lust-filled insanity, and most importantly, he wanted Jeremy to explode in his mouth.

"Jesus," yelled Jeremy gasping for breath, his hands grabbing at the mattress. It was obvious he hadn't expected this.

Feeling very wicked, Jack held Jeremy in place. When Jeremy's hips thrusted up and he groaned, unloading his hot come in Jack's mouth, then Jack then released the firm grip he had on him.

Jack took his place back on the bed next to Jeremy. He pulled a blanket over them. Now, together in spoon fashion, he felt him shiver slightly.

"That was fucking awesome," he whispered with an added sigh. "Mind if I stay the night?"

Jack reached around and playfully rubbed the guy's chest. "Of course, and I'll even make breakfast in the morning."

"Sounds good," mumbled Jeremy, drifting off. "I like pancakes."

Rain stood in front of the bathroom mirror checking himself out. He was a complete and utter mess. The eyeliner he applied at the beginning of the night had smeared, and he resembled a racoon on crack.

Rico was great, but he sure as shit wasn't relationship material. The guy was a total player and revelled in having that reputation plastered on him. He could hear Rico calling him from the other room.

Rain returned to the sofa bed and took his place next to Rico, who eyed him with curiosity.

"That was great, babe. You suck cock like a pro."

"Ah thanks, I think." Rain raised one brow.

"No problemo." Rico spun onto his back, crossing his arms behind his head, his muscles flexing with even the slightest movement.

"Rico, have you ever thought about having a relationship? I mean, something more than fucking around?"

A thoughtful look crossed Rico's face. "Can't say that I've ever considered it, at least not at this time. I mean, I'm twenty-one years old. I work fulltime at the garage. And, well, I just like to have fun, no strings attached."

"Fun," repeated Rain.

"Yup, fun. For most of my life I was told what to do, where to go, how to act, who to hang with. My parents were very strict with me and my brothers. Add religion to the mix and well...Let's just say when I got the chance, I got out and I haven't look back.

"My parents have disowned me, and two out of three brothers have vowed never to speak to me again after I came out to them. I don't broadcast who I am. And you may not think it, but I'm a very private person away from Manhandle." Rico paused. "I'm gay, without a doubt. I've accepted that it's a part of me I can't change. In my culture it's looked down on. But that's life. I've moved on."

Rain listened in awe. He knew nothing about Rico's life until now.

"I still love them. They're my family and nothing will ever change that. Now back to the original question. I think it would be great to have that one special guy to love and for him to love me. That's gotta be all kinds of awesome when it happens. If you want it."

Rain nodded.

"I look at you, Rain, and I think you're one hell of a guy, and cute to boot. I'm not sure if it even matters or relates to what you ask. But if I were to seek out a boyfriend, you'd be at the top of the list, babe."

Rain blushed. He rested his head against Rico's chest, his fingers playing with the guy's sparse chest hair. "Thanks for saying that."

Rico reached down and caressed Rain's back. "Let's get some sleep, cutie. It's late."

Jack stirred, then opened his eyes slowly. He squinted at first, until he adjusted to the bright light filtering in through the bedroom's blinds. He glanced at the bedside clock. In less than two hours he had to open the store. Thank God for short hours on Sundays.

He nudged Jeremy and smiled when the guy turned to face him. "Breakfast in a little bit, just like I promised."

Jeremy slid out of bed and started to dress.

"You don't have to go to any trouble. I need to be off anyway," muttered Jeremy. "Listen, thanks for last night. It was amazing. I'll see you around sometime, perhaps at Manhandle."

Jack went to get up but Jeremy stopped him. "I can see myself out." And with those words, Jeremy was gone.

Jack sat there with a dumbfounded expression on his face. He'd just had his first one night stand. He pondered that thought for a bit, then decided he'd best get in the shower and clean himself up before work.

Rain left while Rico was still asleep. His head pounded not only from the after effects of the alcohol but also from lack of sleep. After his talk with Rico, his mind ran to Jack. It had yet to come back.

Jack, who was everything good in his life. Jack, who was always there to pick up the pieces for him when his life shattered. Jack, who last night had looked so damned sexy before going to Manhandle. Jack, who even in that one night had shown him more tenderness than any of the other guys he had slept with in his eighteen years.

Straighten up. Get yourself together. You can't lose it now.

When Rain got home, he showered, redressed, and then headed off to the salon. His shift was short today. He wasn't looking forward to seeing Jack. He'd avoid him if at all possible. The last thing he wanted or needed to hear was the dirty details of Jack's sordid night with Jeremy. No thank you. Hearing that would be too much for him to handle. But one thing was certain, he had to straighten himself out soon. If that meant coming clean about his feelings to Jack, then so be it. Otherwise he was going to drop soon, and this time he might not be able to get up.

"Rain, is that you?" called his mother from her bedroom. Rain gritted his teeth. He really didn't want to face her this morning.

"Yeah, mom. I'm off to work."

"But you just got in. Sweetie, you're going to wear yourself out."

She cared. God knows, she cared, sometimes too much. He loved her. She had accepted him from the get-go, even though he'd been a complete shit to her at times. Yet, she persevered, never giving up on him.

Standing in the hallway ready to leave, he remembered the moment he'd decided to

come out to her at sixteen. He couldn't help but snicker thinking about it.

Two years earlier

"Mom."

Rain waited for her to acknowledge him. Her eyes were focused on the TV and the latest episode of Coronation Street. She glanced at him. "Something wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

He hesitated for a moment, looking down at a brown stain on the grey carpet. But he was determined to do it. He couldn't hide any longer. "I have something to tell you. Something that you need to know."

Her back went straight as she flicked off the TV and sat up in the recliner. "This sounds serious. Is it anything I should be worried about? Did something happen in school again?" Her eyeglasses teetered on the edge of her nose as she looked over them at him.

"No, nothing happened at school."

"Then what is it?"

"I'm gay." He braced himself for her response.

A moment of silence passed. She dropped the remote onto her lap and sank back into the recliner. "Is that it?"

Rain shuffled from side to side. "I guess so."

"Sweetie, I kind of suspected that you might be. It's okay. I just want you to be happy." She flicked the TV back on. "Sorry to cut you off, but I'm dying to see the rest of this episode."

It was one of the easiest and hardest moments in his life, if that made any sort of sense.

"Make sure you eat something. Something nutritious."

"Will do," Rain called back to her, rolling his eyes. "See you tonight."

Chapter Five

Coffee, glorious coffee, how I love thee, let me count the ways.

For once Jack was thankful for the lack of customers. The coffee wasn't great, but it was helping his brain escape from the fog it was enclosed in.

He took another sip, then went about his business, logging into the store's inventory system.

Looking up from the computer screen, he spotted Rain walking into the salon.

His brow furrowed slightly when Rain didn't turn to call out to him or even wave. Usually, he always did one or the other, but nothing today.

If Rain was pissed at him, he'd certainly understand. It had been extremely rude of him to leave with Jeremy without telling Rain he was going.

He'd give it time. Rain, mad or not, would come around. He always did. They'd

make up, hang out, and all would be fine between them.

Rain sensed Jack's eyes on him. But he wanted to stay away, distance himself for a bit.

Ginny was the first to notice him come into the salon. She gave him a look. "Hard night, lover?"

Was it that obvious? Was he that obvious?

"I think I slept for an hour."

"That's life when you're Rain Underwood."

She was teasing him and he so wasn't up for it. "Fuck off, Ginny," he barked, hands still in his jacket pockets, his right fumbling with a piece of paper.

"Testy are we?" She raised one finely arched brow.

"Go lick a vag. Seriously, I'm not in the mood." He pulled the piece of paper from his pocket and glanced at it. *Nate, perfect Nate.*

He'd call Nate after work. His day was looking up after all.

At one Jack stuck the Out for Lunch sign in the store's window and made his way to the food court.

All around various foods called to him. Jack's stomach rumbled at the many selections and aromas. After much indecisiveness, he settled on Chinese food and ordered a double portion of noodles along with ginger chicken and chow mien.

Just as he settled at a booth, Rain appeared, coffee in hand. "Hi." Rain sat across from him, his eyes on the table.

"Hey," replied Jack. "I'm sorry I took off last night without telling you."

"No biggie. I wasn't there long myself. Rico spotted me and well..."

"Rico?"

"Just a guy I know," explained Rain, fiddling with the paper coffee cup. "I assume you left with Jeremy?"

Jack nodded. "Yeah, we went back to my place." He wasn't in the mood to go into the dirty details. It was over and done with.

"Just so you know, Jeremy is kinda loose. He's always picking up."

"I figured as much. It's not like there's interest or anything."

"Interest from you?" asked Rain.

"No, Rain, I'm not interested in him." Why was Rain asking him these questions? It was none of his business.

Rain slipped out of the booth and grabbed his coffee. "I have to get back. I'll call you."

It was confirmed. Jack had slept with that bitch Jeremy. As Rain walked back to the salon, he fought the urge to hit something. Hard. Just the thought of that slut's hands on Jack, his Jack. By the time he reached the salon, he was ready to spit fire. For the rest of the day, he sulked, not daring to look over at The Bookworm.

When closing time rolled around, he was the first one out. He had time to go home, shower, dress, and then he'd call Nate. His mind needed to be elsewhere tonight, and Nate would be the one to help him with that. Screw Jack and the horse—Jeremy—he rode in on.

After he showered and fiddled with his hair, Rain dressed in his standard jeans and a long sleeved shirt with some band's name slapped across it that he hadn't even heard of. He bought the shirt on a whim because he liked the way it looked. It was what he liked to call eclectic.

Grabbing his cell, he glanced at the scrap of paper with Nate's name and phone number. He keyed in the buttons and waited for the guy to answer.

"Hello, this is Nate."

Damn, he sounded so sexy. "Hey. This is Rain from the salon. You left your number for me to call you?"

"I sure did," replied Nate, a twang ringing through his voice.

Rain hadn't noticed the accent before, but it was sexy as hell. "So, do you want to meet up?"

"Yes indeedy. There's a coffee shop near where I live called The Expresso. Do you know where it is?"

"I think so," replied Rain, thinking. "Isn't it next to a laundromat?"

"That's the place. We can start there and see how the night progresses."

"Great." Rain's heart thumped loud echoing in his ears. His pulse raced just thinking what they might get up to. "I'll see you in thirty minutes."

"See you then," said Nate.

When Rain spotted Nate sitting at a table inside The Expresso, he heaved a sigh of relief. He half expected for everything to be a big joke. And if Nate hadn't showed, he wouldn't have been surprised.

Nate smiled and motioned for him to sit down.

"I work here part-time," explained Nate. "So I get discounts. What would you like?" "Just a coffee, black." Rain slipped his jacket off and onto the back of the chair. Nate returned with two steaming cups. He pushed one towards Rain once he had placed both down on the table. "A coffee, black for you and a hot chocolate for me."

"Nice place," commented Rain, taking in his surroundings. The coffee shop exuded a casual, artsy atmosphere. He liked that.

"It's decent." Nate sipped his hot chocolate, looking over the mug at Rain.

They locked eyes. Rain blushed. Could Nate really be interested in him?

"After we finish here, I thought we'd take a walk in the nearby park. I know a spot that's amazing. I go there to think sometimes. It reminds me of back home."

"Sure." Rain liked the idea, but he liked the thought of being alone with Nate even more.

They exchanged some more information back and forth about each other. And with one last slurp of his hot chocolate, Nate was done and already slipping into his jacket. "You done?" he asked Rain.

"Yup."

They left. Rain smiled when he felt Nate's hand come in contact with the small of his back.

"Just breathe that in." Nate inhaled deep and then exhaled. "It's great to think that even in the midst of a city there's still a place to go to get back to nature."

Side by side, they walked along the trail leading into the park.

"This spot you mentioned, are we near?" asked Rain, his pulse quickening, his heart racing.

Nate stopped on the trail ahead of him. "We have to veer off for a bit, but it's through these trees. Follow me." Nate grinned. "I'll protect ya."

"This is it." Nate motioned with both arms. "It's private and secluded. A great place to just be alone or," he moved in close to Rain, "with someone you want to be close too."

The sky started to darken as daylight turned to dusk.

"It's a bit chilly," said Rain. Autumn had come, and as he talked, his breath materialized.

"It's exhilarating." Nate's eyes roamed over him. "Let's sit and relax for a bit, look at the stars."

Rain looked up to the sky, he couldn't see any stars. He dropped to the grass and was glad the ground was dry. He'd hate to mess up his jeans.

Nate tumbled down beside him. "So, Rain, I noticed you looking at me the other day at the salon."

The guy wasted no time getting straight to the point. Rain swallowed hard. "Was I?"

Nate smirked and rolled his eyes. He reached over and ran a hand across Rain's thigh. "I may not be that experienced, but I could tell you were eyeing me. So, tell me exactly what you think of me?"

Rain stammered. "Well...I...you're handsome," he blurted out.

"And you're pretty darn cute and sexy. I like guys like you, Rain. Smaller, smooth guys who are a bit—" Nate bit down on his bottom lip.

"Femme?" asked Rain, wondering if that's what Nate meant to say.

"And that." He moved in very close, one arm wrapping around Rain's waist. "I want to lick you. I bet you taste as good as you smell."

Rain trembled as the other man's stubbly cheek brushed against his neck. Nate's lips trailed kisses to his lips. Things were moving fast, too fast for his liking. This wasn't how he wanted things to go. He broke the kiss and pushed Nate away. "I thought we were

going to get to know each other?"

Nate shoved him back. Rain fell with a thud, banging his head against the ground.

Terror gripped Rain. This wasn't right. When he tried to get up, Nate held him, leering down at him. "You can't tease me like you have and expect nothing to happen."

"Let me go," cried Rain, his voice squeaking. This had turned bad in so many ways. Where had the Nate he thought he knew gone?

"Let you go? You must be fucking joking."

This wasn't fun, this wasn't hot, and this wasn't happening to him. Rain struggled and then a sharp pain shot through his head when Nate's fist connected with his jaw. He saw stars for a moment and then cried out.

Don't be a victim. Fight, fight, fight!

And he did, but Nate was stronger, much stronger. And when Nate punched him again he was sure his nose had broken.

Rain put one hand up to protect himself, feeling his jeans being pulled down. He didn't want this, this wasn't happening.

In the distance he could hear voices yelling, something was in the bushes around them, moving, rustling. "Help," he yelled. "Help!"

Through blurred vision, he saw Nate stand and look around nervously. "Faggot," he spat, pulling back and kicking Rain in the stomach. "You're pathetic." And then Nate was gone.

Rain tried to stand, but the pain...

Everything spun around him and the last thing he heard before darkness enveloped him was voices, and a hand on his shoulder. "Jesus, are you all right?"

"I should call the police."

"Like they'll do anything. Vince, put the cell away. He needs a hospital more than anything. Fuck!"

Rain stirred. Slowly, he opened his eyes. The whole left side of his face burned with pain and blood. So much blood he could taste it.

"Don't move," ordered a male voice when he attempted to sit up.

"We're going to help you," explained another. "But you need to relax."

It all came flooding back. Nate. What he tried to do.

"No," he cried. "I'm ok. I just need to get home." He winced in pain. God, he probably had broken ribs. Then he noticed his jeans were still around his ankles. *Fuck!* Embarrassment washed over him. What the two guys must think of him.

"Easy," said the guy who looked older. "I'm Greg and this is Vince. You really need to go to the hospital."

"No, no hospital," yelled Rain, his voice cracking. "I just need to get home."

Greg looked at Vince and shrugged. "We can't make him go. Get on his other side and let's get him standing."

With help from the two men, Rain struggled to get to his feet.

"Hold him," said Vince. "I'll pull up his jeans."

Rain steadied himself against Greg and thanked Vince. He then broke down in tears, sobbing.

"How did you get here?" asked Vince, his eyes full of concern.

"I walked."

"And how far is your house?" Vince placed a hand on his shoulder. "It'll be fine. We'll take you wherever you need to go."

"Seventy-eight Lexington Street."

"Do you have a name?" asked Greg with Rain still clinging to him.

"It's Rain."

"Ok, Rain, let's get you where you want to go," replied Greg.

Seventy-eight Lexington Street wasn't his address it was Jack's, and right now he didn't want to see another person in the world. He'd fucked up big time, more so than ever before. He hoped Jack would, once again, help him pick up the pieces.

Chapter Six

Jack stretched lazily on the couch. After he closed the store, he stopped off at the market and picked up the makings for a tossed salad, which he combined with a thick steak, for supper. Afterwards, he settled in for a quiet, leisurely night in front of the TV.

When a knock tapped on the front door, his mind went to Rain. But nothing prepared him for the shock he experienced once he opened the door.

His mouth gaped open when he saw his friend standing there, battered and beaten. "What the fuck happened?" he asked, trying not to freak out.

Rain fell forward in a heap against him. "He was so nice, Jack, and I just thought—" Rain broke into a sob.

Two men, both unknown to him, stood back watching the scene unfold. One stepped forward. "We found him in Greenwood Park."

"Thanks," replied Jack, one arm draped protectively around Rain's shoulders. "Thanks for bringing him here."

"He was beaten pretty bad," said the man.

"I'll take care of him," reassured Jack. He watched as the two men walked away, then he shut the door and locked it.

"Let's get you cleaned up." Jack held Rain close as they moved slowly down the hall to the bathroom.

Rain sat on the toilet while Jack fumbled through the cabinet under the sink. He produced a first aid kit and then dampened a wash cloth with warm water.

Rain sat there shivering as Jack gingerly wiped the dried blood from his face. Inside, Jack burned with rage, not at Rain, but at whoever had done this too him. Now wasn't the time to hurl questions.

Rain winced and pulled away. "I'm so sorry, Jack. I shouldn't have come here, but I didn't want to go home. My mother will freak when she sees me."

Jack squat down in front of Rain. "Listen, you don't have anything to be sorry for. We'll get you cleaned up and changed into something more comfortable. I'm glad you came here. I really am."

Rain leaned forward, his head resting on Jack's shoulder. Jack held his head with both hands. You're going to be fine. Trust me."

"I do trust you," whispered Rain. "More than anyone else in this fucked up world."

They both stood. Jack shot into the bedroom and returned with a clean pair of sleep pants and a grey, oversized t-shirt. "I'll throw your clothes in the washer, but I doubt if the blood will come out."

"I don't care," replied Rain, wiping his eyes. "Burn them. I don't want to see them again."

Jack went to leave, to give Rain his privacy, but Rain stopped him. "No, don't go. I don't want to be alone."

Rain shrugged out of his jacket. He attempted to remove his bloodied shirt and cried out. "Fuck that hurts."

Jack reached down and grabbed the edge of Rain's shirt. "Lemme help you." Rain nodded.

"It's soaked through." Jack motioned to the blood on Rain's chest. "You need to shower."

"I will if you come with me."

Jack was ready to say no, but Rain looked so small and pitiful, his eyes pleading, begging.

"That might not be the best idea, Rain."

"I need you near me. Please?"

Jack took a deep breath in. "Ok." He did his best to inject some humor into the situation. "I'll wash your back."

Rain walked into the hot spray and the water surrounded him. Jack stepped in behind, his firm chest coming to rest against Rain's back.

He trembled when Jack's head rested on top of his right shoulder.

"You're ok," Jack whispered. "Nobody will ever hurt you again."

Jack was the best thing in his life. Tears washed down Rain's face along with the water.

Jack held him close, caressing him, lathering him up with soap, the blood washing away from his body.

Rain's mind drifted back the night they first connected on an intimate level. The perfect man, the perfect lover. Jack was both and more. How could he have been so stupid these past few months to not notice what was right in front of him?

He felt his cock stir, but it wasn't from sheer lust, the emotions behind his arousal were deeper.

For the first time in a long time, Jack's emotions got the better of him. And when Rain turned to him, the strong desire to kiss the younger man, to make things okay, overtook Jack's better judgement. Gently leaning in, he stared into Rain's eyes and placed a soft kiss on his bruised cheek, tracing his lips to Rain's mouth.

Jack's hands rested on Rain's slender hips. Rain moaned and pressed against him. Now it was Jack who was sorry. Maybe he was overstepping his boundaries. Maybe Rain didn't want this.

"I probably shouldn't have done that."

Rain pressed harder against him. "Jack, I want you to kiss me. I want you to love me." Rain's lips found his under the hot spray.

Rain groaned when Jack's hand found him. He rested his head against Jack's chest, his fingers caressing the hard, slick, defined muscle.

Jack's thick cock throbbed against his thigh. The intense desire to sink to his knees and please Jack wafted over him. When he went to do this, the guy stopped him.

"Not here. Let's dry off and go to bed."

He was safe. Jack would never hurt him or use him. Not like the other men who has passed through his life and certainly not like that bastard, Nate.

Under the thick, warm bed clothes he foundered his way to Jack, sighing as he was enveloped into everything that was splendid and good.

Jack touched him in ways that made him tremble with ecstasy. He slid one hand

around Jack's hips and grasped the man's glorious butt.

Jack faked surprise, raising one brow. "Now that's different."

Rain smiled. "It's a fantastic butt. I don't think you realize how attractive you are."

"I'm alright, but I'm certainly not all that like some of the guys I spotted at Manhandle."

"They're nothing compared to you. Nothing. They're users, every last one of them." Jack caressed his cheek. "I'm sure some of them are decent. You've just had bad experiences."

Rain furrowed his brow, thinking. "Maybe. But they're not you and I…" The next word was hard to come, but he had to say it. There was no going back. "Love you, Jack." Silence.

"It's ok. You don't have to feel the same. I just wanted you to know how I felt. For too long I've kept my feelings hidden, and I'm done with that."

Of course he felt the same. "You love me?"

"Yes. That night we had together, it was special."

"But then you pretended like nothing happened between us. I thought it was what it was and nothing more. That you had made a mistake and regretted being in my bed." Jack was confused.

Rain sighed. "I have a way of fucking things up, even when it isn't intended. I'm a total idiot."

"Rain, you are not. You just often make wrong choices. We all do."

"But..." stammered Rain.

"But nothing. Now, it's your turn to listen to me. From the first moment we met at the store, I felt a connection with you. I wasn't sure what it was, but my initial guess was friendship. When you kept coming around, I did pick up on the interest you showed for me."

Rain blushed.

"But I liked the flirting. I liked you and having you around me. You helped me come out of my shell, and I started to doubt my feelings for you. I started to see you in another light, something way beyond friendship. Rain, you have to understand, I'm not good at flirting or anything like that. It's still foreign territory to me."

"You're so sweet." Rain kissed him.

"Then, that night I knew for sure. I wanted nothing more than to protect you, to keep you safe. And, for a moment, I thought *w*e were really going to happen. Then, the next morning, nothing." Jack paused. "I love you, Rain, with everything I have." He reached up and ran his fingers through Rain's mussed hair. "I want you to be *my* Rain."

Keep it together.

Jack fought the lump in his throat. "It hurts me to no end to see you repeat the same mistakes over and over. You're worth so much more."

"I'm yours, Jack. I always was, even if I didn't realize it."

Arms entwined, they said nothing, each lost in his own thoughts.

God, he loved this man.

Rain's heart swelled. For the first time in years he felt valued and loved. It was a wondrous feeling, one that he never wanted to end.

Looking into Jack's soulful eyes, he kissed the man on the tip of the nose. "I want you to make love to me."

"Are you sure?" There was worry and concern in the Jack's eyes. "You've been through so much tonight."

"I've never been more sure of anything. I want you inside me. I want to feel you so bad. Love me."

Jack rolled onto his back and then onto his left side. He fumbled through the contents of the top drawer in the nightstand, producing two things which brought a delightful, wicked grin to Rain's face.

"I love a man who's prepared."

"Always." Jack held out the condom packet. "Do you wanna?" Already Jack's erection was standing straight, commanding attention. "See, that's what you do to me." Changing position, Rain bent over, his lips touching the top of Jack's cock. Rain savoured the taste of pre-cum, dabbing at the oozing slit.

"You taste so fucking good." Rain took him in and went deep until he gagged. He pulled back and repeated the act.

Jack groaned, bucking his hips slightly. "Jesus, if you keep doing that I won't get near your sweet, lil' ass. You're going to make me come before we even get down to it."

Rain withdrew Jack's throbbing cock from his mouth. "Oh no, I want you inside me. You don't realize how many times I've fantasized about that."

"Tell me," murmured Jack, his eyes glazed with wanton desire.

Rain sat up, grasping Jack's cock with one hand while he applied the condom with the other. "I wished for you to take me. That's how I always saw it happening. You'd grab me and tell me how much you've always wanted me and that you had to have me.

"I pictured you stripping off my jeans." Rain bit down on his lower lip. He couldn't believe he was telling Jack his most intimate thoughts. "You'd bend me over and then slide your huge cock inside my tight ass, forcing me to beg for mercy."

"That's fucking hot," said Jack.

"I like to think so." Rain applied lube to Jack's ever-growing manhood.

Jack rolled onto his right side and motioned for Rain to slide up beside him. "I want to take you like this. When I'm fucking you, I want access to every inch of you. That's how I always pictured it."

Rain took position and scooted his butt backwards until they were pressed together. He reached down, and when Jack's fingers massaging his tight hole, he cried out in unabashed pleasure.

"You like that?" purred Jack.

"I do." Rain's voice flowed in gasps.

Jack rested his lips against the back of Rain's neck and slowly guided his hard cock to where his fingers had worked their magic.

At first, Rain didn't think he was going to be able to take it. Jack was much bigger and thicker than any other cock he had experienced. But damn it, he wasn't giving up. He cried out as Jack entered him.

"I can stop," whispered Jack, licking the back of his neck. "I don't want to hurt you. I'd never hurt my Rain."

Hearing the last two words sent sparks flying through Rain's body. This was

everything, this was love. "No, don't stop. Just hold it for a second." My Rain.

Fuck, he was so tight, so perfect. Like a glove, Rain gripped him.

"Go deep," ordered Rain, pressing back.

Jacked pushed. He caressed Rain, easing his way inside.

"Fuck me, Jack."

Hearing Rain cheer him sent his hormones reeling. He pulled back and slid deeper, forcing Rain to grunt.

Skin against skin, they bumped together.

Rain leaned his head back. "That's it, baby, fuck me nice and deep. Keep doing it just like that. I can feel you throbbing inside me. I love having my man fuck me."

My man. Jack liked the sound of that.

Jack moaned feeling Rain milking him. "Fuck! I can't hold off much longer."

"Then don't." Rain pulled Jack's right arm around him, edging him on some more. "Fuck your boy, Jack. Breed my ass."

Jack's fingers found the silver rings on Rain's nipples. Rings that, not long ago, had shocked and intrigued him. He pulled on one slightly and felt Rain buck hard against him in response.

Rain cried his name over and over and, in one deep motion, he knew he was at the end of his rope. He couldn't hold out any longer. His balls tightened, he felt them contract, and then hot ropes of liquid fire came up through his cock and deep inside Rain's tight, demanding ass.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he cried, shuddering and trembling. His grip tightened around Rain's chest, he wasn't letting go.

With his cock still embedded inside Rain's twitching hole, Jack found his way back from his dazed state. Rain was pushing his ass against him, moaning.

"Oh God, I'm going to come," announced Rain, fisting his own cock. "Fuck, that's so hot, you inside me, fucking my hot, little ass."

"That's it, baby," Jack murmured in Rain's ear. "Come for me. Come for your man. Come with your man's cock buried inside your tight asshole."

Lying in a hot, sweaty heap, both were completely exhausted, not only physically but mentally, with all that had taken place in such a short time span. Resting in each other's arms, limbs entwined, they drifted off.

Chapter Seven

Rain awoke with a yawn and instantly winced from the pain thudding through his cheek and jaw. He reached to his right, but Jack wasn't there.

Sitting up, Rain called out to Jack. It was far too early for him to have left for work. Then he noticed the aroma. Pancakes? His stomached rumbled. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten.

"Ah, you're up." Jack entered the bedroom with a tray in hand. "I didn't wake you when I slipped out, did I? I did my best to be quiet."

Jack looked ever so handsome in his sleep pants, all bare-chested and sexy as fuck!

"No, I just woke. But then I noticed you were gone."

"I decided to make breakfast for you. It's nothing spectacular, just pancakes made from scratch," said Jack with an added grin. He placed the tray down in front of Rain and climbed onto the bed. "There's enough for both of us. We can share."

Rain watched in total awe as Jack cut the pancakes into small pieces. He then offered a forkful to Rain, who eagerly accepted. Never in his life had he been treated so well. He felt like a damned prince.

"They're so good," said Rain, his eyes wide, revelling in the awesome taste. "Did you add cinnamon to them?"

"Just a bit. It's part of what makes them special. I thought you'd like it."

"I do, very much so." And then he couldn't look at Jack. Rain turned away, tears clouded his vision. "You're too good to me."

Jack removed the tray and places it on the night table. "Rain, what's wrong? Is it about last night? Us?"

"No, you and I are perfect. I couldn't have asked for a better night. I just feel so damned shitty when I think about what I allowed to happen to me."

Jack scooted across the bed and held him tight, cradling his head. "I didn't want to upset you last night, but I need to know what happened, what that twisted fuck did to you."

Rain took a deep breath and then he began.

Rage. That was what he felt when Rain finished. But this wasn't the time to freak out. He held his cool. "Finish up before it gets cold," he said, placing the tray back in front of Rain. "I can hear your stomach rumbling, you need to eat. I'm going to call my parttimer to see if she can cover the store today, even for just a couple of hours. I'll be right back."

The first phone call he made was to Michelle, who eagerly agreed to work for him. She gave some reason for needing the extra money, but he wasn't really paying attention to a word she said beyond when she accepted.

The second phone call was to The Expresso, the place where Rain had met this Nate. The guy had claimed to work there.

A soft female voice picked up on the second ring. "Hi, this is The Expresso, Anna speaking."

Jack lowered the tone of his voice. He didn't want Rain to hear. "Do you have a Nate working there?"

She paused. "We sure do. But Nate isn't due in till four. Would you like to leave a message?"

"No. But thanks for asking." He hung up.

When he returned to the bedroom, he noted that Rain had finished. He removed the tray and then slipped back in bed, smirking as Rain patted his stomach. "That was so good. Where did you learn to cook like that?"

"Self-taught, there are some great cookbooks out."

"Makes sense," shrugged Rain. "You'll have to teach me."

"Will do." Jack ran one hand across Rain's trim tummy.

Stay focused, don't get sidetracked.

"Michelle agreed to work today but she can only stay till three. I have to cover afterwards." He hated to lie. But he couldn't tell Rain his real plans.

"I'm not going into the salon today. Not with this face. They can fire me if they like. It's just a shit job anyway."

"You can stay here when I go. I like the idea of coming home to you." Jack kissed him. "That is, if you want?"

"I want, and right now I want you even more." Rain pushed him back onto the bed and then straddled him. Jack hardened, his cock pressing against Rain's ass.

Rain ground down, his hips circling slowly in a very seductive manner.

"You're driving me crazy, you know that right?"

Rain nodded. "I've only just begun."

Slipping away to shower was easy. After they made love again, Rain was exhausted and he soon passed out into a deep, fatigue-driven sleep.

It was after four by the time Jack pulled up in front of The Expresso. He got out of his car, fed the meter, and then took a deep breath before slipping inside.

The first thing to hit him was the fresh aroma of coffee and baked goods. The place wasn't busy. Only a few patrons lingered at the sparsely placed tables.

Jack walked up to the counter and waited his turn while an older woman placed her order. She turned with coffee in hand, smiled at him, and then made her way to an empty table.

"Can I help you, sir?" asked a young girl, flashing him a toothy smile.

"I'm looking for Nate."

She nodded. "Nate just came in. He's still in the back changing, I think."

"Is it ok if I go back there?" he asked, giving her his best killer smile.

Charm, charm...

"Sure, go right ahead. You're a friend?"

Jack nodded. "Yes, a friend."

"It's the black door at the back of the shop." She pointed. "Right down there."

When Jack entered the room, there was only one other person.

"Nate?"

The fair-haired guy turned to him, fastening his belt buckle. He cast Jack a strange look. "Do I know you?"

"Possibly... maybe... probably not." Jack decided to toy with him a bit. Giving Nate the once-over, he could certainly see why Rain had been attracted to him. "Do you want to know me?" Jack locked the door.

"Is this some sort of a setup?" Nate narrowed his eyes. But when Jack moved in closer, he stood his ground.

Jack locked eyes with him. "If I touched you like this, would you push me away?" Jack reached out and touched Nate's bare chest. He'd yet to button his blue, cotton shirt.

Nate swallowed hard but didn't move.

"And if I moved my hand lower, like this." Jack slid his hand down until he reached Nate's bellybutton, an innie. "Would you demand I stop?"

A fine sweat formed on Nate's brow, and he was breathing deep. Jack looked down and grinned at Nate's obvious state of arousal.

"And if I did this..." Jack grabbed Nate's crotched. He squeezed hard causing Nate to groan. "Oh, you like that, eh?"

"I have to work but maybe we can do something quick," he whispered.

Jack nodded. "I bet you had that in mind with Rain, eh?" With a hard twisting motion, he grabbed Nate's balls and pulled.

"Fuck," cried Nate, bending over, trying to pull away. "Who the fuck are you?"

"A friend of Rain's." Jack released him, pulled back his right arm, and nailed Nate square in the jaw, sending him backwards onto the floor.

Nate looked up at as Jack towered over him. Fear whipped across his face.

"The next time you decide to beat on a fag, I suggest you come see me. And if you ever go near Rain again, I'll kill you."

Jack didn't wait for a response.

Upon returning to the house, Jack found Rain still asleep. He looked at the knuckles on his right hand, two had cracked and swelled, but hell, it was totally worth it. Sitting on the floor beside the bed, he watched Rain, his breathing soft and even. His heart swelled with emotion.

This was what he wanted, what he needed.

He'd never realized how important Rain was to him and vice versa. They had both been so blind to what was right in front of them. It was laughable.

He stood and removed his jeans, socks, and shirt.

Rain opened his eyes as Jack took him in his arms. No one would ever hurt Rain again, not as long as he had breath in his body.

"You're back?"

"Michelle decided to stay." It would have done more harm to Rain than good if he told the truth. And for now, it wasn't needed.

"I'm glad," whispered Rain, looking up at him. "Kiss me." He did.

The End



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