

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

HIS HEART BELONGS TO DADDY

Harry K. Malone

Table of Contents

Love’s Landscapes.....	3
His Heart Belongs to Daddy - Information.....	5
Dedication.....	6
His Heart Belongs to Daddy.....	7
Chapter 1.....	8
Chapter 2.....	13
Chapter 3.....	17
Chapter 4.....	21
Chapter 5.....	26
Chapter 6.....	31
Chapter 7.....	38
Chapter 8.....	45
Chapter 9.....	56
Chapter 10.....	60
Chapter 11.....	67
Chapter 12.....	75
Epilogue.....	78
Author Bio.....	82

Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

HIS HEART BELONGS TO DADDY

By Harry K. Malone

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A well-muscled man in a leather shirt and leather cap sits astride a motorcycle. He has one hand on the throttle, and with the other he's holding a second man in place on the seat. The second man is naked except for a pair of black boots. He's leaning against the biker, his eyes closed in bliss.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

That's me with my Daddy.

Yes, my Daddy is younger than me. Yes, people usually mistake our relationship roles when he allows me to discuss them. I'm older, taller than my Daddy and I love to bottom. I came out of the closet later in life, always wanting for someone to take care of me the way my Daddy does. Sometimes I step out of line but I need my Daddy to keep me in line. He helps me find the right balance, sometimes with toys or discipline. Could you please tell our story, give a glimpse into our daily lives?

I'd prefer a contemporary setting. Bikers a plus!

Sincerely,

SheReadsALot

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: BDSM, Daddy/boy, flogging, age gap, men with children, businessmen, over age 40

Word Count: 25,792

Dedication

For JSS, who may not understand but always supports.

HIS HEART BELONGS TO DADDY

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Chapter 1

Oliver was watching *The Colbert Report* when Olivia let herself into the condo on Friday night. He'd told her she was welcome to come over any time, and though he'd hinted that she might call first in case he was busy, it warmed his heart to think that his twenty-one-year-old daughter still wanted to be around him, especially on the weekend.

"Pops!"

Oliver heard her keys clang against the crystal dish in the entryway and then the thud of two shoes hitting the marble tile. A moment later Olivia appeared in the doorway to the den.

"What are you doing home on a Friday night?"

"I could say the same thing to you." Oliver pointed the remote at the television to pause the show. "Your social life so sorry these days that you have to spend your weekends with your old man?"

Olivia made a face at him and plopped down on the plush sectional. She wiggled a blue silk throw pillow out from behind her. "Actually, it was a pity checkup. I knew you'd be alone, and I said to myself, 'Olivia, a good daughter hoping for a nice inheritance wouldn't spend her Friday night having drinks with hot guys when she could be sitting on the couch with her father, the shut-in who hasn't seen the outside world since you were born.' That's what I said to myself, so then I came over to check on you."

Oliver pointed the remote at her and hit the mute button, but it didn't work. "I am not a shut-in."

"When was the last time you went out?"

"Olivia, I was at the office for eleven hours today."

"Da-ad." She rolled her head to the back of the couch. She'd pouted the same way as a child. The difference was that back then it was to get something she wanted for herself, and now it was to get something she wanted for him. "I just want you to be happy," she said, reaffirming Oliver's belief that her heart was in the right place.

She was a good kid, even if she was more meddlesome than her mother. "I *am* happy. I like watching Stephen Colbert. He makes me happy." She raised an

eyebrow in disbelief. "Really," he insisted. "Go out. Do dumb things. Screw up your life. That's what you're supposed to do in your twenties."

"I thought I was supposed to get a job and act like a grown-up."

"God knows you don't seem to be doing it, so I was thinking maybe I'd just encourage the debauchery from now on."

"Can I tell Mom you said that?"

Joanne, bless her, would die. She firmly believed their daughter was adult enough to get a job and start paying her own way, but at the same time she had a hard time accepting that Olivia drank alcohol and had sex. Not that Oliver particularly wanted to imagine Olivia as a sexual being either, but he was more of a realist than Jo. "No. Go on. I mean it. Get out of here."

"All right," Olivia sighed, pushing herself up from the couch. She came over and kissed him on the cheek. "I'll be back after last call."

"You're sleeping here tonight?"

"That okay?"

"Yeah, of course."

Olivia usually only stayed with him when it was a special occasion, like his birthday, or when she thought he'd be down in the dumps. She technically lived with Joanne, but she'd spent the final months of college bouncing between friends' apartments. Since her graduation a few weeks earlier, Oliver and Joanne had gone days at a time without seeing her.

From behind the sofa, she dropped an iPad into his lap. "Golden Match, Dad. Check it out."

"What's Golden Match?"

"It's a dating site for seniors. See ya."

As Olivia trotted back to the foyer to put on her shoes, Oliver tossed the iPad aside. He tried not to be affronted, since she really had the best of intentions. Most kids probably cringed at the idea of their dad dating, and she'd been trying to play matchmaker for him since she was fifteen. It was sweet, even if she persisted on calling him geriatric and earnestly believed that the Internet was the place to meet quality men.

Once he heard the front door open and close, he turned Colbert back on.

"I want you to kneel down beside me, right here, like a good boy," Martin instructed. Adam crawled on his hands and knees to his place beside the dining chair. "Open up. Good boy!"

Adam resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He was averaging about fifty "good boys" in a night with Martin, only half of which were actually deserved. Most of the time he was just doing what he was told, tasks so easy they shouldn't have warranted any praise. But he couldn't really complain. Martin was good in bed, generous with his time and money, and he seemed to really care about Adam.

Adam let Martin feed him bite-size pieces of food by hand, and when the plate was empty, Martin studied it. Adam knew he was trying to determine if it would be okay to order Adam to lick it clean. Adam wasn't sure if he wanted to do it, but he hoped Martin would demand something from him, tell him to do something that challenged him. But after a moment, Martin rose from the table and took the dishes into the kitchen.

Why didn't you ask me to do that? Adam shifted slightly on his knees. His lower back was starting to a cramp.

"It's bedtime," Martin announced. "Go brush your teeth and wash your face. Get undressed and pick out one toy."

"Only one?"

"Only one."

"But we haven't done anything tonight, and it's so early!"

"Don't complain, or I'll spank you." Martin sounded too nervous to actually carry out the threat. "Be a good boy, and I promise I'll fuck you any way you want."

Adam heaved a bratty sigh, rose to his feet, and trudged up the stairs. Martin's house had four bedrooms, three of which were bigger than the living room in Adam's apartment, and one, on the ground floor, that served as the master suite. Martin didn't like playing in there, so he kept the room at the top of the stairs for Adam. He'd let Adam choose the paint colors and linens, and he'd stocked the dresser with a variety of toys for discipline and pleasure. The walk-in closet held a partial wardrobe of clothes in Adam's size, so Adam never had to worry about bringing an overnight bag or hurrying home in the morning. As it was, he hadn't been to his apartment in three days.

The promise of a good fucking had him hurrying through his business in the attached bathroom. He tossed his clothes in the hamper and padded into the bedroom. He stood at the dresser, contemplating his options. If Martin was only up for one thing tonight, the best option was probably a flogger. Martin had a steady hand, even if he wasn't the most intuitive at using the thing, and if Adam selected the brown one made from ostrich, the longer falls might curl nicely around his lower bits. It would get him more fired up than that spanking Martin had threatened him with.

Even if Martin had carried out the punishment, it wouldn't do much for either of them. Martin never spanked hard enough or with consistent enough aim, and Adam always squirmed and zoned out before the pain could meld into pleasure. No matter how many hits he promised, Martin would inevitably give up after only a few and complain that his hand hurt. So it was much better to go with a flogger, something to make things more enjoyable for both of them.

Adam laid the ostrich flogger on the bed and braced himself against the one empty wall in the room, his feet spread wide. When Martin appeared a few minutes later, he chuckled in satisfaction.

"I love seeing you look ready for me. Makes me hard." Without peeking, Adam knew Martin would be loosening his tie and opening the top button of his shirt. The sight of Martin coming undone always got to him, but often in their scenarios he wasn't in position to see. By the time they'd finished whatever game they'd been playing, Martin would be naked.

"I love making you hard." Adam tensed slightly as he heard the first whoosh of the flogger moving through the air. The tips touched him, flicking gently at first, but by the fourth stroke, they crackled against his skin. By the sixth, they made him feel itchy, and he wanted to call for a time out to stretch his back. By the tenth, he just wanted the scene to be over.

But he kept quiet. It wasn't that he couldn't speak. That had never been part of their arrangement. It was that Martin was so obviously into it that Adam couldn't bring himself to ruin the moment. And it paid off, eventually. When Martin tossed the flogger aside and manhandled Adam to the bed, it definitely paid off.

Martin took him, hard and fast, reaching all those places inside that needed tending to, all the places that the flogging and the discipline at dinner couldn't reach. As Martin's orgasm drew nearer, he growled, "Who's your Daddy?" and Adam cringed, but he was too close to the edge to argue.

“You are.”

Their shared groans echoed throughout the house.

Chapter 2

Golden Match had an option for men seeking men to browse and post profiles. It shouldn't have come as a surprise. For one thing, any dating service in this day and age that didn't market to the gay community had bad business sense. For another, Olivia was a thoughtful girl. She would have vetted the site before suggesting it to her old man.

To appease her, Oliver created a profile. It took a lot longer than he anticipated, and he found himself overthinking every answer to the questions he was asked. By the time he finished, his profile no longer sounded like the same Oliver Wasserstein he'd known for fifty-four years, but he hoped he came off as sophisticated and intriguing.

Around ten his home phone rang. Figuring it was Olivia, and hoping she wasn't in trouble, he picked up.

"Why are you answering your phone on a Friday night?"

It wasn't Olivia. It was worse. It was her mother.

"Why are you calling me if you don't think I'll answer?"

"Liv told me to check on you. She said you looked especially sad tonight."

"I am *not* sad!" Sometimes it felt as if the two of them lived in an alternate reality. "I'm just watching television!"

"Oh, Oliver."

He hated how she said that. *Oh, Oliver*, the way she'd frowned at him when he'd announced he was quitting his job and starting his own business. *What a terrible idea, you sad little man*. Maybe Joanne never said that exactly, but she didn't have to. It was all in how she said his name.

"What about you?" he wondered. "Why aren't you out?"

"I am. Ted and I are at Santorini's with some friends. Why don't you come join us for a drink?"

"I'm tired. I was about to go to bed."

"Are you sure?"

He was half-tempted to give in. He could change quickly and drive to Santorini's in less than fifteen minutes. He could have a cocktail, say hello to

Joanne's husband Ted, and it wouldn't be a dreadful way to spend the evening. It wouldn't be thrilling, but at least he'd have a chance to socialize.

Unless it was a setup.

"Which friends?"

"Maggie and James," she said, understanding his trepidation. "Nobody single. Nobody gay."

"I don't know about that. James definitely wants a three-way." Jo snorted into the phone. "Are you at the table with him right now?"

"Uh-huh."

"How does he look? Does he have the face of a man who wants to shake up the sacrosanct marital bed?"

"All right, Ollie, we'll see you soon." She hung up on him.

Oliver groaned and stretched and went to find a change of clothes.

Things always looked different in the harsh light of day. Adam awoke, needing to use the bathroom, but he couldn't because Martin's arms were wrapped tightly around him. He nudged and wiggled, but Martin only snored and squeezed harder.

Adam hated being spooned.

"Martin?" He nudged Martin with his hips. "Martin, I have to get up. Come on."

Martin snuffled awake. "What? What time is it?"

"Come on, let go of me." He could see freedom at the edge of the mattress, only a few inches away. "Martin." He stretched his torso forward while kicking backward at Martin's shins. Once liberated, Adam stretched and worked out the kinks in his neck. "I hate it when you do that."

"Sorry."

After showering and dressing, Adam found Martin downstairs in the master bathroom. He had a towel wrapped around his waist and shaving cream smeared across his face.

Adam sat on the spacious countertop between the two sinks. "What are we going to do today?"

Martin ran the razor up his throat to the jaw line. "I was trying to figure out if I should tell you to go home and get some chores done, or if I should tell you to stay here and help me with mine. I need to go grocery shopping. Do you feel like doing that?"

"I don't know. Does it matter?"

"Well, I want to make sure I'm not forcing you to do things you don't want to do."

"Isn't that your job?"

"To make you do things you don't like?" Martin gave him a worried look through the beard of shaving cream.

"Not just anything I don't like, but things that are for my own good, even when I don't want to do them."

"But isn't it so much more enjoyable when we're doing something we both want?"

Adam thumped his head against the mirror. They weren't even having the same conversation. Adam was thinking about nutrition, exercise, and money management; Martin was truly convinced Adam liked crawling around on his hands and knees and eating food out of Martin's hand.

Adam sighed and watched the man shave. Martin's salt and pepper hair was still wet and sexily ruffled. His chest was wet, too, and Adam liked how furry it was. Martin was so distinguished, such a man's man. Except when it came to taking care of Adam.

They'd met at an instructional class on rope play at an adult store. There had only been five other people in the class that night: one unattractive, unhappy couple who barely acknowledged each other's existence; one young couple who blushed and giggled at everything the instructor, Master Kimodo, had said; and one single, studious woman who took pages and pages of notes. Adam had approached Martin after the class, and they'd gone out for a drink and hit it off.

In hindsight, the fact that it had been Adam who approached Martin was probably a sign. Adam had done all the driving in their relationship, despite the fact that Martin was supposed to be the one in charge. He'd offered Adam guidance with job interviews in the few weeks since graduation, and he never hesitated to buy Adam things and give him spending money. But he was generally clueless about the role he had pledged to fill in Adam's life.

“We’re not very good at this.” Adam figured that sounded nicer than putting all the blame on Martin.

“We’re new to it.”

“I’m not sure it’s working for me.”

“So let’s talk about it. Isn’t that what Master Kimodo said? Communication is the most important thing?” Martin splashed some water on his face and wiped it off with a towel.

“You’re a sweet man. A wonderful man.” Adam realized he was beginning a breakup speech. He hadn’t planned on ending his relationship with Martin, but now that the words were starting to tumble out of his mouth, he knew it was the right thing to do. “I don’t think we’re giving each other what we need.”

Martin leaned a hip on the counter and took one of Adam’s hands in his own. He laced their fingers together. “We’re just figuring out the dynamic, that’s all. We’ll get it. We just need time.”

Adam slid his hand free. “Martin, you’re a bad Daddy. And not,” he rushed to add, “‘bad’ in a sexy way.”

“Damn it, Adam, it’s not me who’s the problem. You’re a rotten boy. I can never tell what you want, and you don’t listen. You don’t even seem to enjoy listening. What’s the point of me trying to give you guidance if you aren’t receptive?”

“Receptive?” Adam guffawed. “Receptive? I feel like all I do is bend over for you!”

“You love it!”

“Yeah,” Adam sighed, sliding off the counter. “I do. But everything else is a mess. I think I should go.”

Martin let him get halfway out the bathroom door before he called, “If you think you’re going to find someone who’s willing to give you everything the way I did, you’re younger and dumber than I thought.”

Chapter 3

Light. Bright light. Glaringly white, hot light shining directly on his face. Oliver groaned, rolled over, and pulled the pillow on top of his head. But the pillow was made of bricks, and it nearly crushed his skull. He threw it off, groaned again, and rolled onto his back, squinting at the sunlight streaming through the parted curtains.

I will never drink that much again. A hollow promise if ever there was one—he'd probably pledged the same thing a hundred times since he was a teenager. But this time he meant it.

It wasn't his fault. It was Joanne's, for dragging him to Santorini's the night before. If he could stay away from her, he could stay away from booze, and then he'd be able to walk the straight and narrow. Well, the narrow, anyway. He'd never wake up feeling like this again.

He was thirsty and needed to pee, but he could hardly move with the room spinning so fast. He let out another self-pitying groan.

His cell phone on the nightstand chirped with a text message. Oliver glanced at it briefly, hoping it was Jo, so he could hurl insults at her for what she'd gotten him into. If she could just resent him for their past history like a normal woman, this would never have happened. But, no, she had to be so open-minded, so content to share a daughter with her gay ex-lover. Always inviting him out to parties to show him off. *This is my daughter's father. The queer one. Isn't that neat?*

Okay, maybe Joanne had never said anything to that effect. And maybe she only invited him places because she worried he was a workaholic with no social life. Maybe she was a great woman, one of three women he had ever and would ever love—his mother, Joanne, and Olivia—and the only woman he could ever imagine being a parent with. Their relationship had crashed and burned in a matter of months, but as friends and parents, they'd been going strong for over twenty years.

Too bad he'd have to kill her.

He picked up his phone.

R u coming 2 brkfst?

Oliver had to read the message aloud to understand it, and by the time he'd done that, there was another message waiting to be read.

Pancakes.

Why Olivia thought it was necessary to text him when they were in the same house was beyond his comprehension. The condo was big, sure, but not so big that she couldn't come down the hall and knock on his door. Unless she thought he had someone in bed with him and was avoiding the room to spare them all the embarrassment.

Dad, come on.

At least she was using full words now. Oliver tried to sit up. It took a few attempts, and he was sweating by the end of it, but eventually he was upright. He phoned her.

"Morning, sunshine," Olivia greeted him. "How was *The Colbert Report*?"

"Your mother told you."

"Now, Dad, there's no judgment. I said to myself, 'Olivia, how would you want Dad to react if you'd tied one on last night?' And the answer was that I'd really like it if someone would make me breakfast."

"Pancakes for a hangover?"

"Pop, we've got company. Gotta feed them something."

"Company? Christ." It was bad enough to let his daughter see him out of sorts, but no way was Oliver Wasserstein going to allow guests to witness his morning after. He rose swiftly to his feet and made it all the way to the closet door before he regretted it. He gritted his teeth, picked out a clean shirt, and went to the bathroom to freshen up.

By the time Oliver made his entrance, Olivia was holding court in the dining room. A few pancakes remained on the platter in the middle of the table, along with a half-empty pitcher of orange juice and, to Oliver's chagrin, a nearly empty bottle of 1995 Perrier-Jouët.

"You couldn't use something cheaper to mix in?"

Olivia smiled at him through a mouthful of pancakes. He recognized the glaze in her eyes. It was the telltale sign that she had a mimosa buzz. He supposed he should be more upset about that than which brand of champagne she'd used to get there.

"Aren't you all starting a little early?" He helped himself to some fresh fruit and a glass of orange juice, sans booze. "Who are you all?"

“Dad, you remember Wendy.” Olivia gestured at the young woman seated to his left. Oliver had seen her quite frequently this last school year. He guessed she was Olivia’s current BFF. “And this is Doug and Adam and the one we call Boom-Boom.”

“Good morning,” he greeted the gaggle. “Did everyone stay here last night?”

“Yes,” Olivia replied. “Well, everyone but Adam. He came over this morning.”

“I presume that you were home at a reasonable hour?”

“Before you.”

“Oh, you heard me come in?”

“We sure did,” Boom-Boom answered, sending the table into a fit of laughter.

Oliver cringed. The childish part of him wanted to turn to Olivia and say, *Well, you told me to go out! See what happens when I listen to you!* But he was, after all, in his fifties and much too old for such outbursts. Instead, he cleared his throat and said, “I apologize if I woke you.”

“Not at all, sir,” one of the young men answered. “We’re the ones who should be apologizing. We obviously intruded on your privacy.”

The one called Boom-Boom snickered again, though Oliver couldn’t imagine why. He preferred the good manners of the young man who had spoken.

“Remind me of your name again, son?”

“Adam, sir.”

“Adam, please call me Oliver.”

The kid gave him a toothy smile.

Olivia’s dad was hot. Not hot in the older man kind of way. He was hot, like hot enough to be a model, hot enough to be on the cover of a magazine, George Clooney-esque, age-defyingly hot.

But he was a mess.

When Olivia said he would be joining them, Boom-Boom had whispered to Adam that Oliver had stumbled home drunk in the wee hours. Now that Oliver was sitting at the table, his tardiness for breakfast, his pallid complexion, and his bloodshot eyes all gave away what he'd been doing the night before. It was as if he was trying to efface his hotness with his hangover. His skin looked dry, the wrinkles standing out proudly. There was a bead of sweat on his brow line. He was probably struggling not to hurl onto the pancakes Olivia had made.

Adam didn't know Olivia very well. They'd only recently started to run in the same circle, because Adam was roommates with Boom-Boom and Boom had once dated Wendy, who was close to Olivia. Adam knew Olivia had stayed in his room at their apartment a lot while he was at Martin's. He'd only been invited over this morning because everyone felt sorry about his breakup.

When the others finished breakfast, they pushed back from the table and scattered to get dressed and head down to the beach. Adam left with them, but once bedroom doors were slammed shut, he doubled back to the dining room, where Oliver was still contemplating a piece of grapefruit.

"I wouldn't try it," Adam cautioned. "I'd stick with a banana."

"No pancakes to fill the stomach and help flush out the toxins?"

"I can't imagine syrup will taste very good coming back up."

Oliver made a funny noise. "Did you go to school with Olivia?" Adam nodded. "Were you pre-med?"

"No, sir, communications."

"So you just learned about hangover cures as a side hobby?"

"Better than through firsthand experience." Adam clamped his mouth shut. He hadn't meant to be so cheeky, insulting the man in his own home.

"I'll thank you to keep your opinions to yourself." Oliver rose from the table and dropped his napkin on his plate. "Enjoy my house."

Chapter 4

It wasn't hard to find a date through Golden Match. A perfectly reasonable sexagenarian in Saint Petersburg responded to Oliver's profile and agreed to drive the distance to Tampa to meet.

Oliver suggested that Paul come to his house, so they could have a drink while deciding where they wanted to eat dinner. In retrospect Oliver realized it wasn't the smartest or safest thing to do, but Paul didn't raise any objections to the plan.

He arrived promptly at eight, while Oliver was still scrounging to find clothes to wear. With Olivia banished and the maid off duty, there was no one to answer the door. Oliver hurried down the hall in his socks and unbuttoned shirt. He looked like a crossover between *Cocoon* and *Risky Business*.

He opened the door to Paul, who grinned at his state of undress. "This looks promising." Paul stepped into the condo, slammed the door behind him, and shoved Oliver against the nearest wall. Before Oliver could speak, Paul's mouth latched onto his neck and left a mark that Oliver would have to explain at the office on Monday. Satisfied, Paul turned his attention to Oliver's mouth. He tasted like stale coffee. He pushed his hips into Oliver's and ran his hands under Oliver's shirt.

"What about dinner?" Oliver managed to ask.

"Screw it. Let's screw instead."

Oliver thought about it for a half-second before giving in. He took Paul into his bedroom, where the man stripped out of his jeans and flip-flops.

"I can't do hands and knees," Paul warned. "Knee replacement surgery. Standing okay? Or face to face on my back?"

Paul wanted Oliver to fuck him. Oliver ran a hand through his hair. It wasn't that he wouldn't, or couldn't, but he'd at least have liked to have been given a choice. He reached into the nightstand and pulled out a condom.

"Are you positive?"

"No. You?"

"No. I get tested every year."

“All right then.” Paul lay down atop Oliver’s comforter and spread his legs wide. He reached down to fondle his balls. “Let’s do this.”

Oliver looked down at his Tag Heuer. His date for the evening, Simon, had been going on for a solid ten minutes about his kitchen remodel, without any awareness of Oliver’s complete and utter disinterest in the subject. When you could have whatever you wanted in your house, it wasn’t that exciting to get a designer’s discount on cabinetry. And when you could hire someone to take care of the details, you didn’t have to waste your time wondering if the glass tile backsplash clashed with the quartz countertop.

Or waste your date’s time, when he had to listen to you debate the matter.

Oliver took another sip of his cabernet. It was a nice vintage, impressive for the tiny wine bar Simon had suggested. After his “date” with Paul, Oliver had hoped that his meeting with Simon would turn out the same. In fact, he would have no problem if all his Golden Match dates turned into casual sex, though Olivia and Joanne would certainly have frowned upon that. They needn’t worry; Simon seemed intent on getting to know each other first.

As he gazed around the bar in boredom, Oliver spotted one of Olivia’s friends. It took a moment to remember the name—Adam, the one who had chastised him for drinking too heavily. Pots and kettles, it seemed. Adam was laughing loudly and waving around a wine glass of his own. There was no good in being a father if Oliver couldn’t put the younger generation in their place every now and then.

“Would you excuse me?” he interrupted Simon. “I see someone I know. I’m just going to say hello.”

Adam didn’t see Oliver approach, and he jumped when Oliver touched his arm. He looked guilty, and Oliver felt a thrill of victory rush through him. “Oh. Hi. Oliver.”

“Hello, Adam. Enjoying a drink?” He couldn’t help punctuating his consonants a little more than was necessary.

Adam narrowed his eyes. “Yes, as a matter of fact, I’m enjoying *one* glass of wine with my friend Skip.” The friend in question lifted his glass in acknowledgment. “Skip, this is Olivia’s dad, Oliver. Oliver, Skip.”

“Hey, man, nice to meet you,” Skip said. “Olivia’s a great girl.”

Yes, she was. And what he did in front of her friends reflected on her. He suddenly felt like a cad for intruding.

“So, Oliver,” Adam asked tartly, “how many glasses of wine have you enjoyed tonight?”

“Enjoyed? None. I’m going to the restroom. Nice to meet you, Skip.”

He fled. This was why he didn’t go out, and the stupid website and its stupid users who took an interest in him had made him forget, had given him confidence that he knew how to handle social settings. He knew that when he was Adam’s age, he’d owned the world, like Adam, but for the life of him he couldn’t remember how he had pulled it off. All he knew how to do now was make a fool of himself. Adam and Skip were probably laughing at the dumb geezer who’d thought he could catch their attention.

He splashed a little water on his face and reached for two paper towels to dry it. The door creaked open while his face was covered, and when he lowered the paper towels to toss into the trash, Adam was standing behind him.

“I’m sorry,” Adam said.

Oliver turned to face him. “For what?”

“For being rude.”

“I’m the one who’s sorry. I interrupted your evening.”

“How much have you really had to drink tonight?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m on my first glass. You?”

“I never drink more than one,” Adam declared. “I don’t like losing control.”

In spite of Adam’s snotty attitude, Oliver felt himself smiling. Twenty-one and so adult. Fresh out of college and thinking he had all the answers figured out. Maybe he hadn’t owned the world when he was Adam’s age. Maybe he had just been foolish enough to think he had.

“The thing is,” Adam continued, “it’s not really enough for me to be in control of myself.” He took two steps closer. “Do you know what I mean?”

Nowhere near a novice to the game, Oliver knew exactly what Adam meant, what Adam wanted. As much as Adam was a snot-nosed punk, he was also gorgeous and polite—well, at first, anyway—and his confidence was arousing. Oliver licked his lips but only realized he’d done it when he caught Adam looking.

This is Olivia's friend, he told himself. You can't.

"No, I don't," he said coldly. "I run a multimillion dollar business that I built from the ground up. When I go out, I like losing control. It feels freeing to clear my head and not worry about anything for a few hours."

Except doing things men my age shouldn't be doing to men yours.

"You mean like being reckless?" The way Adam held his gaze, it wasn't a question so much as a suggestion.

Oliver's heart quickened. He caught his breath. He only had to say the word "yes," and he and Adam came together for a searing kiss.

Oliver's kiss was more timid than Adam expected, and it took him a second to realize Oliver was letting him set the pace. He backed Oliver against a wall, next to the paper towel dispenser, and kissed him more forcefully. Oliver was no dead empty mouth—he met Adam's intensity—but it was clear Adam was doing the driving.

Adam pulled back to catch his breath and took the opportunity to study Oliver. This close, he was more handsome than Adam had first realized, and there were no exposed capillaries in the whites of his eyes, no pallid, dry skin to give away his inebriation. He was freshly showered and shaved, his eyes bright, and his salt and pepper hair impeccably combed. Adam couldn't resist giving it a fluff and ruining the perfect style, which prompted a little cry of outrage from Oliver. But Adam didn't apologize. Not with words.

Instead, he slid to his knees.

"Oh, fuck," Oliver groaned. "Right here?"

"Right here." Adam carefully undid the button and zipper on Oliver's fancy linen pants. He found Oliver's dick inside a pair of skin-colored silk boxers and brought it out. It was red and thick, beading with fluid, ready to be savored and lavished with attention.

"What if someone comes in?" Oliver's voice was shaky.

"Let's see how fast we can do this." Adam swallowed as much of Oliver's cock down as he could. He heard Oliver let out another groan.

They weren't caught. Oliver came in just a few minutes, and Adam licked him clean. They tidied themselves up, washed their hands, and rearranged their

hair and clothing. Then they looked at each other, awkwardly. Adam's heart was racing in his chest. Now was the moment he needed Oliver to take charge, to tell him what a good job he'd done and to make everything okay.

"May I buy you a drink or something?" Oliver offered. "To get the taste out of your mouth before you go back to your—Jesus, was that your boyfriend?"

"No," Adam corrected. It was difficult to maintain eye contact when he was feeling so confused. "Just a friend. And I really meant it when I said one is my limit."

Oliver nodded. "I guess then..."

Adam could feel his heart sinking. He wasn't the kind of person who participated in public sex acts. It meant something that he wanted Oliver so badly, that he was willing to be with Oliver in the middle of a bathroom, that he had taken such a great risk. But Oliver didn't even care. It was probably just one in a string of indiscretions in his life. He was old enough, after all. He'd probably been around the block more than once. He'd probably committed to a life of non-monogamy long before all the homos starting jumping on the gay marriage band wagon. And now, well, if Adam were Oliver's age with Oliver's looks and wealth, he wouldn't keep someone around after a hasty blow job either.

The way out of this was to downplay it. "It was my pleasure, really, but we can't tell anyone, and we certainly shouldn't do it again."

Adam thought he saw a tinge of disappointment in Oliver's eyes, but it was probably his own wishful thinking.

"Right," Oliver quickly agreed. "Olivia."

"You should go back to your table. I'll head back to Skip, and we'll both act like nothing happened."

"What about the next time we run into each other?"

For a moment Adam foolishly thought Oliver was asking for seconds. But, no, Oliver was worried about his daughter finding out what her father was up to. He needn't be. "Have no fear. Olivia and I aren't really that great of friends anyway. You don't have to worry about running into me again."

Adam strode out of the bathroom before Oliver could respond and hurt him any further.

Chapter 5

Adam didn't go home that night. Boom-Boom texted that some friends were coming over, and Adam feared that Olivia might be in the crowd. He couldn't see her now. Not because he was ashamed of what he'd done with her father but because seeing her would just remind him that Oliver didn't really want him. No one really wanted him. He was a boy adrift.

He returned to the bar after the bathroom encounter, rinsed away the taste of Oliver with his remaining Malbec, and looked at Skip. Before he could really think through the consequences, he put a hand on Skip's hip and asked, "Do you want to get out of here?"

Now he was leaning over the sink in Skip's bathroom, looking at himself in the mirror. He wasn't an especially attractive man. His teeth were too big, his nose too long, and his hair never held its style in the Florida humidity. His body was okay—he certainly worked on it as much as he could to make up for what nature hadn't given him—and between that and his smile, he'd gone further than most people who looked like him probably could have. It didn't hurt that his ass was made of two perfect globes of flawless alabaster skin.

Skip had never shown any interest in men before, but he'd left the bar without any fuss. Maybe he'd always kept his preferences quiet, or maybe he was feeling curious. Either way, he lived alone and had a king-size bed. It would give Adam a safe place to get some rest.

Adam had thought about having sex with Skip before, as he'd thought about every man he met, but it had never been more than a fleeting idea. He would never have expected Skip to want it, for one thing. And Skip was about fifteen years younger than Adam preferred.

But it would take Adam's mind off Oliver. And it would alleviate the tension that sucking off Oliver had caused.

He turned off the bathroom light and padded into the bedroom.

"Hey," Skip greeted him sleepily. Adam slid between the sheets next to him. "Are we really going to do this?"

"Are you going to be okay with it?"

"Yeah. I think so."

Skip didn't know what he was doing. Adam could tell it was his first time with another man. It should have bothered him, the way he had to coach Skip through every step, but it didn't. It actually made the process more enjoyable—which was a good thing, because there weren't many fireworks anyway.

Afterward Skip reached for Adam, his eyes shining with affection and wonder, and Adam felt an intense, immediate need to flee.

"I can't believe this is your house," Simon said as they sat down to breakfast.

Oliver resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Simon had said the same thing at least four times the night before, and while Oliver enjoyed it when people admired his home, it got a little stale when they couldn't move beyond the wealth.

"Do you have a vacation home and all that?"

"I live in Florida. Where would I need to vacation?" Oliver dug his spoon into his grapefruit. "When I go on vacation, I rent places. It's less hassle than maintaining some house year-round, and it encourages me to see different parts of the world, rather than going to the same place year after year." Not that Oliver traveled much these days. Work and sleep, spend time with his daughter, watch TV, and work and sleep again. At least Olivia was enjoying all the money he made. He certainly wasn't.

"Where was the last place you went?"

Oliver had to think about it. He remembered a ski lodge, hot chocolate, and a young ski instructor named Jean-Michel. He'd had to lie repeatedly to Ted and Jo that week so he and Jean-Michel could steal time together without Jo's nosy intrusion. For one lust-crazed minute, he'd thought he and Jean-Michel might have really had a thing, but it turned out the ski instructor also had a wife and baby in town.

"Chamonix, for skiing."

"Is that in Europe?" Oliver nodded. "I'd love to go to Europe," Simon sighed dreamily.

"So why don't you?"

Simon took a sip of his espresso and looked up at Oliver through fluttering eyelashes. He probably thought it made him look sexy, but to Oliver he looked

like a man who didn't realize his best days were behind him. "Never had anyone to take me."

Oliver wasn't about to issue an invitation. He had enough trouble in daily life with people sidling up to him to capitalize on his wealth and generosity. This Golden Match profile was supposed to give him a chance to meet people who liked him, not his money. It was his fault for bringing Simon home in the first place, but Oliver didn't particularly like being in strange houses. And last night he'd needed a palette cleanser after the inappropriate blow job he'd received from Adam.

Too bad Simon's skills were nothing compared to Adam's. Their encounter left Oliver itching for a rerun with Adam instead of making him feel ready to move onto something new.

"I need to get to work soon," he announced, pushing up from the table.

"It's Sunday," Simon protested. "You have to work on Sunday?"

"Yeah, well, how do you think I pay for the European vacation you're trying to con out of me?" He saw Simon's shocked face and realized he'd probably spoken too harshly, but he didn't care. He hustled Simon through his breakfast and out the door. Simon didn't ask when they could see each other again.

By the time Adam got back to his apartment, the sun was already beating down. It was another summer scorcher, the kind of day when all the women would wear their hair off their necks and all the men would strip out of their shirts. Adam suspected Boom-Boom would scheme to let them into his parents' house, so they could enjoy the giant swimming pool in the backyard. If Boom-Boom's parents were still in Tampa, they'd have to make other plans; Boom had been thrown out after his mom found him doped up on Ambien and walking around the house like a zombie.

One of their friends probably knew someone with a boat. If they could get out on the water, they could at least catch a breeze.

But first Adam needed sleep. Then a shower.

He left his flip-flops by the front door and went barefoot down the hall to his bedroom. He slid his shirt off as he opened the door. Olivia was lying in the center of his bed, face up, snoring lightly. She was wearing a twisted pink

camisole that nearly exposed her left breast. She wasn't wearing any pajama bottoms.

Adam eased the door closed quietly and headed back to the living room. Boom was sacked out on the couch. Adam gave him a gentle shake.

"Hey. Someone's in my room. Why are you sleeping out here?"

"Wendy and Pablo hooked up in my room."

"So they kicked you out?" The need for sleep was becoming a pressing concern, and Boom-Boom's use of the sofa put a crimp in the plans. "Why didn't they just go home and hook up in one of their own beds?"

"I don't know, man. The moment felt right?"

Adam surveyed the living room. Nearly empty bottles of alcohol overturned, dishes of leftover food that had grown hard and crusty, throw pillows tossed haphazardly in every direction. He tried to imagine the scene last night, as their friends got so drunk that they couldn't even make it home to have sex in private.

A public bathroom was one thing, but your friend's bed?

"Fucking savages, all of you. I don't know what to tell you, but I need sleep, and you gave away my bed."

"You told me it was okay."

"Back when I was dating Martin and had somewhere else to stay."

Boom-Boom yawned. "Sorry, ace."

"Fuck you, Christopher." Adam turned back to the short hall that led to the bedrooms.

"What are you doing to do?"

"She can either wake up and go home, or she can share with me. I don't care, but I'm getting sleep one way or another."

Once inside his room, though, Adam couldn't bring himself to make Olivia do either of those things. She looked too content and too vulnerable for him to disturb. He stood, mesmerized. If anyone caught him watching her, Adam would probably have been called a creep. But it wasn't like that. Even stripped down to her panties, Olivia didn't do it for him. Rather, it was the fact that she shared many features with her father, except that on him they looked rugged and masculine and on her round, soft, and feminine.

One blow job. One round of oral. That was all, and Adam couldn't stop thinking about Oliver.

He hated himself for ever telling Boom-Boom it was okay to let other people stay in his room. He hated Olivia for using his bed when she probably had a fucking suite in Oliver's massive condo. Mostly, though, he hated Martin for ruining everything, for not being strong enough to control him, for causing Adam to wind up in the situation where he now found himself.

Martin wasn't the answer. Adam and Martin had been drawn to each other as a result of common interests, and in the time they'd spent together they had served as mutually convenient partners. But Martin wasn't the one.

A romantic at heart, Adam still believed there was someone out there who was right. Someone who would teach him, punish him, support him, love him unconditionally, even when he talked back and put up a fight. Someone who told him the impulses, the needs he felt weren't wrong or sick because he felt them, too. Someone who treated Adam like a treasure. Someone whose face took Adam's breath away.

Olivia's phone was resting on the nightstand. Even in its off mode, it emitted a siren song that made him pick it up. It had a four-digit passcode. Adam decided that he could try to open it, but if he didn't succeed in one minute, he would have to call it a wash.

Olivia's passcode was 1-1-1-1. He got it on the first try.

Adam didn't look through her pictures or text messages. He scrolled through her contacts until he got to *d*. He repeated the number quietly a few times, to make sure he had it memorized, set the phone down again, and sneaked out before Olivia awoke.

Chapter 6

Like most Sundays, the office was deserted. It was unsurprising, since only a few people had keys, but on occasion some executives, in fear for their annual bonuses, ditched their families and church services to get in a few more working hours. On days when Oliver was also present, he tried to make sure he bought them lunch to show his appreciation.

Today, however, it was just him and several emails. In reality they could have waited until Monday, but Oliver would only spend the rest of his weekend worrying about them. Better to come in and take care of things now, so that his mind would be free to—what? Watch television alone? Maybe Liv would want to get dinner at that Mexican place she loved so much.

The ringing of his office phone jolted him. Alicia usually turned the phones off promptly at six on Fridays, so any calls they received on the weekend went straight to voicemail. On Monday mornings, there usually weren't any messages. Everyone who really needed access to Oliver over the weekend had his cell number or sent him email.

“Oliver Wasserstein,” he said automatically as he answered.

“Hello? Oliver? This is Adam. McPherson. You know, from... the bathroom.”

Oliver looked at the phone he was holding to make certain he'd heard right. “Hello, Adam. Is there a reason you're calling me at the office? Are you planning to do business with us?”

“The office?”

“Yeah, the office. Where did you think you were calling?”

“Um, nowhere, never mind.”

Oliver leaned back in his black leather executive chair. Adam's voice sounded a little higher over the wire, and all his fumbling made him sound younger than he had in person. Less sanctimonious, more charming. As much as Oliver enjoyed listening, though, Adam had made it clear that their encounter was a one-time affair.

“You were very specific about not contacting each other again, Adam.”

“I know, but... I was wrong, okay? Sometimes I make mistakes. It happens. Especially...”

“Especially what?”

“Especially when I don't have anyone looking out for me.”

It wasn't difficult to hear the plea in Adam's voice. How tedious. First Simon's adulation, his barely masked desire to live out his own Cinderella fantasy, and now the little lost boy who wanted to be schooled. This was what happened when Oliver ventured out. This was why it was better to stay home alone.

“I already have a child,” he said curtly, “and I'm busy working right now. So if you don't have anything else to say—”

“Damn it, Oliver, shut up and listen to me!”

He sat up quickly. “I'm listening.”

“It wasn't my imagination in the bathroom. We had a connection.”

Flashes of Adam's wet, hot mouth on Oliver's cock sent shivers through him. Inside his khakis, he began to harden. “It was great,” he had to concede.

“That's why we should do it again.”

“Adam,” he sighed, “you were the one who said you didn't think that was a good idea.”

“Because I thought that's what you wanted to hear. Was it?”

Oliver imagined Adam pulling away from him with an obscene smack. Adam rising to his feet and turning to take Oliver in another kiss. Instead of pushing Oliver out the door and back to Simon, agreeing to come home with him. Giving Oliver the chance to recover and then taking him, slow and steady.

“God no. Why did you think that?”

“You were on a date.”

“So were you.”

“He wasn't a date. Just a friend. I told you that. You need to listen better.”

For a reason unbeknownst to him, Oliver's dick responded to Adam's tone. “I'm listening now.”

“I want to see you again.”

“I...” Did he want to see the kid again? Hell yes. Did he want to feel once more the way he'd felt in the bathroom? Absolutely. But there were ethical

considerations. He wasn't certain that being with someone his daughter's age—someone who was friends with his daughter—was an acceptable thing to do. And he'd meant it when he said he wasn't interested in having another child to worry about. Olivia was enough trouble for any parent.

“What?” Adam asked distractedly. He was obviously talking to someone else. “No, I'm—shit. I have to go, Richard. Please think over what I've said.”

The call ended. *Richard?* Oliver let himself wonder about that for a moment before returning to his work.

Although Joanne had never said so directly, Oliver knew she thought having a gay ex-lover in her social circle made her edgy and sophisticated. She liked that it served as a “fuck you” to conservative types. While Ted was less thrilled to have his wife's ex-lover constantly around, he had no particular gripe with Oliver, and he'd been a wonderful stepfather to Olivia, as engaged as Oliver and Joanne. Oliver could find little fault with Ted, other than how boring he often was, and so their unconventional trio were often found in each other's company. It was no problem.

The problem was that this dinner at their house was a fact-finding mission. Joanne had only invited him so she could ask how the dating was going. What Oliver didn't want to tell her was that the dating was not going. The dating was intruding on Oliver's ability to watch TV.

Fortunately, he only had time to tell Jo an edited version of his meeting with Paul over a glass of scotch before Olivia and her gang of merry misfits burst into the McMansion and interrupted the quiet adult evening they'd planned.

The gang included Adam. Oliver kept his eyes on Olivia and his drink, but he could feel the young man's gaze, steady, unashamed, unafraid of being noticed by the others.

“What are you guys doing here?” Joanne asked.

“We were going to get some pizza, and I said, ‘Why would we eat pizza when Mom's got all that great food she bought for Pop?’ and Wendy said it's been a long time since she's seen Ted because he was out of town last time we were here, so I said, ‘Let's all go over there.’ But Adam said, ‘No, we shouldn't interrupt their dinner party,’ because Adam's an upstanding guy like that, but I said, ‘Guys, Joanne loves to entertain guests.’ So here we are.”

Joanne did not look as though she loved entertaining unexpected and uninvited guests, but she wasn't the type of woman to turn people away. Especially not her daughter. Oliver could see her maternal side kick in, and with some resignation, she set her scotch down on the table and rose gracefully to her feet. "Well, I suppose I'd better heat up some more food." As she passed Oliver, she brushed him affectionately on the shoulder and murmured, "We're not done talking."

"I'll help you, Mom," Olivia offered, "since it was my idea and all. Ted, shouldn't you get your guests some drinks?"

"Charming kid," Oliver said. "Impeccable manners."

Olivia grinned at him and trailed Joanne.

Ted went to the small bar that was installed in a corner of the living room. "Wendy, what are you having tonight?"

"What are my choices?" Wendy asked with a vixen-like smile.

Ted smiled, too, clearly enjoying her flirtation. "Why don't you come over and see?"

That left Adam alone with Oliver. He took the seat Jo had vacated.

"Hello, Oliver. You look well."

"Thanks. So do you."

"I'm sorry we interrupted your dinner. I tried to convince them it was a bad idea, but—" From across the room, Wendy gave an artificial titter. "Well, you can see how eager they were to come here."

"To be honest, you're saving me." He leaned conspiratorially toward Adam. "I was supposed to spill all about my last date."

Adam smirked. "All?"

"Maybe not all. Probably not the bathroom scene."

They shared a smile that was interrupted as Ted and Wendy returned with drinks in hand. Ted offered Adam a glass of something clear and sparkling. "It's just seltzer. Wendy said you're not big on drinking."

"Drinking and riding a motorcycle is a very bad combination."

"You have a motorcycle?" It was incongruous with the picture Oliver's mind had painted of Adam: buttoned up, formal manners, teetotaling. But maybe it went along with giving blow jobs in public bathrooms.

“Well, a starter one, anyway. I’m saving up for something more powerful.”

“I rode a little when I was in college,” Ted chimed in, and they were off on a conversation about bikes that Oliver could barely follow.

He excused himself and peeked into the kitchen, where Jo was giving Olivia a lecture about responsibility. Olivia, with the same look of outrage that she’d had when she was four and had to go to bed while the summer sun was still out, turned to her father.

“Please tell her she’s being unreasonable!”

“Liv, you have a college degree, and no job or money,” Joanne reminded her. “If it weren’t for your father and me, you wouldn’t have a place to live. Your friends are too wild. You guys go out every night, partying, and guess what, little girl? The summer won’t last forever. Come September, you’re out of here. So you’d better have a job and an apartment by then.”

“You can’t do that to me! I’ll just stay with Dad.”

Jo shot him a warning look. Oliver knew he wasn’t supposed to intercede. “Dad’s throwing you out, too. You think he wants your friends hanging around, drunk, while he’s trying to get a love life?”

“Trying?” Oliver repeated, but neither woman was paying attention to him.

“You know what, Mother? You’re a real hypocrite. First it was Dad, then it was Ted. Have you ever stood on your own two feet?”

“Olivia—” Oliver started, but Joanne cut him off.

“Stay out of this. I can defend myself.”

He threw his hands up and backed out of the room. There was no real cause for alarm. The two of them fought heavyweight every chance they could get, but they also spoke on the phone every day, took vacations together, and shared jokes no one else understood. It was a mother-daughter thing.

Oliver ambled around the house. He wasn’t interested in talk of motorcycles or in watching Wendy and Ted’s May-December flirtation.

“Are you avoiding the crowd?”

Oliver turned from the picture window in the front room to see Adam, leaning with ease against the archway. With his arms crossed in front of him, he looked the image of cool. In that moment, Oliver could absolutely see him on a motorcycle.

“Or are you just avoiding me?”

“You told me to keep away, Adam.”

“I was wrong.”

“I don't think you were. I think you were absolutely right. I had no business getting involved with one of my daughter's friends.”

“We're not really friends. I'm just roommates with Boom-Boom.”

“Boom-Boom,” Oliver repeated. “And weren't you with a guy named Chip the other night? What's with your little circle? Doesn't anyone have a regular name?”

“Skip,” Adam corrected, a smile quirking up the side of his mouth. “Boom-Boom's real name is Christopher, but somebody started calling him that sophomore year as a joke. It's supposed to be his stripper name. I guess it stuck. And Skip—well, his real name is Scott Keith Peterson, but Olivia started calling him Skip. She said he should wear sweaters tied around his neck because he's so preppy and uptight. Skip hates it, but it's fun to torture him, you know?” He shrugged.

“I'd have thought that was you. The preppy, uptight one.”

“Me? Nah. I'm a country boy on a bike. Anyway, without a daddy around, I'm hardly uptight.” Adam took two steps forward, out of the safety of the bright hallway and into the dangerous half-light of the front room. Oliver took a step back on reflex. “That's why I need to see you again. My life is a mess, and you're going to help me get it in order.”

“I am?”

“Yes. I've decided.”

“Oh, you've decided? Like you decided to blow me in the bathroom? And to send me on my way afterward? Is that what you do? Make unilateral decisions?”

“No, see, that's why I need you. I do the wrong thing when I'm left to my own devices. I make bad choices.” He reached for Oliver. “That was chemistry in the bathroom. Don't tell me you didn't feel it.”

Oliver wouldn't lie.

“Let me prove it to you.”

“How?”

“Tonight, after this, what are you doing?”

“I—”

“Let me come over and show you how we belong together.”

“How will you do that?”

“We’re gonna fuck like my mama lives two states away.”

Oliver’s mouth went dry. He had to swallow to be able to form words. “Not that I don’t like that plan, but...”

“But nothing,” Adam growled. “Ten-thirty. I’ll be on your doorstep. Don’t disappoint me.”

Chapter 7

As he drove his Ninja toward Oliver's house with the wind and the engine drowning out the sounds of the world around him, Adam replayed their conversation in his mind. He couldn't believe he had spoken to Oliver with so little respect. He couldn't believe Oliver hadn't tried to punish him for it.

And he really couldn't believe that, in spite of not being taken to task, he still wanted Oliver—badly—and that he was racing toward Oliver's house to satisfy this urge that he couldn't seem to shake. Oliver hadn't even called him "boy."

He left his bike in a corner of the guest parking lot and popped off his neon green helmet. He shook his hair out, knowing that it would be its usual combination of frizzy, flat, and sweaty, thanks to the weather and the helmet. The building probably didn't have a general use bathroom where he could check on his appearance before going up to Oliver's, so he'd just have to hope that Oliver would accept him as he was.

He was let into the building by a bored-looking doorman and rode the elevator with anticipation. How should he play it when Oliver answered his door? Should he drop to his knees right away and show what a perfect submissive he could be? Or should he wait, demurely, for Oliver to tell him what he wanted? Although when he'd made the decision to drop to his knees in the bathroom, Oliver had enjoyed it. Maybe he should do that now. He still hadn't decided on a course of action by the time he reached apartment 801 and banged the sleek silver knocker.

A small, dark woman answered, and Adam was immensely grateful he hadn't pulled off his clothes in the elevator and arrived at the door naked.

"You must be Adam," the woman said in an unidentifiable island accent. "Please come in."

She escorted him into the spacious kitchen, where a buffet of meats, cheese, and bread had been laid out. "Something to drink?"

Adam set his helmet down on an empty stool at the counter and eyed the spread. Surely the woman knew they'd both come from a dinner party? This must have been part of Oliver's plan for him. Maybe he was going to practice feeding Adam before they moved to anything else. Or maybe they were going

to do something so athletic that they'd need plenty of fuel to keep their strength up. "Um, what do you have?"

"Anything. How about lemonade? I'll get you a glass."

"Offer the man a real drink for crying out loud," Oliver called as he entered the room. The woman glared at him a moment before turning her attention to the double-door refrigerator. While her back was turned, Oliver mouthed, *I'm sorry*.

So the food and the maid were not part of his plan. Huh.

"Sanaa, I see you've met Adam. And decided to empty out the refrigerator. You know I was at Jo's for dinner, don't you? Adam, this is Sanaa. She's in charge of the house."

Adam's eyes narrowed. Something about the way Oliver said it, Adam could tell he wasn't just placating the help. He took the bottle of Red Stripe Sanaa offered him and gave her a nod of thanks. He held it politely until she turned away and then set it on the counter.

Sanaa turned her attention on Oliver. "You eat all of this, you hear? I don't want to see any leftovers tomorrow."

"There's enough for five people."

"Adam is a growing boy." The way she said it, with a benevolent smile, it didn't seem like a criticism of their age difference. "Just look at him. So skinny. He needs a good meal. So you eat before you do anything with him, you hear?"

Adam could practically see the hearts in Oliver's eyes. "Okay, I promise." Oliver leaned down—she was at least a foot shorter—and she gave him a kiss on the cheek. She waved to Adam, collected a purse from near the espresso machine, and left.

"I'm really sorry," Oliver said once again. "She stayed late today to do her own laundry, and when I told her someone was coming over, she insisted on putting out food for you." He gestured to the spread. "Please help yourself."

Although Joanne had fed them a nice meal, it seemed rude to turn down what Oliver, via Sanaa, was offering. Adam selected a ciabatta roll from the stack of bread and filled it with a few slices of ham and a mild-smelling white cheese. Sanaa had even put out little pots of mustard and mayonnaise, and he spread a little of the spicy, seeded mustard on his roll. No squeeze bottle with electric yellow goo in Oliver's world.

“Not that I’m not grateful, but aren’t you supposed to be the boss? Shouldn’t you be telling her what to do, not the other way around?”

Oliver shrugged sheepishly as he put together his own sandwich. “I guess I’ve just learned that things go more smoothly when I do what she says.”

Adam thought about that as he ate his sandwich. He wasn’t certain if it boded poorly for what was to come between them. What if Oliver turned out to be another Martin? But Oliver had an allure that Martin had never had.

“You like rope play?”

Oliver choked on his food, coughing and sputtering. He stole Adam’s Red Stripe and took a few sips, coughed a little more, and finally dabbed a napkin on his mouth to compose himself.

“Jesus, kid.”

“That a no?”

“That’s an ‘I don’t know, and what the hell kind of question is that five minutes after you show up?’”

Adam set his sandwich down. “I’m sorry. I thought we were here to fuck.”

“We are.” Oliver held Adam’s gaze for a charged moment.

“Then shouldn’t we figure out how we’re going to do it? Our preferences? Communication is the most important part, you know.”

“And here I thought the dick in the ass was the most important part.” Oliver took another drink of Adam’s beer.

Adam grinned at him. Adoration, that was what he was feeling. Complete adoration. Oliver might have been a little surprised by Adam’s forthright attitude, but he wasn’t intimidated by it. And he was funny.

“See, and I thought for you it was the mouth-on-dick part,” he returned.

Oliver shrugged, his smile growing. “How will I know until I have a point of comparison?”

Sandwiches suddenly didn’t seem all that important. It was much, much more important to make sure Oliver had lots of time to do a comparative study.

“Hey, Oliver, you know how she said we had to eat everything? When does she work again? Is she coming back tonight?”

“No.”

“So what do you say we skip to the fucking and eat later?”

Oliver's face had a look that Adam couldn't interpret. For a moment Adam held his breath, certain he'd exerted too much control, gone too far. He feared Oliver would be upset at his gumption, even as he wondered what it would be like to be reprimanded by Oliver.

Oliver took another swig of the Red Stripe. The bottle was nearly empty now. “Kid, you've got *chutzpah*, I'll give you that.”

“Is that a problem?” Adam didn't like how defiant the question came out. Damn it, he was going to ruin everything by not being a good boy.

But Oliver's grin returned, catlike this time. “Nope,” he said, pulling Adam toward him, “not at all.”

There was a moment in the middle of their coupling when Oliver let go of their cocks, when it would have been natural for him to turn Adam over. But instead they looked at each other, their breath mingling in the intimate proximity of their faces, and Adam confessed, “I really want to be inside you. Is that wrong?” Oliver responded by kissing him fiercely.

There was another moment when Adam stopped treating Oliver like a beloved object, let himself go, and ordered Oliver to change positions without asking nicely. When he had Oliver bent forward over the mattress, their feet braced on the floor, he gave Oliver's rump a few smacks. In that moment, something clicked. Oliver nearly came right then, and Adam laced their fingers together and entered him with renewed vigor.

They chased their orgasms, Adam arriving there first but willing to see Oliver to his own finish line.

Afterward, they lay side by side, sated but exhausted. Eventually they began to talk, at first congratulating and thanking each other and then turning to more intimate subjects.

“So what's the story with Olivia?” Adam wondered. “Did you not come out until later in life?”

“I went to college in New York. I spent my early twenties there.” Oliver didn't talk much about what it had been like when he was Olivia's age, mostly because political and social circumstances were so different now. “I left right around the time they came out with the test. It was getting too hard to deal with reality. In those days, we went to a funeral every week.”

"I'm so sorry. I can't even imagine."

"No, you can't. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad that people your age have it so much easier, but there's no way you can ever understand what we lived through. My roommate got arrested one time."

"For what?"

"Technically? Lewd and lascivious conduct. In reality? He and his boyfriend kissed on the street, and a police officer happened to see them."

"Are you serious?"

"Mm-hmm." That was a story Oliver had never even told his daughter. "After that, I decided I couldn't do it anymore. I came home, here to Tampa—"

"Because Florida's always been known for being so much more socially progressive than New York."

"I know, but at least here I had a support network of friends who weren't dying by the dozens."

"Straight friends."

"High school friends. I started the company, and tried to build a different life."

"And you tried to be a dad."

"Not tried."

"Yes. Sorry." Adam rolled onto his side and stroked a hand over Oliver's flank. "It's obvious how much you love Olivia."

"I never imagined being a father when I was growing up. Especially not while I was in New York."

"How did it happen?"

"Joanne. We'd been friends for a long time before I left, and we were again when I came back. We were both lonely, and we had a crazy fling. She wanted a family—a husband and kids, the whole thing. We had Olivia, but I knew I couldn't do more than that."

"And you stayed friends?"

"It was a lot easier after Ted came along," Oliver admitted. "But yeah. Jo's one of the great loves of my life."

"What about all those friends you came back to?"

“Huh?”

“Well, I don't know you very well, but you seem... solitary.”

Ordinarily a comment like that would have led Oliver to send his bedmate packing. As it was, he turned his head away from Adam's touch. “What the hell do you know?”

“I know that if I had your good looks, I'd treat my body better.”

Oliver snorted. His body was old, gray, and saggy. Adam's had the tautness and glow of youth.

“And if I had your money and influence, I'd do a hell of a lot more than sit at home alone on Friday nights getting drunk.” When Oliver looked at him in surprise, Adam explained, “Olivia might have said something once or twice.”

Oliver wasn't ready to address what some twenty-year-old saw as his personal problems. “What about you? What's your story? I guess you're perfect then?”

“I just broke up with this guy who was about your age. Martin Hinsdale.”

“Martin? I know Martin.”

“You do?”

“Yeah.” Tampa's social elite didn't have a very big roster. Oliver's company was larger and had more influence than Martin's, but they networked in the same circles. “Why on Earth were you with a guy like Martin? He promise you a job or something?”

“Interviews, none of which panned out. Still looking for a job.”

Oliver wasn't in the habit of throwing his money and power around, but he still heard himself extending an offer he hadn't even made to Olivia. “If you need a job, I can get you one at my company. You can start tomorrow.”

“No thanks.” Adam threw a leg over Oliver's middle and straddled him. “I don't want to be a kept man.”

“Of course not.” Oliver couldn't help grinning at their positions. “You liked topping me.”

“Well, yeah.” Adam pinned Oliver's arms over his head. “You seemed to need it.” He leaned down and planted a kiss on Oliver's lips. It was tender and spoke of Adam's age. Mostly because his kissing didn't feel cynical or ironic.

“Christ, what does it say about me that I liked being fucked by a kid?”

“I am *not* a kid.”

“You’re a hell of a lot younger than me.”

“Emotionally I have my shit together.”

“What shit?” Oliver challenged with a smile. “You just said you have no job and no money.”

“And nowhere to live half the time. Olivia’s always staying in my bedroom. You’re right, I got nothing.”

Oliver didn’t like the way Adam was frowning. His teasing had clearly rubbed a raw spot. “You got a lot more than nothing. You have your looks. Your youth.” He sighed. Even if he could overtake the young man, it felt good to be pinned by him. There was no reason to pretend otherwise. “You appear to have the ability to hold me down and make me do what you want.”

“You like that, don’t you?” Adam asked, with a gleam in his eye.

“Yeah.”

“Me too. It’s so weird, too, because...” Adam gave Oliver’s wrists an experimental push into the mattress. He rocked his hips forward.

As much as Oliver liked what he was doing, he wanted to know what Adam really thought. “Because what?” he prompted.

“Because I thought I wanted it the other way.” They were quiet for a moment, looking at each other. “It seems so obvious how you can be happy.”

“I’m not happy?”

“I’m not sure, but I don’t think so. I saw that guy you were at the bar with. He was too clingy and too old for you.”

“Maybe I like men my own age.”

Adam didn’t say anything directly, but he bit his lip and looked at where their pelvises met, where Oliver was semi-hard.

“And you think you can make me happy?”

“I don’t know,” Adam admitted, “but you should at least let me try.”

Chapter 8

It was a magical summer. Before meeting Oliver, Adam would never have believed he could take the lead in a relationship, but instead of feeling frustrated that he had no guidance of his own, he plunged into his role as Oliver's protector and master, his shepherd and caretaker, and found in that role a tranquility—and, yes, arousal—he'd never before experienced.

They met frequently, though often late at night when Oliver's especially long workday had ended. And Adam's shorter one, now that he had a lousy entry-level position at Wasserstein Enterprises. Adam tried to ensure their relationship was more than just meeting for sex, but with Oliver's busy schedule and their secrecy, it was difficult to go on real dates.

When he caught Oliver sneaking a pill before bed, Adam demanded an explanation. Oliver told him he was working on his cholesterol, his doctor's orders, and Adam upped the stakes by suggesting a light fitness regimen. Oliver countered with the proposal that they join a gym together, so Adam could monitor his workouts and so they could meet in public without suspicion.

"Because people from your world and people from mine so often belong to the same gym," Adam said sardonically. It was a lost battle. Oliver paid their membership fees. Adam could have ordered him not to, but if he wanted Oliver to exercise and if he wanted to be with Oliver, it didn't seem like such a bad idea.

There was also the issue of food. They spent a few lazy weekend afternoons together at Oliver's place, where Sanaa always greeted Adam warmly and without judgment. On days when Sanaa wasn't working, Oliver tried to play host by offering Adam food and drink. His meals were nothing like Sanaa's, and a few weeks into their relationship Adam decided he needed to intervene.

"While I completely appreciate that you always try to feed me," he said, striding to the kitchen island, "I absolutely forbid you do this anymore." He gestured to a bowl of tortilla chips beside a smaller one of guacamole. "Fried." A dish of fried plantains was next. "More fried." And finally a plate with two cupcakes, decorated with fanciful icing, which were obviously purchased from an expensive bakery. "And artificial sugar. This is not a lunch." He pointed a finger at Oliver. "It's time to clean up your diet, Ollie."

"I'm sorry." Oliver cast his eyes downward.

“Don’t be sorry. You have nothing to be sorry about.” Adam prodded his chin up with an index finger. “You were trying to give me a treat, I get that. It was very sweet of you. We’ll eat this today, and tomorrow you’ll leave instructions for Sanaa to buy healthier groceries. And you’ll start drinking less alcohol.” Adam gave one final gesture toward the liquor cabinet.

“How much less?”

Oliver’s brow was furrowed, his eyes expectant. The question was not, as it could have been, a sign of complaint. Oliver was asking so that he could be sure to get it right. He was so good at listening to Adam, and it thrilled Adam to have someone waiting so patiently for his verdict.

“How about we say you’re limited to drinking with me?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Adam closed the distance between them. “God, I love it when you say that,” he murmured before capturing Oliver in a kiss.

“It is so wrong,” Oliver purred. Adam could feel Oliver’s hard shaft pressing against his thigh.

“I know, but it’s so good, too, right?”

Oliver nodded into their kiss. They made out lazily, until the kiss naturally faded. “Can I ask you something? I’m not questioning the rule—I just want to know. The drinking thing? Why is that such a thing with you? Because I don’t actually drink that much. I’m not an alcoholic or anything, and I never drive.”

Adam plucked one of the fried plantains from the dish and ate it. Greasy or not, it was delicious. He gave an “mm” of approval, stalling for time. He knew he was more sensitive to alcohol consumption than a lot of people, especially people his own age. Extra-especially people his own age who lived in his apartment and who were the daughters of men he was sleeping with. And he knew that it sometimes raised questions for others, who were left to wonder if he had health problems or if he was some kind of uptight Christian.

“It was my dad.” He couldn’t look at Oliver while he talked about this. “I guess it wasn’t anything traumatic or anything like that. He didn’t die and never killed anybody, you know? Although he did hit me and my mom more when he was drunk, but he wasn’t totally abusive. He just... always drank. After work until he went to bed, and the drunker he got, the meaner he got. Sometimes he’d be a fun drunk, and I remember when I was a kid loving those moments. He’d

sing songs with me or play games, and we'd laugh and laugh. But mostly he was mean. And even when he was fun, he'd try to drive me places, and I'd always feel this knot in my stomach. Because my mom always said not to go in the car with him when he was like that, but if I said no to him, he might turn mean again, and then it would be my fault I ruined the moment." He reached for another plantain. "I don't want to be around that kind of loss of self-control ever again."

Oliver pried the plantain from his fingers and pulled him into a hug. Adam resisted—he didn't need sympathy about his dad, and anyway, it wasn't Oliver's job to ease his burdens—but Oliver uttered a soothing *ssh* and held him tighter. He wouldn't let Adam refuse the comfort.

Adam buried his face in the crook of Oliver's neck. It smelled like the expensive cologne Oliver wore, something Adam's dad would never have smelled like. Oliver's arms around Adam were strong and confident, and it occurred to Adam that Oliver was very capable of playing the dominant role in their relationship. He just chose not to.

"I thought I was supposed to be the one helping you," he murmured.

"See, I thought we needed each other."

Adam looked at him. Yes, he needed Oliver. He needed Oliver to let him have control. He needed to know that Oliver was strong enough to give it, that Adam wasn't just taking it from someone too weak to refuse. He hadn't understood that about their dynamic before.

"Yeah," he agreed. "It's mutual." He wiped his eye, although he hadn't actually shed any tears, and mentally shook off the moment. "You said you had something to talk to me about?"

Oliver heaved a sigh and ran his fingers through Adam's unruly hair. "Joanne finally gave Olivia the boot, and I know she's going to ask if she can live here full-time."

"What are you going to say?" Adam didn't think Oliver would actually kick out his own daughter for his sake, but if Oliver let her move in full-time, it would be a lot harder for them to see each other. It wasn't like they could meet at Adam's apartment, where a bunch of drunks hung out every night.

"I'm not sure. What should I tell her? What do you want me to do?"

Adam bit his lip. This was a precarious situation. Whatever the nature of his power exchange with Oliver, interfering with someone's child was a different

beast. Especially when Oliver had twenty-plus years of experience at being a father and Adam had none.

One thing he'd gotten very good at in his new role was thinking before speaking. His job was to ensure that Oliver made the best choices for his life. As much as Adam wanted to have Oliver all to himself, wanted to hear Oliver say that Adam should move in and that it was time for Olivia to grow up, kicking her out of the condo would not be the best choice for Oliver. He loved her. He was a devoted father. He'd regret it if he said no to her, and eventually he'd come to resent Adam.

"I think you have to figure this one out on your own."

Oliver stalled by eating a few of the plantains. As concerned as Adam was for Oliver's continued cardiac health, he leaned forward and licked Oliver's fingers clean. Oliver held another plantain out for him to eat, and as soon as it was in Adam's mouth, Oliver kissed him.

"I don't think there's a good answer to this," Oliver said.

"Someday we'll live together, and we'll plan our schedules together, and I'll know everything you do at every minute of the day, and our families will know about us and be okay with it. But we're not there yet."

Oliver gave him a hopeful, dopey smile. Adam didn't need to ask if he liked that vision of the future.

Later, as Adam sat astride Oliver's hips, setting the pace, he felt a tinge of vulnerability that came and went and that, he had learned from a few discussions in an online forum, was normal for someone new to his position. Not his physical position—as much as he loved fucking Oliver, it felt great once in a while to ride Oliver this way. No, it was his emotional position that occasionally concerned him. This was his first time being a master, a dominant, a daddy. He didn't even know what to call himself. He sometimes wondered if Oliver really wanted things this way, or if he was just going along with it because it was fun to have a younger lover, and he'd do anything to keep Adam.

"Why me?" he asked as Oliver thrust up to meet him. "Why do you let me do these things to you?"

"I don't know. I just get off on it. So do you."

"Do you think that makes us freaks?"

“If it does, I don’t care. It’s better when you’re around. I’m better when you’re around.”

Oliver’s eyes were brimming with emotion, and something inside Adam wanted to surge into him, to fuse them physically and spiritually, but it was Oliver who was inside him.

“Take me faster.”

They rolled so Adam was on his back. He lifted his legs and held his knees as Oliver thrust harder, faster, deeper, and finally came with a deep-throated exclamation and a stupefied red face.

A moment later, Oliver propped himself on his elbows and looked down at Adam. He carefully combed his fingers through Adam’s hair. They shared a grin.

“I love you,” Oliver said.

Adam touched his cheek. The idea that someone so handsome and smart, so wealthy and powerful could find pleasure in someone as mundane as him overwhelmed him. Made him feel blessed. He was beginning to understand that as much as Oliver needed their relationship, Adam needed Oliver’s trust. That was where he could find the solace he’d been seeking for so long: in the faith Oliver had in him.

“I love you, too.”

“I know I’m talking down the road here, but I wonder what you have planned for your life. Do you want to be married? Have children? Is this—the way we do things—something you think you’ll want to do when you’re my age?”

“I never imagined myself married,” Adam admitted. “That seems really weird to me, that legal obligation.”

“I guess not everyone is interested in something long-term.”

He heard the disappointment in Oliver’s voice. “It’s not that. I just think people should be together because they want to be, and when they don’t want to be together anymore, they shouldn’t. You shouldn’t be in a relationship because the law says you have to. You should be there because you’re in love. I think that’s much more meaningful. As for kids? Not really interested. What about you? You ever think about adopting another one or something?”

“I have Olivia. I’m pretty set in that department.”

"I guess we're a match."

"Adam, I could buy you a condo. Then we could have somewhere to be together in private."

"So you've already decided to let her move in?" It was hard to understand why, on the heels of their first declaration of love, Adam felt disappointment curling in his belly.

"She's my kid."

"You can't buy me a condo. For one thing, that's the same as telling everyone about us, and anyway I'm not in this for the money. It's important to me that I earn my own way in the world."

"You let me get you a job."

"Only because I'm actually qualified for it, and I don't answer directly to you. And you know it's not that great of a job."

"Nope," Oliver agreed. "The life expectancy of people in that position is about a year and a half, I'm told. But it'll give you time to find something better." He stifled a yawn. "I guess I could buy her a condo, but..."

"But you want her to learn responsibility and self-sufficiency, and you don't want to piss off Joanne," Adam finished for him. "I understand, I really do."

"So I tell her she can move in here, but I give her a deadline to find a job, and I help subsidize your rent in the meantime." He shot a beatific smile in Adam's direction. "So you can get your own place without feeling bad about it. It's only fair for me to contribute to your rent, if I'll be sleeping there, too."

Adam let out a laugh. "Baby, you don't have to do that. And you don't have to buy my love."

"I'm not trying to buy your love. I'm just... trying to get all this right."

"Get us right? You're doing fine. I think we're doing fine."

"We are," Oliver agreed. "You and me. But sooner or later, there's everyone else." He flipped onto his back and kicked his legs out.

"Talk to me," Adam instructed. "Communication is key, remember?"

"It's just that... I don't want to be five years down the road and still squeezing you in between meetings or pretending not to watch you at the gym. I don't want you to be my dirty little secret."

Adam hadn't felt like a dirty little secret until Oliver said it. "I'm not. Am I?"

"I don't want people to think you are."

"How can they think that if I'm a secret? Is that a logic puzzle or something?" Oliver groaned in response, so teasing was not the way to handle the moment. "You're pretty worked up for someone who just had an orgasm."

Oliver nodded. "I feel frustrated that there are no good answers here. I wish you would just tell me what to do, so I didn't have to think."

"You know I can't. Not on this issue."

"I guess I understand."

Adam couldn't decide what to do about Olivia, but he could help Oliver stop thinking about it for a moment. "Okay," he declared, "on your knees. Let's go."

"I really can't go again so soon—"

"I gave you an order." He poked Oliver in the side. "Come on, move it, and would you have a little faith in me? I know your recovery time."

As Oliver scrambled onto his hands and knees in the middle of the bed, he gave a sorrowful look over his shoulder. "I have a lot of faith in you. I'm sorry if I made it seem as if I don't."

"I know you do." Adam kissed his shoulder blade. "I think ten spanks should do it. Get the demons out. Help you clear your mind."

"Sir? May I say something?"

"What is it?"

"Would you try the flogger?"

Adam pressed his cheek to Oliver's back, his arms winding around Oliver's torso. They'd bought the flogger, even attended an instructional class in Orlando, where no one would know them, but thus far Oliver hadn't been ready for it.

"God, yes. Yes, we can try it."

He found the flogger at the back of Oliver's second dresser drawer, behind a stack of cashmere sweaters and next to the leather restraints they'd used on the Fourth of July. (The fireworks had been great, at least inside the bedroom.) He

brought the flogger back to the bed and stroked through the falls. He didn't look at Oliver, feigned casual disinterest to build the anticipation, but he knew that if he did peek, he'd see Oliver looking hopeful, expectant, a little afraid, but also full of trust.

"How many?" he asked. Because as important as mouth-on-dick was, or flogger-on-ass, communication still mattered.

"Ten." Oliver sounded like he was in a good mindset for this.

Adam had been right that this was something he needed. He imagined a day when Oliver would come home from work and beg for a flogging right away to shake off the drudgery of the office. If they could ever figure out where "home" was going to be. He moved to the other side of the bed, near Oliver's backside. "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

He skimmed the flogger across Oliver's back, letting him feel the coolness of the leather. The instrument itself was nothing to be feared. It was all in how Adam used it, and funnily enough, Adam wasn't feeling any pressure about his performance. He'd taken the class, watched videos, practiced at home—but more importantly, he knew Oliver. He'd know Oliver's limits without Oliver telling him. Probably before Oliver knew himself.

"I'm not doing this to hurt you," he reminded them both. "I'm doing this to help you clear your head. I'm going to start now." He raised his arm back at the elbow and flicked it forward. The flogger barely touched Oliver's skin, enough to tickle but not hurt. "That's one. How did it feel?"

"Like not much. Can you do it harder, please, Sir?"

Warmed by Oliver's sincerity, Adam struck again, this time with a little more force. Oliver grunted as the falls thudded against his flesh. "That's two."

"Oh my God!"

It was Olivia.

Adam turned and caught sight of her crashing into the door frame. Oliver scrambled toward the pillows, pulling the sheet over himself as he yelled for her. Adam stumbled around until he found his pants and jumped into them. Meanwhile Olivia made it out the door and was screaming as she ran down the hall.

"Shit, shit, underwear!"

In a panic Adam threw his own boxer briefs to Oliver, and once they were on, Oliver ran toward the door.

“Pants!” Adam warned him. No way was Olivia going to want to see them in less than full clothing. He handed Oliver his pants and took the opportunity to give Oliver’s ass the swat he hadn’t been able to give with the flogger. “It’ll be all right.” He kissed Oliver’s forehead. “Go talk to her. I’ll clean up in here.”

With his heart rattling around his chest like a caged beast, Oliver headed down the hall. He hoped Olivia was gone and that he never had to talk to her about what she’d walked in on. It suddenly seemed so very stupid to him—the younger lover, the secret rendezvous, the experimenting with BDSM. Stupid and embarrassing. Why couldn’t he have just met someone nice on Golden Match like she’d wanted?

Oliver found Olivia in the living room, pacing and gesturing wildly as she muttered to herself. “Liv—”

“How could you, Dad?” she turned venomous eyes on him. “He’s practically a child!”

He just looks that way, but he’s more adult than I am, Oliver wanted to say. He didn’t, though. She wouldn’t understand.

“And what was he doing with that thing? That’s just—that’s—”

Sick. She might as well have said it. The word hung in the air between them. A few months ago, Oliver might have found himself pleading for her understanding. He might have tried to explain, to make her understand.

Five minutes ago, he didn’t think there was anything less than natural about what he and Adam did. They were adults, it was consensual, and Adam was right that sometimes Oliver needed to clear his mind. Usually from worrying about Olivia.

Right now, though, getting flogged by Adam didn’t seem natural. It seemed shameful. But it also seemed like something she shouldn’t get to know about.

“It’s private. It’s intimate. And it’s my choice.”

Had he been in the room, Adam would have been proud.

Olivia, however, was unimpressed. “Your choice? Your *choice*? To... what? Have someone young enough to be your child treat you like garbage? Or were you pretending to be an animal or something gross like that?”

“He does not treat me like garbage,” Oliver said harshly. “He’s taught me more about myself, more about life, than I’ve learned in the past forty years. I respect his wisdom.”

“Dad, he’s brainwashed you. I don’t know how, but he must have. Do you know what Pablo says about him? He says Adam ran away from home. His parents don’t even know he came here to school. He’s probably just desperate for money, and you’re rich and horny and gay, so you’re the perfect target. You can’t honestly think he’s into you. Pop, he’s using you.”

Her words gave Oliver pause.

In his split-second of hesitation, Adam appeared in the doorway. Oliver knew Adam saw the doubt in his eyes, heard the silence when Oliver should have been leaping to his defense. Adam shook his head in disbelief. Oliver had never seen him so utterly uncertain.

Olivia turned on him. “I can’t believe you’re fucking my dad! Fucking gold digger!”

“I’m not,” Adam said with the desperation of a convicted man.

“Pablo says you got a job at Wasserstein. Did you give him a job, Dad? Did you give him a job for sleeping with you?”

“I—”

“What the fuck! You wouldn’t give *me* a job! I can’t believe this! I have to get out of here.” She lowered her head, as if she couldn’t even bear to look him in the eye, and Oliver’s heart nearly broke. She shoved past him.

“Olivia, wait—”

“Let her go,” Adam said, taking his elbow. “You can talk to her when she calms down.”

Oliver yanked his arm free. “Don’t fucking tell me how to talk to my kid!”

“Don’t fucking yell at me!”

“Why not?” And then Oliver said the words he regretted before they were all the way out of his mouth: “It’s your fault, isn’t it?”

“Is that how it is? You’re going to blame me for this? You’re picking her over me?”

“This isn’t about picking anyone over anyone else,” Oliver tried to backpedal, but Adam was no more interested in reasonable conversation than Olivia had been.

“Yeah, it is, Oliver! And the thing is, I’m the only one picking you. I’m out of here. I can’t believe this.”

Adam fled down the hall to the bedroom, probably to collect the rest of his clothes. As he watched Adam go, Oliver heard Olivia quietly sneaking out the front door.

Chapter 9

On nights like this, Adam was grateful for his Ninja. He rode south on 41 to the interstate, then across the bay, back north through Saint Petersburg, and across the bay once more before heading to his apartment. By the time he arrived, the sun was beginning to set, and he wished he'd stayed out long enough to watch it sink under the water.

With his helmet in his hand, he trudged up the stairs to their entrance. He doubted Olivia would be there. He'd probably never see her again. But he was worried the others might be, and he wasn't up for conversation any time soon. Especially not with people who gossiped about him behind his back.

Maybe he hadn't come from money like they all had. Maybe he had gotten out of Tennessee the first chance he'd had. Florida, with its abundant coastlines, had seemed like an exotic paradise. He hadn't realized how much he'd miss the Smoky Mountains or how awful the swamps could be in the summer. He couldn't have predicted that he'd fall in with a bunch of spoiled brats and, too soon, come to take their privilege for granted, just like them.

He should have been able to foresee that everything he took for granted, everything that wasn't really his, would eventually be stripped away from him.

My name is Adam McPherson, and I ruin everything.

He opened the front door and stepped into a messy but empty apartment. He tossed his helmet on the sofa—because who the hell cared if he put it away properly now?—and rushed into his bedroom. He plopped face down on the bed.

The reality was that Oliver was the one who ruined things, not him. Oliver was the one who was too much of a pussy to stand up to his own daughter and tell her to respect him and his life choices. Oliver was the one who looked between Olivia and Adam and chose Olivia.

And why shouldn't he? She's his daughter.

In reality, Oliver had done no wrong. He'd just been caught off guard, as had Adam. No one expected to have a perfectly normal moment of naked flogging interrupted by someone's nosy daughter. Why the hell had Olivia burst in like that, anyway? Even if she thought Oliver was single, did she think he never jerked off? Never took showers?

The problem was boundaries. Olivia had none. She trampled Oliver's, and she had tested Adam's repeatedly by crashing in his bed. Like her father, Olivia could have benefited from someone taking her over their knee.

For the second time that summer, Adam was alone. He'd never spank Oliver again. He'd never get to hold Oliver afterward. And the pain of that realization was so much worse than his breakup with Martin, because this time Adam had let himself step outside his comfort zone. He'd played a different role, and he'd foolishly thought he'd risen to the occasion. But since it had only taken a matter of seconds for the whole thing to unravel, it was clear that Adam had never really had control over anything. Not his relationship, not Oliver, not even himself.

Be the change you want to see in the world, a voice in his head chanted. He silenced it. He was done with his crusade. Let the world crash and burn.

He hoped his hypocritical, immature, judgmental frenemies would turn up soon. He wanted to punch Pablo in the face and then maybe get drunk with him.

"I just can't figure out which is weirder, you know? That you like younger guys or that you're into freaky shit. I probably should have guessed about the freaky shit. I mean, it's always the quiet ones, right? That's what they say, anyway."

"Liv, honestly?" Oliver rubbed his right temple. "I've had enough. If you're going to keep mulling over my sex life, could you at least not do it out loud?"

"That's what she said." She slurped her frozen margarita. "Yeah, sorry. I guess it's weird for you, listening to me talk about how it's weird for me."

"A lot of children walk in on their parents having sex when they're young. That's how they learn about the birds and the bees." Of course, that myth of childhood development didn't ordinarily involve flogging. Or sodomy. Or thirty-year age gaps between Mommy and Daddy. "If you need therapy or something, just tell me, and I'll pay the bill."

Olivia put her hand on his. "Dad, don't be so serious. I said I was scarred for life, but I was probably just exaggerating."

"No, you were probably right." Oliver pushed his fork around his enchiladas. He'd ordered them because Adam wasn't around to worry about the fat content of all that melted cheese, and the first few bites had been delicious.

Now, though, they were unappetizing. "There was a moment when you were three, when your mom first started getting serious with Ted. The three of us sat down to talk about whether Ted should adopt you, and I should bow out of your life."

Olivia's eyebrows shot up. "What?"

Oliver gave a rueful smile. "You could have had such a normal life. Just Mom and Pop. Not Mom and Pop and Pop's fuck buddies."

"Pop, you never had fuck buddies around me when I was a kid." She blinked a few times, then squinted. "Wait a second, were you, like, abstaining because of me?"

Once they'd made the decision to raise her together, all three of them, it had seemed silly that they'd ever worried. But at the time, Oliver had been terrified Joanne would wake up one day, angry at him, and take him to court, using his lovers as evidence of why he'd be a terrible father. He'd gone for a long time without sex or companionship. It hadn't seemed like much of a trade-off. Olivia was more important.

She still was, he reminded himself. And she was here, at this Mexican restaurant, talking to him. She hadn't stopped answering his calls. She was going to move in, and Oliver was going to help her get a job. This, now, with her, was all that mattered.

When the waitress came around, Oliver told her to take his still-full plate away. He paid the check while Olivia finished slurping her drink, and then they walked outside together. The sun was still out, and there was a gentle gulf breeze blowing. It was the perfect summer evening.

"I think I'm going to go home and turn in," he told her. "Are you going out?"

"I thought I was supposed to be in early on weeknights if I wanted you and Mom to keep up my allowance."

Oliver shrugged. "I won't tell."

"Do you want to come?" She stopped walking and turned toward him. "I'm worried about you, Dad. You should come out and blow off some steam."

He couldn't help the snarky laugh that escaped him. "With your friends? What am I going to do with a bunch of twentysomethings?"

"Try not to have sex with them?" Olivia gasped. "I'm sorry. I can't believe I said that."

“You’re just telling the truth. All the more reason for me to stay home. The last thing you need is me stealing more of your friends.” He pulled out his wallet and handed her two twenties. “Have fun, kiddo.”

Olivia didn’t make any overture at refusing the money. She never did. She gave him a hug, told him she loved him, and skipped toward her car.

Oliver waited a moment to watch her leave. He felt as if he was sending her out to do the living for both of them.

Chapter 10

Sanaa had always been wonderfully discreet, something Oliver valued in her more than her ability to keep his house clean. In fact, he was willing to overlook the little line of dust powdering the baseboard in the master bathroom because she kept him well fed, made certain his dry cleaning was taken care of, and never once said a word about the men who came into his home.

She also kept her trap shut when men didn't, and given Olivia and Joanne's frequent poking and prodding, Oliver appreciated that, too.

But something changed that August. Sanaa maintained her performance of her duties, but she and Oliver didn't have their special chemistry anymore. And she never came over to use his washing machine. He wondered if she'd given up on having clean clothes or if she had given up on him. Maybe she resented having to clean up after Olivia now, too. It wasn't as if Oliver had offered her a raise, and he'd basically doubled her workload, given Olivia's tendency to leave messes in her wake.

One night as Sanaa was wrapping up a dish of cold salad made from quinoa and black beans, still following Adam's dietary plan, Oliver approached her.

"Hey, Sanaa, before you go, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Her hands froze over the Saran wrap. "Of course."

Oliver looked across the kitchen to where Olivia was eating cereal. He didn't want to put Sanaa in a position to have to talk about Olivia while the girl was in the room, but sending Liv away was tantamount to telling both of them he knew she was the problem.

He ran a hand through his hair. "Liv, why are you eating? Aren't we doing dinner at your mom's?"

Olivia shrugged. "She said we were having fried shrimp, and I asked myself, 'Now how's that going to go down after living here and eating healthy for the last month?' Not very well, I don't think. So I thought I'd eat before we went over there."

"She'll be upset if you don't eat."

"No, she won't. She just wants to show off the new toys they got. It's not a real dinner party. We won't even be sitting at the table."

“All right.” Oliver thought to himself, *whatever*, but he wasn't going to start talking like a millennial. “Can you give me a sec to talk business with Sanaa?”

She pushed her stool back, scraping it loudly on the tile floor. Before she got two steps away, Sanaa put her hands on her hips and cleared her throat. Olivia rolled her eyes but picked up the cereal bowl and brought it to the sink. She cleared the room.

“How did you...?”

“I'm sorry. I have no right to treat that child that way, but she needs some discipline. She has no respect for you or your nice home.”

Oliver squeezed her shoulder. “Getting her to put dirty dishes in the sink is more than fine. I just wanted to know if you and I are okay. You seem a little... distant lately. I never see you anymore.”

To his surprise, she beamed. “It's Marco. I'm always with him.”

“Who's Marco?”

“He's my boyfriend.”

Did everyone have a boyfriend but Oliver? The way Sanaa said it, she didn't sound embarrassed to use the term, despite the fact that she was in her forties. Maybe “boyfriend” was more universal a label than Oliver realized. Was that what Adam had been? His boyfriend? They had felt more like lovers.

He didn't want to think about Adam. He'd been waiting with butterflies in his stomach for the day they ran into each other at work, but it hadn't yet happened. And Olivia never casually mentioned him in the course of describing her social activities anymore.

“You're seeing someone?” He tried to remember the last time she had been involved. It had been a while. “That's wonderful. Do I get to meet him?”

Her smile widened. “I want everyone to meet him.”

Oliver didn't mean to make the moment about him, but he could feel his face falling. How utterly simple it must have been for her. When she was in love, she told people. When she wanted to see her boyfriend, they made plans and went out. This guy, Marco, had probably never had to sneak into a hotel on a Wednesday night after a board meeting ran late. And what a night that had been, too. Adam had been on fire. The memory was as delicious as it was painful.

“Mr. Wasserstein,” Sanaa whispered, laying a hand aside his cheek. She rarely touched him—kissed his cheek hello and goodbye, yes, but rarely a touch with the hands. And she only called him by his last name in the most awkward moments of their interactions, like when she’d asked for a raise in her third year. “Why don’t you call him?”

Oliver glanced over his shoulder to see if Olivia was lurking. “I can’t. Besides, he made it clear he wants nothing to do with me.”

“You are such a handsome man. My God, if you weren’t gay, I’d ask you to marry me tomorrow.”

She didn’t mean it. She was only showing concern. But in her lilting accent, the proposition sounded nice.

“You just want a green card,” he teased. “So do you have a date tonight?”

Sanaa nodded. “We’re going to that movie. The one with Julia Roberts.”

“A tearjerker? If he’s willing to see that with you, he must love you.”

“What’s not to love?” She gave his cheek one more pat. Her ebony eyes radiated with sympathy. “Will you be all right?”

Oliver shrugged and reached into the refrigerator. After months of eating healthy food, fried shrimp didn’t sound that appealing to him either, but eating might calm his nerves. “You go have fun tonight,” he told her. “Someone should.”

Sanaa clucked her tongue but left anyway. Oliver poked a fork through the quinoa. He heard Olivia come back into the kitchen. Her footsteps stopped on the other side of the open refrigerator door.

“What?” he asked testily.

She pushed the door closed and looked at him. “What about Mom’s?”

“Not going,” he managed to say through a mouthful of food.

“I thought you might decide that.” Quietly, she placed an iPad on the counter nearby. “Recon-dot-com, Dad.”

He put the bowl of quinoa down and picked up the iPad. “What’s Recon-dot-com?”

Olivia shook her head. “Don’t ask, don’t tell.”

Once Olivia left for Joanne's, Oliver pulled up the website in question. On the home page were images of men trussed up in harnesses, men in leather pants, men with cod pieces. Olivia was still pushing him to have an active social life, it seemed, only now she'd given up trying to interest him in the silver set. He couldn't help but think this was her way of telling him she accepted his kinky preferences.

Why now? What was the catalyst for this turning point? And why was he blessed with a daughter who quietly supported her father's desire to be spanked, when he'd been so rotten that he'd let her go unemployed for nearly three months before finding her a job?

Oliver wiped a tear from his eye. She was a damn good kid.

She had bookmarked several other sites: one for men seeking daddies, one community for fetish discussion and support, a service for houseboy employment. He had to snort at that one. First of all, "employment" was probably being used in the loosest of terms, and if he were to find another younger man, one who sought shelter in home in exchange for domestic services, he'd be stripping Sanaa of her duties. And that would never fly.

Besides, Oliver wasn't certain he wanted another younger man. He browsed the profiles on the site. They were all twinkles looking for sugar daddies. Olivia had tried, but she'd gotten it backward. Where was the website for someone older like Oliver to find his younger daddy?

There probably wasn't. Adam was one in a million.

And look at all the trouble that got you into.

Really, he had lucked out. The fallout from their relationship could have been so much worse. He could have been socially disgraced, embarrassed at work, or sued for sexual harassment. Adam could have tried blackmailing him.

Just because Adam hadn't, it didn't mean it couldn't happen with someone else.

Better to stick with the familiar, someone his own age. Someone into sex without a relationship that could get messy and make things difficult.

Oliver saw a familiar face in one of the profiles on the daddy-lover site. It was Simon, his would-be Cinderella from before Adam had come along. Simon's second profile picture featured him on his knees, his hands held above his head by leather restraints. Oliver grinned. Simon had seemed fairly vanilla

during their last encounter, but maybe that was because of the website through which they'd met. Maybe if Oliver contacted him through this one, Simon would show his true colors.

In his profile, Simon had listed himself as one hundred percent passive. Suppressing his disappointment, Oliver decided he'd have to learn to work with it. Being submissive to Adam had only weakened him. It had made him dependent upon some child who knew a hell of a lot less about the world than Oliver did. Listening to Adam had not been good for Oliver.

His newly muscled body begged to differ.

Simon had also listed his safe sex practice as "ask me." That gave Oliver pause. He and Simon had played safe—he hadn't given Simon the chance to ask for otherwise—but was Simon running around town, barebacking with anyone with a fat wallet? The man was old enough to know better. Oliver certainly was.

Maybe he and Simon could avoid sex until they knew each other a little better, at which point Oliver could demand to see test results. In the meantime, there were still other ways they could play.

Simon hadn't been so bad. He'd left in a huff the morning after, but if he was still on the market, maybe he'd agree to give Oliver another shot.

For the fourth time that night, Adam's phone chirped with a text message. Boom, whom they were now to call Chris, was as insistent that Adam join him for drinks as he was about the name change. He said it had been too long since Adam had moved out of their apartment and that Adam would like his new work friends. They were, apparently, much less obnoxious than their college friends had been.

Adam put the phone down on the coffee table he'd bought at a garage sale. He'd stripped it and restained it himself, and it didn't look like a cheap garage sale find anymore. It matched nicely with the sofa, his one big splurge on a credit card. Although it had cost him a significant chunk of his paltry earnings from Wasserstein Enterprises to put together his new apartment, it had been worth it. Going home to a place that belonged to him, and only him, was wonderful at the end of a long day.

Chris texted him again. Although he'd changed a lot since he'd gotten a nine-to-five, Chris maintained his joie de vivre—and his ability to dole out peer

pressure. In this message, he assured Adam they were going to a bar that had an extensive mocktail list and that they'd be home by eleven.

Adam couldn't help smiling at that. He texted his regrets and promised that he'd have dinner and virgin drinks with the new colleagues soon. Tonight, however, he had other plans.

At nine the door buzzer went off. That was the other advantage to having his own apartment: being able to invite over guests. He opened the door to a man in a tight blank tank top and baggy jeans.

"You Adam?" the man asked as he muscled his way across the threshold. "I'm Tom."

"Yeah, can I get you something to drink? I've got water, orange juice—"

"Let's fuck." Tom shoved Adam onto the couch and tore at his fly.

"Oh, sorry, do you mind if we go in the bedroom? The couch is new, and I—"

"Keep your mouth shut, boy." Tom silenced him with a brutal kiss. His meaty paws wrapped around Adam's wrists, pinning him in place.

Adam managed to break away from the kiss to ask, "What did you just call me?"

"You heard me, *boy*."

He frowned as Tom sucked on a spot on his neck. "You're Tom? BigBoy77?"

Tom abandoned the fragile skin on Adam's neck with one final Hoover. Adam was certain to have a purple mark there. "Yeah. Why?"

"You IMed that you wanted a big, strong daddy?"

"Come on, kid, we were just talking. If you want to be my daddy, why don't you fight for it?" As he pinned Adam down again, Adam began to worry that this could escalate beyond a case of mistaken sex roles. He fought to push Tom off but only succeeded in freeing his legs. He twisted his head to the side, so at least Tom couldn't kiss him.

"You said you were a lost bottom in need of guidance! Get off me!" Unable to push Tom away, he used his smaller size to slide out from between Tom and the cushions.

Tom sat on the sofa, rubbing his giant hand over his face, looking dazed. “What the fuck, kid?”

“I am not a kid,” Adam told him coldly. “I am not fighting you for control. If you’re interested in listening to me, doing as I say, then we can continue in the bedroom. But if you’re just here to hold me down and take advantage of me, you can leave.”

Tom laughed unkindly. “You are seriously fucked up.” He stood to leave, taking a moment to right his clothing. “If you think anyone is going to take you seriously when you look like that—”

“Get out. Just get out.”

Chapter 11

When Simon had suggested the same wine bar at which they'd had their first date, Oliver had vehemently protested. He did not want to relive his bathroom encounter with Adam. Instead, he'd decided to test how far Simon's sugar boy tendencies would go by taking him to a dive bar, the kind of place where men like Oliver and Simon knew to keep quiet about who they were if they didn't want any trouble.

The bartender looked foreboding in a flannel shirt with the sleeves cut off, a hat that read "Stand Your Ground," and a mean glare at everyone in the joint except the bottle blonde seated on the last stool. But he poured a healthy dose of bourbon into the two drinks Oliver ordered, and the taste of such strong alcohol after weeks of taking it easy did a lot to chase away Oliver's discomfort. Next to him, Simon drank just as fast. By the second drink, Oliver was loose enough that he no longer thought the bar was a bad idea. By the third, he was loose enough that he and Simon were touching in ways that caught the attention of the other patrons. By the fourth, he was loose enough to realize it was time to go.

"Can you call me a cab?" he slurred at their redneck host.

The guy tugged his cap down on his head. Oliver wondered if he kept a gun behind the bar. Probably. "I think that's a good idea. Why don't you wait outside for it?"

"He hates queers," Simon whispered. He dropped his head on Oliver's shoulder. "Oh boy, what if we die tonight?"

"We're not going to die," Oliver said with one eye on the bartender. He tried to give a convincing smile. "He's my brother. He doesn't drink very often."

If anyone believed him, the illusion was shattered when Simon groped his ass on their way out.

"Why did you bring me there?" Simon complained once they were in the relative safety of the parking lot. "That place is awful!"

"Maybe I have a death wish." Oliver looked at Simon. Simon's hair was really short, nothing like Adam's mop of curls that sometimes fell over his face, and his nose turned up where Adam's protruded straight and long. Proud, like

everything about Adam. By contrast, Simon seemed to be shrinking from sight. "I just wanted to see if you'd have an adventure with me."

"I like adventures."

"You do? You want to go on another one?" A reckless idea began to take shape. He could ensure once and for all that Joanne and Olivia would never again pity him. He could show Olivia just how over Adam he was. Show off his new toy. "Let's go to my ex's house."

"Your ex? Who is he?"

"She," Oliver corrected. "She's having some party tonight because she got a new pool table or something. You want to go?"

"I like pool." Simon took a small bottle out of his pants pocket. He uncapped it and held up to his nose. Covered one nostril and sniffed. "Want some?"

Oliver watched Simon's eyes grow bleary. Forget the European vacation. Simon would probably ask Oliver to take him to the White Party. Weren't they too old for that kind of shit? Adam would have thought so. No, that wasn't quite right. Adam had never made Oliver feel too old. He just thought Oliver should treat his body and mind better.

"Adam would definitely not approve of poppers."

"Who's Adam?"

Oliver grabbed the bottle. "Someone who's not here."

The party was in full swing by the time they arrived, but Joanne said nothing about their tardiness. She also said nothing about Oliver's state of inebriation, mostly because he didn't give her a chance.

"Don't worry, didn't drive," he assured her before she could start in. "Cab cost a fucking fortune." He pushed Simon into her entryway. "What do you think of my new friend?"

"Oh, Oliver," she said with a shake of her head. Then, ever the gracious host, she turned to Simon. "I'm Joanne. Welcome. Everyone's in the rec room. I'll show you guys the way up."

They followed her to an extra room on the second floor that had been created under one of the peaks from the roof. For as long as she and Ted had

lived in the house, the room had been a giant empty space. Oliver didn't know what had prompted them to finally furnish it, but he appreciated that they had turned it into an adult playground. Or a G-rated one, anyway. The room wasn't tricked out with restraints and a Saint Andrew's cross—although, if it had been, the party might have been a little more exciting.

Still, this was better than Joanne and Ted's usual parties, at which everyone had to sit around making conversation. Now there was a pool table under the chandelier, and near the window was a media center with the biggest television Oliver had ever seen. Against one sloping wall was a bar, where Ted, Olivia, and an assortment of family friends were gathered. Oliver held his breath, but he didn't see Adam in the crowd.

"This looks very nice," Simon told Joanne.

"You're clearly doing all right," Oliver agreed. "I'm going to stop paying you alimony."

"You never paid me alimony," Joanne reminded him.

"Maybe I should have. Maybe I should have paid all my exes alimony. Apparently, I'm hard to live with."

Simon found this funny and started to laugh, but he stifled it when he saw Joanne's pinched face. "Oh, Oliver," she said again. She led them over to the bar.

"Hey, Ollie, what are you having tonight?" Ted greeted him.

Since he already had Joanne's disapproval, there was probably no harm in further provocation. "Him," he replied, pushing Simon into the crowd.

Olivia's eyes nearly bugged out. "Pop, you want to introduce your friend?"

Oliver put his arm around Simon, but his brain faltered. "This is... my good friend... uh..."

"Nice to meet you," Ted piped up, extending his hand. "I'm Ted."

"Simon."

"Simon, right," Oliver muttered. Why had he been thinking Samson? Nothing about the man standing next to him cried out "brute strength," even if Simon's stature was roughly equal to his own.

They passed some time at the bar, making conversation and trying Ted's new recipe for pisco sours. After a while, the group separated into different

camps, some starting a game of pool. Oliver and Simon found themselves near the television set, where Wendy connected a karaoke machine. Shooting a coquettish smile at Ted, she insisted they all sing. She went first. She chose a contemporary song Oliver had never heard, the chorus of which was about being twenty-two. Each time she said the words, she looked pointedly at Ted.

Oliver watched this unfold with a mixture of curiosity and resentment. Wendy and Ted had flirted for as long as he could remember Olivia bringing Wendy around, but it seemed to have reached a fever pitch that summer. And yet their body language said they were still frothing with sexual tension, that they hadn't yet crossed any lines.

He turned to look at Olivia, who was singing along and clapping her hands. She didn't seem to reserve any particular judgment. Joanne, who was draped on the arm of Ted's plush chair, gave her husband a nudge. Ted looked at her to confirm, and she nodded. He rose to his feet and started dancing with Wendy. It wasn't the kind of out-and-out rutting that Olivia and her friends did, but it wasn't the kind of dancing fathers did with daughters, either. They were flirting and touching, right in front of Olivia and Jo, and everyone in the room was laughing and cheering them on.

The resentment bubbled up into fury. His family had never once made him feel different for being gay, but he could see no other reason why Wendy and Ted were permissible while he and Adam weren't. Unless it was because he and Adam had actually crossed that line. But that wasn't just about sex. Wendy bumping her hips into Ted—that was just sex, and somehow it was more okay than the love Oliver had shared with Adam? Adam, who made him feel whole, made him feel desired, after all the years Olivia and Joanne had urged him to find someone who made him feel that way? And for what had he turned it down? For this?

He stormed over to the bar and poured himself another drink.

When the song ended, Ted called for something from his generation, and Olivia said there was a CD of hits from the 1960s and '70s. Unless Ted was going to respond by singing "Young Girl," Oliver was no longer interested. He tuned out and sipped his drink. He tried to imagine what the party would be like if Adam were present. Adam would have frowned at all the drinking, and Ted probably would have thought he was stuffy. Well, Ted was stuffy. And Adam had been right. The hangovers weren't worth it, and Oliver felt more energetic when he watched what he ate and drank. But Adam wasn't here. He probably

hadn't even been invited. He'd probably been pushed out of his social circle once Olivia told everyone the boy had been sticking it to her dad.

Poor kid. Oliver hoped he hadn't lost all his friends. That was probably unlikely, since Adam was so handsome and confident and had accomplished so much in his young life. People looked up to men like that. Wanted to be around them.

Oliver recognized the first strains of a song by the Guess Who and immediately sought out Jo. Once upon a time, they'd loved the band. They'd gone to a concert and made out a little during it. It was the first time Oliver had kissed a girl.

Joanne must have been flashing back to the same memory. Their eyes locked, and she gave him an affectionate smile. She held out the microphone. "Come on. You know you want to."

"Yeah, Dad," Olivia chimed in. "It's your turn."

Oliver set his drink down and found his way back to them. He accepted the microphone, but something about Wendy and Ted's carefree display, combined with all the alcohol he had imbibed and the melancholy of the song, caused his mood to crash. He wasn't angry anymore. He didn't feel a sense of outrage or injustice. He was just sad. Profoundly sad.

He'd lost the best thing that had ever happened to him, and now he was stuck at this dumb party with the gray-haired guy whose name he couldn't remember.

By the end of "These Eyes," Oliver was sitting on the floor, lost in his own world. He didn't even notice that Simon had left.

Adam's phone chirped again, and while he appreciated Chris's persistence—it made him feel important, after all—he was annoyed to be getting messages after midnight. But, since he was awake, he looked at it.

It wasn't Chris. It was Olivia.

The text message simply said to call ASAP. It could have meant that Olivia was drunk-texting him, goading him into the big showdown that had never really happened after his breakup with Oliver. He wouldn't put it past her. And he really wasn't in the mood.

He rubbed his right hand over the soreness on his left wrist. Stupid fucking online hookups. Adam was majorly striking out in his quest to find someone new. At least he hadn't gone back to Martin, though. He couldn't, not now that he knew how much being the one in power excited him. He still wasn't certain if it was a lifelong change or something specific to his relationship with Oliver. If the online hookups didn't sort out soon, he might never know.

Another text message. This one said, *Call please. It's important.*

Adam sighed. He hadn't realized how much he'd appreciated being away from the drama of his college friends. The prospect of getting pulled back in filled him with dread.

See? I don't want to fix their lives. I'm not a control freak. I just liked helping Oliver be the best man he could be.

"What is it?" he asked wearily once Olivia answered.

"Look, I know you and my dad broke up, and you're probably shacked up with someone new right now."

"Not even close."

"You're not? Why the hell did you move out on Boom then?"

"Uh, because I thought you'd never want to see me again? They were your friends more than mine. I thought you'd convince them all to dump me." Adam glanced around his apartment. It was much smaller than the place he'd shared with Boom—Chris—but it was tidier and in better condition. "Besides, it was time for me to stand on my own two legs. After all, wouldn't want to mooch off the wealthy forever, right?"

"Adam, look, I know I said some things that weren't very nice."

"Nope, they sure weren't."

"You don't have to be a dick about it."

"How do you want me to be, Olivia? You took over my room all the time and never paid rent, and when you weren't there, you were crashing your dad's house and abusing his generosity. Meanwhile, I was trying desperately to get some privacy with the man I loved because we couldn't be at either of our houses. Because of you."

"He's my *dad*, Adam. I wasn't abusing his generosity."

He pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. He wanted to make sure he explained this right, as he'd likely never have another chance to say it. And because he suspected Olivia would report it all to Oliver.

"I know he's your dad. He loves you first. If he has to pick between you and anyone else, you're going to win, every time. I wasn't asking for it not to be that way. But you say you love him, and you take all his money and all the things he buys you, and maybe I did, too, but the difference was that you expect it. If he'd been poor and couldn't offer me a job and didn't have an awesome place to live, I still would have loved him. And if he'd been rich and never given me a dime, I still would have loved him. I know you and Wendy and Pablo think I'm hillbilly trash, and maybe I am, I don't know, but I was never, for one minute, trying to get anything from your dad other than his love. Can you say the same?"

Olivia didn't answer, and Adam worried he'd gone too far.

"I'm sorry you saw me flogging him," he added sincerely. "I can imagine how weird that must have been."

"I needed brain-bleach."

"I wasn't hurting him. He likes it."

"Yeah, I don't really want to know, okay?" She sighed. "I felt lied to. By both of you."

"We did lie to you," Adam admitted. "I'm sorry for that. We just—we were figuring our relationship out, and we needed privacy to do that. And then after we figured it out, I guess we thought you wouldn't understand."

"You could have at least tried me."

"Yeah. I'm sorry. Did you say this to him?" Adam wondered. "It might be better for him to hear it. Since, you know, we're not really friends anymore, and it doesn't really matter."

"Why aren't we friends anymore?"

"Are you seriously asking me that?"

"I'm sorry I was such a bitch. If it makes you feel better, I hate Pablo, too. I think he's a douche."

In spite of himself, Adam cracked a smile. The line between Pablo and Olivia's insults was a little fuzzy to him, but he appreciated her attempt to distance herself. "Is this a drunk dial? Because you sound really sober."

“No, actually, I called because of my dad.”

Adam's heart stopped. Oliver was dead. Oliver was in the hospital. Oliver was in love with someone else. There were many possible reasons why she'd call about Oliver, and none of them were any good.

“You really love him?” she asked. “It wasn't just a sex thing?”

“I'm not going to lie. We had mind-blowing sex.” She let out an *ewww*, and he laughed sadistically. “But, yeah, I loved him.”

“Still?”

He didn't like admitting it, but he would always love Oliver. What had Oliver said of Joanne? She was one of his great loves. Oliver was going down in history as one of Adam's.

“Yeah,” he told Olivia. “I still love him. I probably always will.”

“I'm pretty sure he's still in love with you, so could you come to my mom's house? It got kind of messy over here. We could use your help.”

Chapter 12

The first thing Oliver thought when he awoke was, *Sun, oh fuck, the sun, why is it so bright?*

The second thing was, *Didn't I swear I'd never do this again?*

The third, as he rolled onto his side and felt a gentle hand stroking through his hair, was, *Who's that?*

He opened his eyes. He was in his bedroom, with no idea how he'd gotten there, and next to him, like a dream come true, was Adam. In shorts and a T-shirt, his hair freshly washed and not yet gone wild. Adam gave him another caress.

"Good morning," he said softly. "Do you need something for a headache?" Oliver nodded. Adam reached behind himself for a glass of water and two tablets that were on the nightstand. He helped Oliver sit up enough to drink and wiped Oliver's chin when he dribbled. "Do you think you could eat a little something, or do you need to throw up?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Taking care of you."

So simple. Oliver needed taking care of, and Adam was there to do it. Why wasn't every morning like this?

"Olivia?"

"She's in the living room. She's ready to talk whenever you are. She's the one who called me last night."

"I was at Jo's," Oliver remembered.

"Yup, and apparently you had a meltdown while you were singing 'Killing Me Softly.'"

"The last thing I remember was 'These Eyes'."

"What can I tell you, babe? Apparently you gave a whole concert." Adam tipped his head. "Were you singing about me?"

Oliver nodded. "How'd I get here?"

"Olivia and I brought you home in her car."

“So she’s not—you and she are okay?”

“I’m going to warn you now,” Adam said with a lopsided smile. “When she comes around all the way, she’s going to be awful. I’m talking bad jokes and tasteless Christmas gifts. I can see she’s going to think it’s hilarious to tease you about the age thing. And the kinky sex thing.”

Oliver couldn’t keep up. He snuggled into Adam and pillowed his head on Adam’s lean thigh. “Simon?”

“Who’s Simon, baby?”

“No one. Wimpy little bottom. Good poppers, though.” Adam’s hand in Oliver’s hair stilled. “Are you mad at me for getting drunk and using club drugs?”

“I’m not mad at you. I’m not mad at anyone. I’m disappointed in both of us. That fight—”

Oliver sat up quickly, then clutched Adam in silence until the room stopped spinning. “That fight was my fault. I should never have let you walk out.”

“I made you feel like you had to pick between me and Olivia. I never should have put you in that position.”

“You didn’t,” Oliver argued. “You were more than understanding about the whole thing. I was the one who made you feel... well, I didn’t make you realize how precious you are to me. That’s on me.”

Adam cradled his face. “See, I thought I was the one who didn’t make you realize how precious you are to me. You know what we have here? This is a serious case of mouth-on-dick preventing communication.”

He was joking. He was here, in Oliver’s bedroom, comforting Oliver after his thoughtless night of drinking, and instead of passing judgment or scolding or making Oliver do penance for their breakup, he was holding Oliver and making jokes. Oliver had no idea what he’d done to deserve such good fortune.

“You’re probably right. We can’t let mouth-on-dick prevent us from communicating. I am, however, more than okay with dick-in-ass preventing mouth-on-dick.”

“Well, come on now, sometimes they can happen together.”

Oliver looked carefully at Adam. Enough joking. There were things he needed to say. “I tried to get over you, but it didn’t work. Everyone wants a sugar daddy.”

“Everyone who? I had a couple of dates, and all they did was try to convince me I hadn't yet realized my full potential as their suck pig.”

“You would look really hot in a harness.”

“I'm not a slave. I'm not a brat. I'm not a big, nelly bottom in need of stuffing.”

“Then what are you?”

Adam turned serious eyes on him. “I hope I'm yours. And I hope you'll let me help you sort all this out.”

Oliver felt awash with relief and happiness and anticipation. He didn't have all the answers. Liv was coming around, but what about Joanne? And how would he and Adam manage work? What about the living arrangements they'd fought over? That all still needed to be sorted out.

But they could do it together. Because as much as Adam wanted to be his, he wanted to be Adam's.

“And you'll stuff me?” he teased, a little bit hopefully, to break the tension.

“I'll definitely stuff you.” Adam leaned down to kiss Oliver, and it was just as Oliver remembered: sweet and unassuming, but also full-bodied and fiery. “Mine,” Adam growled. “Tell me you didn't try to belong to anyone else.”

“Nobody, Daddy. I belong to you.”

Epilogue

One year later

“Champagne for Pops,” Olivia announced, handing Oliver a glass. “And champagne for Step-Pops.” She produced another glass from behind her back and stuck her tongue out while offering it to Adam.

He gave her a smile in return and accepted the glass. “Thanks, Step-Brat.”

Oliver had mastered the art of checking in with Adam in public. He looked discreetly from the glass to Adam and back again. Adam gave an equally subtle nod that said he could drink it. He deserved a glass in celebration, and Adam would make sure neither of them had more than one or two tonight.

“So,” Olivia said, “I was thinking to myself about this big occasion, and I wondered, ‘What could someone in my position do to help her Pops celebrate?’ And then I realized on my measly entry-level salary, not too much.”

Adam rolled his eyes. Some things never changed. “Let me guess. Then you realized your Pops didn’t need anything from you but your love and affection? Or maybe you made him a card decorated with macaroni?”

“No, stupid, I’m trying to tell you something real.”

“How would we ever know that? Everything gets lost in the miasma of bullshit.”

“Children,” Oliver warned, “play nice.”

Adam grinned at Olivia. They knew Oliver enjoyed the occasional reminder that he was the patriarch of their unusual clan, even if he was patriarch in name only. Olivia still had him wrapped around her finger, and Adam usually had him wrapped around other body parts.

“So I argued for a raise and got one. You can stop my allowance now if you want, Dad.”

Adam was speechless. Oliver’s money was his own, and he could give as much to Olivia as he wanted. The only time Adam intervened was when he knew Oliver didn’t want to fork over but felt manipulated into it, and then he’d only interject to remind Oliver that Olivia would love him no matter what.

But ending her allowance was a big deal. They’d brokered a tidy little agreement after Oliver and Adam had reconciled. Olivia sublet Adam’s

apartment, and Adam had moved into Oliver's condo. Olivia maintained squatter's rights to come and go as she pleased, as long as she never entered their bedroom without knocking. And if she heard or saw something she didn't want to, Adam was fond of reminding her, it was her fault for being a meddling brat.

The arrangement had forced Olivia to get serious about finding employment and trying to stand on her own, which had pleased Joanne. Adam had offered to pay Oliver an amount equal to what he'd paid in rent on the apartment, but Oliver had been upset to learn that all of Adam's savings had gone into his new home. He wouldn't accept rent from Adam, and he insisted that Adam's paychecks go to his student loans and his motorcycle fund.

Adam's birthday was next month. Oliver thought he was going to make a down payment on a new bike, but Adam planned to use the motorcycle fund to get Oliver riding lessons and a license. And his own helmet, so they could ride together.

"Daughter, I would be happy to stop giving you an allowance. We'll put the money in savings for you instead, just in case."

"In case I get fired?"

"In case you want to buy a house someday," Oliver corrected.

Olivia looked properly chastened. Adam glared at her, tipped his head toward Oliver. She, too, had mastered the art of nonverbal communication. She glared back, but rose on tiptoes to kiss her father's cheek. "Thank you, Pops. You're the best. Really."

"You're welcome, kiddo. I'm proud of you."

"Maybe by the time you're thirty, you'll actually be out on your own," Adam teased.

"Maybe by the time you're thirty, you'll actually look old enough to be with my dad. Oh yeah! I said it!"

"Liv!" Oliver scolded, glancing nervously around.

"Don't worry, Ollie." Adam slung an arm around Olivia's shoulder. "Anyone listening will see we're just one big, happy family." He pinched her bicep, and she shrieked and jerked away, sloshing champagne to the ground.

"It's looking good here tonight," Ted said as he and Joanne joined the circle. "I wasn't expecting this many people."

"It's like everyone in Tampa is here," Joanne agreed. She kissed each of them hello on the cheek.

Adam looked around the ballroom. Joanne wasn't exaggerating. He recognized a number of his former Wasserstein co-workers, many of whom he was eager to catch up with after nearly seven months in his new position at a biotech company. And then he spotted one familiar face he wasn't excited to see.

Martin Hinsdale caught him looking and waved. He started to walk toward them.

"Shit."

"What is it?" Olivia asked, craning her neck around him to spy.

Martin made his approach slowly, offering them a wave. "Hello, Oliver, thank you so much for the invitation."

Oliver acknowledged him by lifting his champagne glass. Adam was proud of his poise and dignity. It was true that many business acquaintances had been invited to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Wasserstein Enterprises, but excluding Martin from the list wouldn't have raised many eyebrows. Oliver had invited him because he was a good guy.

Martin said polite hellos to Joanne, Ted, and Olivia before turning his attention to Adam. "It's been a long time since I've seen you. What are you doing here?"

Adam opened his mouth but wasn't sure what to say. It wasn't that he and Oliver were closeted, but how could he explain his relationship with Oliver to the man who'd once made him spit-shine his shoes?

Martin was perceptive enough to figure things out. "Oh, I see. Well, Oliver, I wish you luck. This one, he never listens, he never does what he's told. You've taken on a giant headache."

Oliver gave Adam a look that said he was begging to intervene. While they often corrected the assumption that they were just friends (or, worse, uncle and nephew), they never spoke about their power-exchange dynamic in general company. And now that they had friends online and at the leather club, they knew they didn't need to talk about it. It wasn't weird or wrong—just private.

But this was different. Oliver was insulted on his daddy's behalf, and Adam could see it was paining him not to say anything. He gave a small nod.

"That's really strange, Martin," Oliver mused. "I never noticed if he listens or obeys. I guess I'm too busy getting spanked to pay attention."

Ted choked on his champagne, forcing Joanne to whack him on the back. Adam thought he heard her murmur something about getting with the times.

Martin licked his lips and tipped his glass in Oliver's direction. "Well played, Wasserstein. Well played." He excused himself.

"Did he believe me?" Oliver asked. "I don't think he believed me."

"I cannot believe you just said that to him." Joanne sounded, if anything, proud.

"Freaks, all of you," Olivia grumbled.

"But you love us." Adam leaned close to her, puckering his lips comically, and she shoved him away with a laugh. "All right, Oliver. You're the host of this party. You can't stay in the corner all night. You've got to make the rounds."

"Only if you'll come with me."

Adam grinned. It was one thing to be out, but parading a much younger lover around like arm candy at a company function was a big move. When they'd planned the party, they had decided Adam would come as Oliver's date but that Oliver would not go out of his way to introduce Adam as such.

"Come on," Oliver urged. "All these old men with their younger trophy wives, and I can't have you on my arm?"

Oliver offered his hand, but Adam shook his head. He put out his elbow instead, and Oliver rested a hand on it. Holding Oliver, supporting him physically and emotionally, it felt right. They walked into the crowd, arm in arm, together.

The End

Author Bio

Harry K. Malone is a native of the Chicagoland area, where he has lived in nearly every neighborhood as well as several suburbs. Since he doesn't have a human significant other, the city remains the one great love in his life. Harry has been writing stories about unconventional relationships and families since he was a child. When not writing, he enjoys watching sci-fi, playing video games, listening to NPR, and hanging out with his cat, Khan. Harry is proud to be a part of Chicago's vibrant LGBTQ community.

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