



Almost

**BUT NOT
QUITE**

A M Y S P E C T O R

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

ALMOST BUT NOT QUITE

By Amy Spector

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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 is an Open Road*.

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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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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ALMOST BUT NOT QUITE

By Amy Spector

Photo Description

A photograph of an attractive man is shot through a windowpane and between the pillars of an office building, as he stands in its lobby. He has short, wavy black hair and a closely trimmed mustache and beard. He is wearing a dark blue suit, a dark blue tie with a white dotted design, and a white-collared dress shirt. Head tilted down slightly, he listens to someone on the other end of a cell phone.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This is billionaire Max. I met him last year when I had hit rock bottom, I had nowhere else to go, no money, no job prospects, just a drug habit I picked up to help me cope with the horrible things that had happened to me since running away from my abusive home. They say when it rains it pours; well can you make the rain stop by bringing this ray of sunshine into my life?

I'm kind of going for a cinderfella feel here, hurt/comfort... I am uncomfortable with BDSM and don't particularly like paranormal or science fiction. The rest is up to you, even the name if you don't like Max.

Yours sincerely,

Michgee

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: hurt/comfort, age gap, addiction drug/alcohol, cinderfella, family drama, slow burn/UST

Word Count: 25,252

Acknowledgements

My sincerest thanks to Al, Kristan, and Layla. You guys are truly the best. Thanks to the lovely Michgee for her great prompt and to Elizabetta and all the MM group volunteers that make all this possible.

Dedication

This story is dedicated to Jonathan. See? I didn't forget. You little shit.

ALMOST BUT NOT QUITE

By Amy Spector

Prologue

Daniel leaned back on his elbows in the grass and stared up at the stars. He liked how much easier they were to see here, away from the streetlights. This late at night it seemed like the sky was nearly full.

When he returned his gaze to the group, he caught Richie watching him and felt himself grow warm from more than the bottle they had been passing around. The way the other boy always looked at him made Daniel feel like something worth looking at. That feeling, something he wished he could wrap up and tuck away for those moments when memories of his father's drunken fists and angry words made Daniel feel like nothing at all.

Every one of them had a similar story: run from a home that wasn't much of a home in the first place. The fact that his story hadn't been special had made it feel... not so bad. They'd found him and fed him and taught him how to navigate the cycle of park to park to shelter and back again, and he owed every last one of them more than he could ever repay.

Tonight Daniel had gotten to be the hero: thirty bucks from some pervert in the park who just wanted to look at him. They had eaten fast food burgers and had bought painkillers for one of the twins' toothache. Now they shared something cheap and potent under a clear September sky.

Daniel watched Richie look away to whisper something in Rachel's ear and nuzzle the crook of her neck. He returned his gaze to the stars overhead. She giggled, and he listened as they stood up to the accompaniment of whistles and teasing to wander into the dense trees at the edge of the park where they had all been hid away for the last few days.

"Is there anything left?" Daniel asked, reaching out to grab the passing bottle.

He swallowed the remains of its contents and tossed it as far as he could throw it, listening for the thud as it hit the ground before curling onto his side and cradling his head on his folded arm. Lying there, he concentrated on the sting of his throat and the burn in his belly, anything to block out the thoughts of his parents, and the man in the park, and the longing he ached with.

He wanted more than this, more than the painful memories, more than the loneliness, more than another winter in a shelter.

Most of all, he wanted someone to look at him as if he were worth looking at, and actually mean it. Almost, but not quite, was somehow worse than not at all.

Chapter One

Five Years Later

“Do you know what your dad would say right now?”

Maximilian Litt looked up from behind his father’s desk to where Amanda stood in the doorway, and he couldn’t fight his smile.

“Well, let’s see...” leaning back in the chair, he stroked the stubble on his jaw “...that he was proud of me?”

“Oh, God no.” She laughed at that. “He’d say don’t fuck this up, Maximilian.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right. Then he’d hit me up for a donation to help the endangered capuchin monkey or something.” Max was pretty sure almost that exact thing had happened.

“Is the capuchin monkey endangered?” Amanda asked, taking one of the chairs across from him.

“I have no idea.”

He opened the side drawer of the antique mahogany desk and started pulling out what he needed for the meeting. The Edwardian piece, with its delicate inlaid design, was in such contrast to the modern space in which it sat that Max wondered if that hadn’t actually been the point. There had been nothing modern about his father either. As everyone around him had sought out ways to make more and more money, Max’s father had taken his family’s fortune and, in his own unique way, had tried to save the world instead.

“Am I doing the right thing, do you think?” Max glanced up to find Amanda’s surprised look, and he smiled. He rarely questioned himself, a trait he suspected came from his dad, and it felt a little uncomfortable sharing the uncertainty with another person. But if not with Amanda, then who with?

His father’s longtime assistant had been more a mother to Max than any one of his father’s string of wives that had come after his own. Yet, as well as she knew him, even as a young child he had recognized the professional distance the woman had striven to keep. She may have played nurse to his scraped knees and broken hearts, but there was never any question that Amanda Reynolds didn’t think of Max as her son. But then, no one else had either.

He wondered what their relationship would have been like had there been the mothering without the distance. He really couldn't quite imagine it.

"Your father used to ask me the same question." Amanda smiled back at him. "As much as you are like him, you need to remember that your differences from him are also your strengths. He always knew you would take the foundation in a different direction, Max. He expected you to."

Max hoped she was right. He already knew what was being said about him. He was seen as the prodigal son returning only to claim his father's billions. And the truth of that had him questioning his own moral compass. Especially since his plan to change the entirety of the foundation's focus would be him telling the employees and volunteers—and the world at large—that he would be acting as that compass for the whole of the Litt Foundation from here on out.

"Thanks, Amanda. Now, let's talk about something else."

Anything else.

He stood to walk to the mirror that hung on the far wall to slip on his suit coat. Max knew he looked older than his thirty-five years, but somehow that didn't bother him. He looked like old photographs of his father, always had. As a child, that had somehow made him feel closer to the man even as the man himself had been halfway around the world, with Max the furthest thing from his mind.

"Have you decided what to do with the estate?"

Well, maybe not talk about anything else.

"I think that is a decision for another day." Max caught Amanda's reflection and saw her look of disapproval. "I just don't have any desire to move back there, not right now, maybe someday. Hell, it would be the perfect place if I ever decide to adopt thirty, forty kids."

Amanda didn't try to hide her eye roll. "It's a beautiful home, Max. If you were a drinker, I would have already won it from you in a game of cards."

He laughed at that, adjusting his tie and winking at her in the mirror. "Right now I'm happy with my little place. I'll have to have you over. It's really lovely. I'm planning on having the old greenhouse out back converted into an office. And did you know it's supposed to have a ghost? The walking tours have been stopping outside it for the last couple of weeks."

"That little place of yours," Amanda said, her words managing to somehow convey another eye roll, "is on the National Register of Historic Places and is easily twice as large as my big place."

“Ten minutes, Mr. Litt.” The voice of his administrative assistant brought his focus back to what he had been doing, and Max quickly tugged to even up his white shirt cuffs. “Thank you, Timothy.”

Once everything was in order, Max grabbed the case of papers from his desk and leaned down to press a kiss to Amanda’s cheek.

“See you after the fireworks.”

Daniel was going to lose his job. He knew it. Like some sort of sixth sense, he had felt the eyes on him since the moment he had walked into the salon that morning.

He would have been tempted to strangle Richie if he wasn’t angrier at himself than he was with the other man. Daniel had known Richie was bad news from the first day he had stumbled back into his life. But it had been so comforting to have a familiar face, and someone to touch him again, even if those things came with the drugs and the hiding, and the bottle that Daniel always struggled with.

He had broken it off once more, which was inevitable, but the damage was done and now there was little left to do but wait for the fallout.

Daniel had volunteered to fill in on a bleach job early that morning but had instead been placed at the sinks, washing hair and applying conditioning treatments. When he wasn’t making small talk with someone over the basin, he was cleaning, restocking the towels, and trying not to worry himself sick.

“There’s a chair opening up,” Reagan whispered, stepping up to his side and giving a quick glance around. “Who do you think will get it?”

He and Reagan had left the academy together and had been chair sharing with two others for nearly six months. If the decision were based on skill, everyone knew it would go to Daniel, but no one knew how the decision would be made. Besides, Daniel figured he didn’t have much of a chance at this point.

“I have no idea.” Daniel thought that Reagan seemed a little too pleased, and he guessed that she already knew, or at least she suspected, that Daniel had thrown himself out of the running. Her competitiveness had seemed more understandable in the academy, where everyone had been striving for top marks in hopes of graduating to a position at one of the Academy’s salons. Now it just pissed him off.

“Were you sent here to cover for my lunch or something?” He only barely managed to keep his tone civil.

“Yep,” she said, shooing him away. “You go on now, I don’t mind filling in for you for a few minutes.”

Like you have a fucking choice.

Daniel had just finished his lunch and was starting to gather his trash when he heard his name called. He looked up. A woman he vaguely recognized from his interview a handful of months before stood waiting in the doorway, and his heart sank.

“I need to speak with you Mr. Kohl.”

Not Daniel, Mr. Kohl.

“Absolutely,” he said. “Let me just toss these things.”

After throwing away his trash, Daniel buttoned his sweater, adjusted his tie, and putting on his brightest smile, followed the diminutive woman in Jimmy Choos to his certain demise.

Mrs. Porter was standing on the porch when Daniel arrived at the house. He was already running behind, having missed his bus and having been forced to wait twenty minutes for the next one, and it was nearly half past six. He wondered how long she had been waiting. After the day he’d had, he didn’t think he was up to a heart-to-heart with his landlady. He entertained the idea of ignoring her, just slipping between the houses to climb through his bedroom window and barricade himself inside.

Of course, he didn’t ignore her. Instead he plastered another smile on his face and jogged up the steps.

“Is everything okay, Mrs. Porter?” Daniel asked, taking in her pinched look and angry glare.

“That boy you’ve been seeing stopped by.” The band of stress that seemed to live around Daniel’s chest tightened. “And he swiped fifty dollars from my purse before I managed to kick his ass out.”

Fuck.

“God, I’m so sorry.” Daniel started to reach out to touch her shoulder but stopped himself. Mrs. Porter was not exactly demonstrative at the best of times. “I’ll pay you back, I promise.”

The look the woman gave him at that had Daniel pushing past her and into the house, taking the hall at a dead run, stumbling when he hit an uneven bit of flooring.

The utter mess of his room stopped him in his tracks.

Oh God.

The drawers of the little dresser were pulled out, his clothing strewn about the floor, the nightstand emptied. The handful of items that had hung in the closet now lay below in a tangled mess. Worst of all though, was the small wooden box that sat empty on his still neatly made bed.

Fuck.

“He said he was looking for your stash.” Mrs. Porter’s voice was angry and came from right behind where he stood frozen at the threshold. “He found that box with a bit of money in it.”

That *bit of money* had been every dime Daniel possessed, and he struggled not to lose his shit. Most of what he’d had coming from the salon had been used to clear up his product account. In the end, the check he was cut that afternoon had barely been enough to cover the cashing charge and the cost of the cheap bottle of vodka that lay in his coat pocket—the one he had planned to drown the sorrows of his day in. It wasn’t going to be big enough now.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Porter.” Daniel felt an overwhelming need to hit something or cry. He wasn’t sure which desire was stronger. “It won’t happen again. I promise you that.”

“No it won’t.” She walked past him into the small room to grab his gray duffel from off the floor and open it up on his bed. “Because you are leaving.”

Daniel just stared, shocked, as he watched her start to grab the bits and pieces of the life he had worked so hard to build for himself from the floor, and toss them into the bag. He wanted to slap her hands away, push her from the room. They were his things, and he didn’t like the thought of her touching them. Tainting them.

Instead he took a deep breath.

“I promise, Mrs. Porter. I’ll pay you back.” Daniel didn’t know how, but he was desperate. “I broke it off with Richie, you know that. You have to give me another chance.”

“Jesus Christ, Daniel. It’s not about the money. My grandson was in the house.” Mrs. Porter looked as mad as he had ever seen her, and Daniel sank into himself. “And you’re using drugs? I’m not having that in my house.”

Fuck.

“But they weren’t even mine.” He said the words even though he knew she wouldn’t believe him, but they were true. He may have been drinking again but he had not touched any of the shit Richie had been shoving at him. He had been proud of that fact. Now he wondered why.

“The only reason I’m not calling the police,” Mrs. Porter told him as she continued pawing at his things, “is because I think you’re a good kid.”

And because your grandson always reeks of weed.

“But I want you out.”

Daniel actually understood, would have probably done the same thing in her shoes, but he still had to fight the desire to beg. He couldn’t face the idea of even one more night in a shelter. He couldn’t bear reliving that part of his life.

“I’m sure that salon of yours will give you an advance.” Mrs. Porter sounded more like someone trying to alleviate guilt than someone who really cared. Daniel had no interest in letting her know the truth, that after another fight with Richie and coming in to work shitfaced, the salon had pulled the trigger and fired his ass. It wasn’t something she wanted to know, and it wouldn’t have changed her mind anyway.

Daniel mentally calculated the chances of getting another chair with his noncompetes and this particular black mark on his record. He was certain it would take a miracle.

“I’m sure they will,” he said, fighting the urge to beg again, and instead slipping his hand into his coat pocket to feel the reassuring weight of the bottle. At that moment, he thought he might mourn the loss of Richie’s pills as much as he mourned the loss of the cash he had hidden them away with.

Daniel studied the little room with its mismatched furniture and his few possessions strewn across the floor. It was funny that after more than two years he could likely fit all of his things into the same dirty canvas bag he had shown up at the door with. Not that he felt like the same person. No, in those months he had stopped using, stopped drinking, had worked hard to put himself through school, and had been rewarded with a position with one of the most prestigious salons in town. Of course he had started drinking again, had been fired, and had likely lost any chance of the career he had worked so hard for. Maybe he really was the same person after all.

“I’d better hurry,” he said, grabbing the things that Mrs. Porter had shoved into his bag—so he could fold and repack them—and added his library books

and trinkets and the now empty box. He had been right, everything fit easily inside. He needed someplace quiet to think, somewhere to sort through his options.

Chapter Two

“Thank you ladies, gentlemen,” Max said, turning to leave the now-silent room, Timothy close to his side.

“So, what did you think?” he asked once they were alone, stealing a quick glance at his assistant’s face.

“I think it went well, sir.”

Max laughed. “What do you really think?”

The man grimaced. “I think it went a sight worse than Monday’s meeting, but not as bad as I expected.” This time when Max looked over, Timothy gave him a quick smile. “I think there are a lot of egos in that room. The members of the board are used to having more control. When you told them at the last meeting that projects the foundation would be funding would be changing, I don’t think they realized to what degree their own personal power would be diminishing. I don’t know if they disagree with bringing the foundation’s focus closer to home, or the idea of focusing on helping the individual over the big-picture projects your father favoured. But investing in wetland preservation has more of a polish to it than rehabilitating the neighborhood methadone addict.”

Max thought that was pretty good insight.

“But,” Timothy continued, “maybe most of all, that group is not used to having someone over them making the decisions.”

“My father was always the one in control.” Egotism was not something Max had considered.

“Honestly?” Timothy asked, and Max nodded. “In theory, yes. But your father was very hands-off and, to be quite frank, was rarely here. You may not know this, but there is a lot of clout with being on the board of this foundation, and a lot of money to go with it. Nonprofit or not, you have six-figure salaries sitting in that room and you’ve just told them you’re going to be taking a closer look at the numbers, focusing on reducing operating costs so that we can make more of an impact. In essence, you’ve said you will be cleaning house.”

Six figures.

“How have salaries been decided in the past?”

“By board vote.” Timothy gave Max a meaningful look. “All while your father was in the Arctic or in a rain forest somewhere flirting with the media and counting the blue poison arrow frog.”

Max thought about that. “Could you please—”

Timothy held up a hand. “Salary history is already waiting in your in-box.”

Max thanked the younger man as they entered his outer office, his assistant heading to his desk to wrap up the last of the day’s work, and Max heading to his own to do the same. The meeting had been a long one and, no doubt, both of them were more than ready to call it a night.

Amanda had been right on the money when she had pulled Timothy from his position with one of the board members to step into his role under Max. He suspected that she might have had a more devious plan from his assistant’s tall frame and blond-haired good looks. Amanda certainly knew his type.

“Mr. Litt?” Timothy stood just outside his door, a leather satchel hung across his chest, his jacket in hand.

“Yes?” Max watched the man hesitate before finally speaking.

“Would you be interested in having dinner with me this evening?” The words were innocent enough in themselves, but Max could see more was on the table than a sandwich and chips. Timothy would have been a terrible poker player.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Max answered honestly. “But thank you. You have been invaluable to me these last few months.”

Timothy gave him a small smile and nodded his head, bid him good evening, and left without another word. Part of Max regretted his decision. The idea of something other than a quiet meal in his own dining room—the possibility of eating with another man—sounded, well, it sounded not quite so lonely.

When Max had returned from Austin, he hadn’t considered the loss of his social life. There was Thomas, of course, and he still had a handful of friends from the old days, but while there had been no one *special* before he had left Austin, there had been no one at all since. The foundation stole so many of his hours away that he wondered how his father had ever managed to marry six times. If what Timothy had said was indeed correct, he supposed it was probably through neglect.

Once Max had gathered his things, he left his office to find Amanda waiting for him in the hall.

“How did it go?”

He slowed his stride, allowing her to more easily keep up with him. As young as she always seemed to be, he knew she was at least a few years past retirement.

“As well as can be expected.” He could not wait to get out of this building.

“And how did Timothy see it? He’s worked for a number of the board members.”

Max almost got the idea that Amanda had swiped him for that very reason, as if she had known the changes Max was going to make even before he knew himself.

“He was a good choice, Amanda,” Max told her. “Thank you, but I’m not going to date him.”

“Damn it,” she said with a laugh. “What a shame. He’s so good-looking.”

Max laughed too. “You have a good night. Tell Jay I said hello.”

“I saw Timothy head out a while ago. Did you need me to call for your driver?”

“No, that’s okay. I gave Thomas the day off. I knew it was going to be another long one,” Max told her. “And I think I’m going to walk down the street to that new little bistro. Should be a nice night.”

Amanda’s look was concerned, but she didn’t argue. “If you think that’s a good idea.”

Max let the comment pass. “See you on Monday.”

He wound through the corridors to the stairs, nodding at the few familiar faces in the nearly empty halls, before finally reaching the building’s main lobby. He spoke briefly to the security guards at the front desk, bidding them good evening before walking out into the fall chill.

It was still strange to Max, this being home again, and the stealth with which the seasons abruptly changed, an odd combination of unfamiliar and half-remembered. For reasons he couldn’t put a finger on, he found it comforting.

He broke off from the paved pathway to walk through the fallen leaves on the building’s grounds, through the park exit, and out to the footbridge that crossed the river. The shortcut led to the busy street of shops and restaurants that perched, alongside Litt Foundation, at the edge of a historic residential neighborhood.

He played with the keys in his pocket and listened to the sound of his footsteps and the water underneath his feet. He recalled Amanda taking him over, well, not this bridge but the one that had stood in this very spot, when he was probably no more than twelve. He had been thinking a lot about the past since he returned home, and he supposed that made sense. The memories had always been there, waiting in some corner of his mind, and this place brought them to the forefront. Lost as he was in his thoughts, he was nearly on top of the man before he saw him. He still probably wouldn't have if the guy hadn't stepped into a pool of light cast by one of the lampposts that spanned the walk, to reveal a head of tousled brown hair and a pretty profile. Max indulged himself in looking, enjoying the view for a moment before passing and giving the guy a quick "Hey."

He thought he really needed to agree to someone's offer of a fix-up if he wasn't going to have time to meet someone himself and if he had started leering at college boys.

It only took him a moment after he passed to realize that he was being followed. He turned around and the boy froze, staring at him, and any hope the kid was going to try chatting him up died with the look of guilt that Max saw flash across his face.

"I'm really not up for a mugging tonight or... a GQ potluck?" Max finished, taking in the younger man's dark trousers and tie, and the charcoal sweater that looked a hell of a lot like one Max had nearly picked up at John Varvatos the last time he had been in New York. "I love the sweater."

The guy flushed, looking miserable.

"I just—" he started and stopped, a look of indecision flashing across a face Max thought seemed too young for the tired, red-rimmed eyes that looked back at him. Then a look of determination settled over his features and seemed to age him a handful of years.

"Sixty dollars for a blow job. Twice that for anything more."

Max just stared at the guy, the boy staring cautiously back at him, and Max was torn between pity and disappointment. Somehow anger won out.

"Are you fucking kidding me, kid?" He thought he might be more tired than he'd ever been.

"Fifty and one hundred," the kid amended, and Max had to fight the urge to tell him that once the price was out there in any negotiation, the next one to speak was the loser.

You're not here to give prostitution tips.

It was only when the bottle of whatever he had been drinking slipped from his fingers and hit the wood planks with a dull thud that Max noticed the boy's hands were shaking.

"Please." The word came out in a small voice, and Max stopped mid-turn. "I've got no money and nowhere to go."

Max let out a sigh.

"Why wouldn't you just ask for money?"

The kid just looked confused. "People don't just give you something for nothing." After his conversation with Timothy, Max figured that was probably true.

Max looked at the pretty, desperate man in front of him and thought of his brother, and knew what he needed to do.

"What's your name?" The guy stilled, eyes narrowing as if he were trying to read him before answering.

"Daniel."

"I'm Max. Are you hungry?" The guy nodded hesitantly. "Come on then, I'll buy you something to eat."

Max waited as the other man ran to retrieve an old canvas bag from under a park bench and jogged back to his side, and then returned to his trek down the sidewalk. "After that we can figure out what needs to be done about the other stuff."

"Why would you do that?"

"There are a lot of reasons, really," Max said, turning to give the kid a smile. "But partly because I didn't want to eat alone anyway."

The restaurant was not exactly the kind of place Daniel had been expecting. All polished wood, chrome and low lighting, the room's soundtrack was the quiet murmur of conversation and the clink of silverware on expensive china. He supposed the nice suit should have been a dead giveaway that he wouldn't be going to McDonald's.

He had a foolish thought that the maître d' would be able to look at him and see past the clean nails and the clothing he had paid too much for, and

somehow know how Daniel had paid for the truck stop shower that morning and the bus fare to his interview and know that he didn't belong. But instead they were walked to a dark little corner that, if nothing else, gave the illusion of privacy.

Still, Daniel felt an overwhelming sense of panic at being there.

"I can't eat here." Daniel reached out, stopping Max with a hand. "I—" He didn't know how to finish the sentence.

Max studied him a moment, a slow sweep of blue eyes that Daniel thought were unbelievably beautiful, before nodding, and then told the maître d' that they'd had a change of heart. A moment later they were back out on the sidewalk, Daniel horribly embarrassed, but the other man said nothing about it at all.

"What sounds good?" Max looked up the sidewalk with its string of restaurants and cafes, and Daniel tried not to feel self-conscious.

"Have you ever had a taco from the truck that parks outside the movie theater?" Daniel asked. The other man thought for a moment before starting to head in that direction.

They ordered steak tacos on soft tortillas with salsa, and cans of soda, and headed the few blocks back to the riverside park and one of the benches that faced the water.

It was the kind of moment that Daniel always thought would make for a lovely date, or at least his kind of date. He doubted anyone else would see it the same way. Not that it mattered. It wasn't exactly a date, pretty far from it. Still, he couldn't help but pretend a little. It was nice to think the evening had the possibility of ending up with him somewhere more pleasant than a police station, especially as the man next to him ticked every box Daniel had. He even ticked a few he hadn't realized existed.

Daniel looked over to find himself being studied again, weighed, measured, and evaluated.

"Thank you for dinner," Daniel said, trying to hide his discomfort at being watched.

"Of course." The other man smiled. "So what's going on with you? Drugs?"

Well, that was direct.

Daniel played with his white foam container, opening it and closing it. He knew he should say something, explain the stupid domino effect that brought

him to the park with no money and all of his material possessions either on his back or shoved into a canvas bag. Still, he found what he really wanted desperately was for the man next to him to know something beyond the ugly bits he obviously already guessed at. He wanted Max to see him as something more than a rent boy with a taste for cheap booze. So he said the first thing that came to his mind.

“I’ve never had a cavity, not one.” Daniel opened his mouth wide, tilting his head up to the light. “Not many people can say that.” Or at least he didn’t think they could.

Daniel thought Max nearly smiled at that, a subtle quirk of his lips that Daniel could feel in the pit of his stomach. He thought it was a shame that they hadn’t met under better circumstances. He had been drinking, but not so much that he didn’t know he probably looked a fright. No one ever looked good after crying.

“Have you had any?”

“Yep.” Max opened to point out the back teeth on his lower right side. “They’re capped in porcelain so you can’t tell, but I’ve had two.”

“Well, just goes to show you,” Daniel said, not having a fucking clue what it showed anyone.

“I guess it does.” Max smiled at him, the first genuine smile Daniel had seen on the man, and he had a hell of a time not grinning like a loon. “But we should probably come back to that a little later.”

Daniel nodded, the smile dropping from his face.

“To tell you the truth,” Max began again. “My first reaction was to call the police, but I guess you caught me on a good day. So indulge me.”

“It’s not drugs.” Daniel sighed. “Not really. Well, maybe partly.”

Max raised an eyebrow, but didn’t comment.

“I lost my job on Monday,” Daniel said, playing with the container again. “And the room I rented.”

“Both on Monday?” Max asked to clarify, and Daniel nodded. “Did they kick you out because you might not be able to pay rent? Seems a little premature.”

“Actually, Mrs. Porter doesn’t even know about the job,” Daniel told him. “She’s angry because my ex tore my room apart looking for something while her grandson was in the house.”

“Is this where the *maybe partly* part comes in? Was she looking for drugs?”

Daniel had a hard time looking at him. He knew how it made him look, and he already looked bad enough in front of this man.

“You need to look at me, Daniel.” Max’s voice wasn’t unkind but it brooked no argument, and Daniel looked over to meet his eyes. “I’d like to help if I can, but I need to see that you’re telling me the truth.”

Daniel nodded.

“He,” Daniel emphasized the word, wanting there to be no mistake. “He was looking for some pills he had left there, but he also found where I kept my cash. There’s nothing left.”

“So, how have you been eating?” The answer seemed to click into place almost before Max asked the question, the man nodding and looking away to take a bite of his taco, and giving Daniel a chance to regroup. “God, these really are good. I wasn’t sure what to expect.”

Daniel smiled. *Small victories.*

“So, no family? Someone else?”

“No, there’s no one.” Daniel didn’t want to have *that* conversation. He had already lost his appetite, though he forced himself to start eating.

“There is a shelter on Parsons, I think.”

Daniel shook his head. “That’s a youth shelter, and I’m twenty-two. I’m too old for them now.”

“There’s also a shelter on Grant. Do you have a car?”

Daniel shook his head no again.

“Listen,” Max said, opening his soda. “Let’s eat this, and I’ll give you some money and drive you to Grant.”

“Why would you do that?” Daniel could not fathom why a stranger would be so kind to him, but as much as he looked, he couldn’t seem to figure out his ulterior motive.

“Because I can.” Max took a sip. “And it’s not the worst decision I’ve made. I’m pretty sure it isn’t even the worst decision I’ve made today.”

Twenty-two. God, just looking at the kid made Max feel old.

They had been in the car for nearly ten minutes and Daniel had yet to look at him, instead staring silently out the window, watching the world as it passed. Max had chosen to take a long, winding route, to give himself time to think of what to do. He knew that Daniel wouldn't go to the shelter—felt it in his bones—whether it was because the shelter wouldn't allow alcohol inside or for some other reason altogether, he wasn't sure. But he would drop the kid off, and as soon as he was down the road, the boy would be out the door and walking the other direction.

In a few weeks, the nights would start getting truly cold.

Max wondered exactly how crazy it was that he didn't really want to drop Daniel anywhere. There were, no doubt, a million reasons why he should, but they didn't seem to lessen his desire to take him to his quiet little house, in his respectable little neighborhood, and give him another chance.

His first reaction had been to call the police, he hadn't made that up, but Daniel's quiet plea at the end had broken him down and made him think of someone else completely. He hoped if Matthew had ever been out there in a dire situation that there had been someone kind enough to help, not just someone to take advantage.

Daniel abruptly turned in his seat to look at Max. He seemed geared up to say something but closed his mouth again and turned away.

"So, Grant then?" Max's voice sounded too loud after the nearly silent drive, and he repeated the question, quieter this time.

"If it would be better, you can drop me right here," Daniel eventually ventured. "It's not much of a walk at this point. Much better than it was, and I've already monopolized so much of your night."

"It is no trouble at all," Max assured him. "But, you don't have anywhere else you would rather I take you? You don't have family you could turn to?"

"No," Daniel laughed a little at that, like some kind of private joke Max wasn't privy to.

Fuck.

When they arrived, they were able to grab a spot along the curb, only a few yards from the door where a number of men stood about smoking. "Here you go."

"Thank you, Max." Daniel gave him a smile before opening the door and climbing out.

Max got out too, helping to retrieve Daniel's bag from the trunk and handing it over, but when he went to grab his wallet, Daniel held up a hand.

"No, please don't." He smiled again, this one even brighter than the last, and Max was struck by just how lovely-looking he really was. "It's probably not safe to have anyone see you give me money. Besides, you've done too much already."

"I've barely done anything."

"You made me feel normal for a few minutes."

Daniel spun around and started heading for the crowd, stealing glances to see if Max had left, but he stayed, watching to see if Daniel actually even went inside.

Max thought it was places just like this that needed attention and funding. Food and shelter for the short-term. Rehab, educational programs, and housing services for the long-term. He never understood how his father had let these opportunities pass by unnoticed. But his father had always lived in his own little world, and Max was sure that it wasn't due to a lack of compassion so much as a lack of awareness. It was as if his father's money had blinded him to how nearly everyone else lived: pay check to pay check, shoe string budgets, a tragedy or two away from the street.

That's a youth shelter and I'm twenty-two.

Daniel's words from the park finally clicked into place.

I'm too old for them now.

Max wondered exactly what Daniel's life had been like before their paths had crossed. Before the ever-generous Maximilian Litt had bought him a six-dollar dinner and tossed him right back into it.

Fuck this.

"Daniel," Max called out, motioning him back when the man turned at the sound of his name.

Daniel hesitated, studying Max for a moment before finally heading back to where he stood waiting.

"Get in the car." Max practically growled the words. Then, he stopped to take a deep breath. "Please."

Daniel did, brows knitting, and turned to Max once he slipped into the driver's side.

“Buckle up, Daniel.”

Daniel’s face softened, and he smiled. “I’m going to be fine, Max. I know how to take care of myself in a place like this, and it’s not so scary now that I’m here.” That just made Max more determined than ever to do everything in his power to keep Daniel out of there.

Luckily, money was all the power Max needed.

He pulled away from the curb, telling Daniel to buckle up again. This time Daniel did, not taking his eyes off of him.

“What now?”

“Now, you stay with me until we can get you situated.” Max glanced over to see Daniel grinning at him. “What?”

“You’re used to people doing exactly what you say, aren’t you?”

“Is that a complaint?” Max asked. “I’m offering to let you sleep in a guest room and have someone make breakfast for you.”

“Do you cook?” Daniel sounded excited at that.

“God, no. That’s what Archer’s for.”

Chapter Three

Daniel woke up and lay unmoving for a long time as the night before came back to him in a slow trickle. It was probably better that way. The humiliation of the evening would have been too much if it had returned in a blinding flash. Rubbing at the tightness in his chest, he forced himself to sit up.

The quiet was a lovely contrast to his normal mornings of waking to the noise of freeway traffic outside Mrs. Porter's house or the blare of the television on Saturdays when Daniel didn't work. Still, looking around at the bed with its intricately carved posters and pristine white bedding, he felt utterly out of place, and painfully lonely.

He spied his bag near a red upholstered chair that sat in the far corner, a basket of toiletries on its ottoman. He'd been too tired and wrung out to do more than listen with half an ear as Max had shown him to this room, pointing out the private bath and telling him to sleep well, but he remembered Max saying that the basket had been left for him, which in a silly way, he found kind of exciting.

Max.

Just the thought of seeing him again today set off a combination of dread and desire that had Daniel rubbing viciously at his chest again. The desire won out, and Daniel hopped from the bed to pad over and rummage through the basket's assortment of toiletries. A towel and lavender soap in hand, he headed to the bathroom. Even if the whole of their morning together were Max giving him a bowl of cereal and pushing him out the front door, Daniel thought that getting to look at the man a little while longer would make it one of the better mornings in his recent memory.

He knew that wouldn't be all, though. Max had said he wanted to help sort Daniel out, and he had a feeling he could trust him to do just that. There was something about the other man that made Daniel feel safe, a rare feeling and, to be honest, not one he was completely comfortable with. He was a firm believer that the fastest way to get your heart broken was to place your trust in another person.

Once he was cleaned up and had slipped into his least dirty work outfit, a pair of dark black jeans and a fitted long-sleeved tee, Daniel ventured out in search of his host. The hazy light of morning was only just starting to bleed

through the curtains, and Daniel worried that he might find the household still sleeping, and Max still locked away in his room somewhere on this floor, or perhaps the one below. When he opened his door, instead he found two large dogs sitting expectantly outside his bedroom, as if they had been waiting for him, and a handful of people quietly going about their work.

Daniel had not been around dogs much as an adult, but he had fond memories of a wiry-haired mutt of some kind his grandmother had adored, so he didn't mind it when he started down the hall and the two animals followed close on his heels.

A tall man carrying a step stool and a plastic tote passed by and gave Daniel a quick nod, and on the staircase he found a woman, not much older than himself, dusting the banister and spindles. She wore the same dark pants and pale green smock that he had seen on the man in the hall. She looked up to give him a smile as he passed.

Before he hit the landing, he turned back to her. "Do you know if Max is awake?"

"Mr. Litt left about an hour ago."

Daniel's heart sank. He had somehow thought the two of them would have breakfast together. Honestly, as he had gotten ready, he had fantasized about making the man breakfast himself, though it was obvious now that there was not going to be an intimate moment over scrambled eggs.

He was tempted to linger with the girl, watch as she worked, and maybe even offer to help. It was the least he could do to help repay the kindness of a bed for the night, but sensing her discomfort with his hovering, he instead thanked her and, turning, went in search of the kitchen.

As tired as Daniel had been, he had still lain in bed for much of the night thinking about the man who had been willing to feed him and then was too kind to drop him at a shelter door. Daniel could not have been more grateful. There had been something devastating about it, the thought of another night in a place like that, where you had to keep your things close or risk having them rummaged through when your back was turned.

And he had been scared, maybe not so much of the shelter itself, though that had scared him too, but scared that it would break him like it had nearly done when he was sixteen, before he had met the twins and Rachel, and Richie.

Daniel had been on the street for nearly three months when he stumbled across the others. The shelter was in a bad part of town but painted in bright

colors, and with windows that were brightly lit. On the evening he arrived, he saw Richie standing outside, a cigarette between his lips, rolling his eyes at an adult telling him to put the thing out. Richie was the biggest boy there, tall and broad, and so much more like a man at seventeen than Daniel was at sixteen. Daniel had been head-over-heels from the moment their eyes met, and the older boy had given him that heated look.

Richie was his first kiss, his one and only lover, and the only person in his life who, for a little while anyway, made Daniel feel as if he might have been worth something after all.

Thinking of Richie made Daniel sad, not because he was still in love with the man, but because he had so easily fallen back into that relationship again. Even knowing that Richie would expect him to hide what they were to one another—hide his feelings, and that he would always take a backseat to the drugs and the clubs and the next random hookup—Daniel had let Richie kiss him, and the loneliness faded for those magical moments.

When Daniel entered the kitchen, an older man looked up from where he was working at a large island.

“Get those beasts out of here.”

Daniel looked down, surprised to find that he had forgotten about the animals at his feet. “Oh, sorry,” he mumbled, and worked to push the pair back out into the hall.

“Not your fault, kid. Mr. Litt gives those two the run of this place, but I won’t have them in my kitchen.” The man waved Daniel over to the island. “You’re Mr. Kohl, right?”

“Yes, but please call me Daniel. Are you Archer?” Daniel wasn’t sure if he was remembering correctly from the night before, and wasn’t sure if Archer was a first or a last name.

“That I am.” The man gave Daniel a crooked smile, and he couldn’t help but smile back. “If you aren’t allergic, I was planning to make crêpes with caramel sauce and toasted pecans. It’s our girl Megan’s birthday. She loves the damn things and the staff normally has whatever Mr. Litt is having.”

“God,” Daniel said, “that sounds wonderful. Can I help?” Archer gave him an odd look, as if he weren’t sure if it was a good idea to say yes. “Please. Max isn’t here, and I would enjoy having something to do, and the company.”

Archer finally nodded, sending him to wash his hands. He then started naming off ingredients and where to find them, letting Daniel take over collecting them as he pulled out a saucepan, a skillet, and two large baking dishes.

They worked hip to hip at the stove, Archer browning the crêpes and giving Daniel instructions on making the sauce. Once everything was complete, they worked together to fill the pastries and ready them for the oven.

“I always liked helping in the kitchen,” Daniel told Archer as the man spooned out the sauce and Daniel sprinkled the pecans. “I used to help my mother when I was really small, but when I got older my father didn’t like it.”

“Why?” Archer’s brow creased in either concentration or confusion, Daniel wasn’t sure.

“I don’t really know.” Daniel shook his head. “It was one of my chores, you know, to help, and I think when he realized that I enjoyed it he thought he needed to take it away. He was all about toughening you up, my dad. I was never gonna be tough enough for him, I don’t think.”

“Doesn’t sound like much of an old man,” Archer said, looking up and frowning. Daniel just shrugged.

Reminders of home came less and less often these days, but when they did they almost inevitably brought an unshakeable melancholy with them. So Daniel pushed the thoughts as deep down as he could and returned his focus to what he was doing, and to asking Archer questions about himself, his family, where he learned to cook, and when he had decided it was what he wanted to do. Archer became less gruff as they worked, appearing to warm to having company in the kitchen, or at least the help.

They were sitting at the island together, a first batch in the oven, laughing over one of Archer’s dinner disaster stories, when the sound of footsteps and muffled voices grabbed Daniel’s attention.

He fidgeted nervously, his heart starting to race. Archer gave him an oddly sympathetic smile, and Daniel wondered if he was really so transparent or if Archer was just unusually perceptive. He hoped it was the latter, but he was pretty sure it wasn’t.

“I know,” Daniel spoke quietly to the other man, laughing at himself. “He’s just so handsome, you know? And nice.” Archer raised his eyebrow. “Well, bossy but nice. And queer, right? I’m pretty sure I’m right.”

Archer didn't look as if he were going to answer at first but then just rolled his eyes. "You're sure as hell not wrong."

Max mopped at his hair with a towel as he pushed his way past Zira and Cornelius and into the kitchen. He was a little surprised to find Daniel up and seated with Archer at the island, not that Archer was particularly territorial around the kitchen, just that he was a bit of a grumpy bastard and seemed to prefer to keep to his own company.

Daniel hopped to his feet, giving Max a wide grin that began to fade almost as quickly as it had bloomed. Following Daniel's line of sight, Max found Thomas right behind him, the two of them having just returned from their daily jog. Daniel's disappointed look had warning bells going off in Max's head. As cute as the kid was, the situation meant a romantic relationship couldn't be further off the table. Still, Daniel's obvious effort to mask his disappointment nearly had Max telling him it was okay, that Thomas was just a friend. That impulse scared Max almost as much as Daniel's obvious interest, so he said nothing at all, choosing to keep the misconception alive and well.

"Morning, gentlemen." Max nodded his head at Archer and gave Daniel a friendly smile. "You're up earlier than I expected. Let me grab a quick shower, and we can sit down for breakfast and a chat. I'm assuming you haven't eaten."

"No, of course not," Daniel said, still with that diminished smile. "I was waiting for you." He continued to steal glances at Thomas until he finally stepped around Max and extended his hand. "Hello, I'm Daniel. Are you Max's partner?"

Fabulous.

"He wishes." Thomas laughed, louder than necessary in Max's opinion, and grabbed Daniel's hand for a quick shake. "But it would break my heart to disappoint all the ladies." Thomas's grin was pure cockiness, and Max held in a groan.

"Daniel, this is Thomas. He's my driver. Thomas, this is the man I was just telling you about."

"Nice to meet you, kid," Thomas said, giving Max an unreadable look. "I'm heading up for my own shower, boss. Give me a whistle when you need the car."

Once Thomas had gone, Daniel was all smiles again. "I like him."

Of course he did.

“I’ll be ready in...” Max glanced at the clock and then at Archer. “Is thirty minutes okay?”

Archer nodded, and Max could have sworn the man was trying to fight a grin. Escaping a moment later, he headed to his room, taking the steps two at a time. He was just closing his door when Thomas pushed his way inside.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” the man said, shutting the door himself.

Max moved to drop onto the end of his bed and rubbed at his face. “I told you about it.”

“No.” Thomas glared at him from where he stood against the door, as if he were barring anyone else from entering. “You told me about *him*. You didn’t tell me you were letting this complete stranger sleep in your house. Does he know who you are? That this—” Thomas gestured to the house around them. “You think this mansion is quaint? That this is you roughing it? Is that why we didn’t take the dogs running this morning?”

“It’s my decision.” Max glared right back.

“It’s dangerous.”

“Are you telling me this as my *employee*?” Max emphasized the word, not in the mood to have the decision he was already questioning, questioned.

“I’m telling you this as your friend, dumbass.” Thomas pushed himself away from the door and sat down next to him on the bed. “And as the man you pay to drive your car and take a bullet for you.”

Max snorted. “I’m pretty fucking sure that isn’t anywhere in your contract.”

“Well, that’s what I tell all the girls.” Thomas broke into a grin. “They think it’s very sexy.”

“And would you? Take a bullet for me?”

“Not on your life.” Thomas bumped him with his shoulder. “Please, just tell me it’s because you think he’s hot or something.”

“He’s too young.” Max thought if he said it enough he could probably convince himself. “And more importantly, the situation makes it completely inappropriate.”

“He’s a grown man.” Thomas smirked. “And he looked like I kicked his puppy.”

“You really want to know why?” Max frowned as he picked his words. “Because I watched all those men at that shelter, all those nameless people with stories that I didn’t know a damn thing about, and I couldn’t let him go. I was the one person who could make a difference. How could I not?”

“So it’s about your brother.” Thomas confirmed.

“Isn’t it always?”

They sat there quietly together for a few moments before Thomas spoke again.

“And he’s hot.”

Max rubbed his hands through his hair and let out a tired sigh. “It didn’t hurt.”

When Max finally returned downstairs, nearly twenty minutes later than planned, he discovered Daniel wandering around the sitting room that lay just across the hall from the dining room, examining the framed photographs that covered the mantel and the various tables that occupied the space.

“Is this you?” Daniel asked when he looked up to find Max watching him. “What are you wearing?”

There was a definite laugh in his voice, and Max couldn’t help but laugh too. “That would be summer camp when I was sixteen. And that would be the camp uniform.”

Daniel grinned. “All of a sudden I don’t regret missing out on camp. Thanks for that.”

Max continued to wait as the man wandered the room, ghosting long fingers over frames, staring at some for seconds, lingering over others far longer.

“Who is this boy? I’ve seen several of him with you. I bet he grew up to be very good-looking.” Max didn’t even have to look to know whom he was talking about.

“My brother Matthew.”

“Really? He looks like your negative,” Daniel said, looking up.

“Well, my stepbrother actually.”

“Oh. I don’t have any brothers or sisters, at least that I know of.”

“Why don’t we sit down, Daniel. Let’s eat breakfast and have that chat I spoke about.”

They crossed to the dining room and sat at the table, Daniel folding his legs under him in a way Max thought looked less than comfortable, and a moment later their food was delivered by Archer with an uncharacteristic smile for their house guest.

Max figured it was good to know that Daniel had that effect on more people than just himself.

“So, is Megan the girl I saw on the steps who was cleaning the woodwork? Um, long brown hair, little nose?” Daniel asked, and Max nodded.

“Archer said this was her favorite. I see why,” Daniel said after his first bite.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, Max aware of Daniel stealing occasional glances at him and quickly looking away. When Max finally decided they should talk about the night before, he looked up to find Daniel practically vibrating with tension and decided to let the conversation wait until after breakfast.

“Would you be interested in walking the dogs with me after this?” Max asked.

“Do you walk that kind of dog? I figured you just ran from them.” Daniel looked over to where the huge things were lounging outside the dining room. “They’re sure cute though.”

“German Shepherds are actually very affectionate, loyal creatures,” Max told him. “Would you like to? There’s a park just up the street.”

“Sure.” Daniel gave him a wide smile. “I’ve always loved parks.”

After breakfast, Daniel headed to the room he had slept in to grab his hoodie. He would need to buy something heavier eventually or see if he could retrieve the coat he had forgotten at Mrs. Porter’s in his rush to leave. But for now, the late September weather was still mild enough that it didn’t matter.

When he returned downstairs, he found that Max had grabbed his own jacket and was leashing up both dogs and talking a bit of nonsense to them that

made Daniel's heart melt a little. When Max looked up, their eyes met, and Daniel's pulse gave a little race.

"I'll give you Zira," Max told him, handing over the leash. "She is a little smaller and a good deal gentler. I'll take the big guy here. They're both well leash trained, so no worries."

"Can they do tricks?" Daniel asked as he stepped out onto the porch.

"No, not really." Max grinned over as they descended the steps. "We're still working on the 'don't climb in my bed' trick, and it's been four years."

They walked for a few minutes—Daniel enjoying the tree-diffused sunlight and the smell of fall in the air. "It's beautiful here," he said, finally breaking the silence. "The dogs must like having a park so close."

Max shrugged. "Where I lived before, I had a place farther out from the city, and there was more room for these two to run. I thought this was somewhat of a compromise."

"Where were you before?" Daniel had always lived in Columbus and wondered what it would be like to move to a new city, just start over somewhere fresh where no one knew you. He thought it sounded freeing.

"Austin." Max tugged a little on the leash to slow Cornelius down, and both animals slowed their pace, their tails wagging as they anticipated crossing the street.

"Why'd you move here? I would think Austin would be more exciting." Max looked over, and Daniel bit his lip, giving him an apologetic look. "I'm sorry. I'm being nosy."

Max just shook his head. "No, it's okay. This is where I was born. I should have come back a long time ago."

Daniel didn't ask anything more, aware of how Max had skirted around any real answer. It was obvious the man didn't want to share, and he didn't want to push.

They had made it to the far side of the park and, following Max's lead, cut through the grass to sit on one of the benches that lined its edge. The dogs planted themselves at their feet, antsy in hope or anticipation of being unleashed. Daniel watched Max stroke the head of the other dog, lost in thought, and bent for a tentative touch to Zira's. When she didn't object, he tried scratching behind her ears.

“So, where were you fired from?”

Daniel tensed at Max’s question and then let his shoulders relax. In some way it just seemed like an extension of their conversation. Just two men getting to know each other, and that made it easier. “The Keith Reale Salon, doing hair.”

Max looked over at that.

“Are you any good?”

The question had Daniel looking indignant.

“Of course I am, not that it matters. I don’t think anyone will hire me now.” Daniel sighed. “I had an interview yesterday, but they seemed to know more about the noncompete I signed than I did. I’ll have to start trying those walk-in, eight dollar an hour places, but that would be about it.”

“So, what happened?”

“Came in drunk.” Daniel looked down, ashamed, and focused on stroking the dog. “I was upset, or I would never had come in with that much alcohol in my system, you know.” Daniel doubted Max did know.

“And drinking,” Max asked gently, “that’s a problem for you?”

“A bit, yeah.” Daniel felt an overwhelming sense of grief and pushed it down. “I’ve tried to stop, more than once even, but I always fuck that up like I’ve fucked up everything else.”

As an afterthought, Daniel looked up to see if any kids were around, and sighed with relief. “Sorry.”

Max just waved it off.

“What’s your drug use like?” Daniel tried not to show his irritation at the question but failed. “I’m just trying to get a picture of what you’re up against, Daniel. I said I wanted to help. This is me trying to help.”

When Daniel didn’t say anything, Max spoke again.

“It’s always best to be up-front. Nothing good can come of lying to me, and nothing good ever comes from lying to yourself. So,” Max continued, going back to his question, “what’s your drug use like?”

“I don’t use anything.” Daniel thought Max looked skeptical. “Honest. In fact, I haven’t used anything in years, not since I was nineteen, and even back then it was just whatever my friend Richie would dig up for us.”

“And is this friend still in the picture?”

“He was, but only briefly.” Daniel met Max’s eyes hoping that he could see the truth in his words. “But that was a mistake.”

They sat a few minutes, as Max seemed to process the conversation, just watching the early morning joggers and a few bicyclists making their way around, and occasionally through, the park.

“Okay,” he finally said. “How often do you drink?”

“Every day,” Daniel answered, and Max nodded.

“Have you had a drink today?” Max studied him with that intense gaze again, as if he were looking at Daniel but could maybe see right into him.

“Yes.”

“It’s not yet ten in the morning,” Max said, not unkindly. “And you’ve already had a drink?”

“Of course. I’m awake.”

Chapter Four

Max sat on the floor of the library, piles of books surrounding him.

Every other room in the house had been decorated by designers and organized by staff months before Max had even officially moved back from Texas, but he hadn't allowed anyone free rein over this room or anyone to touch his books. He had insisted the walls be painted in a dark olive green that warmed up the dark woodwork of the built-in shelving and the expanse of wood flooring even more. He had made the arrangements to have the stained glass windows restored and had chosen a painting—one that had belonged to a long-dead uncle rumored to have been *peculiar*—to hang over the fireplace. Other than that, the room remained a cluttered mess of boxes, couches, and upholstered chairs.

Every Sunday, in the early hours of the morning, Max would steal what little time he could for himself, and sitting on the floor with his laptop open, he'd scan ISBN numbers or manually enter volumes into library software, as he mapped out how he planned to organize his shelves. He was rarely able to spend much more than ten or twenty minutes working before other things pulled him away, so even all this time later, it was hard for anyone else to see the progress.

Still, it always helped him clear his head, and he thought he might prefer this room, with its clutter and its smell of old books, to any other room in the house.

He heard a throat clear and looked up from the book he was examining to find Daniel standing, ruffled from sleep, just outside the door.

“Can I come in?”

“Of course,” Max said, setting the book aside and moving to free up space on one of the chairs.

“No, please don't bother,” Daniel told him, walking over to drop down on the floor. “What are you working on?”

“I'm cataloging my books and organizing them.” Max looked around at the nearly empty shelves. “It's taking me a while.”

“Is that what's in all these boxes? Books?” The look of complete disbelief almost had Max laughing, but he managed to rein it in.

“Not much of a reader?” he guessed.

“No. No, I love to read.” Daniel looked embarrassed. “But I just have a library card. And I read horror mostly, no biographies, or stuff like you have there.”

“Horror? Like monsters?” Max smiled at the idea. It seemed such an odd contrast to the gentleness he saw in Daniel.

“Yeah, that, but I really love stories about serial killers and psychopaths and stuff. I like when the nice guy who picked up the wrong hitchhiker or the deaf lady that kissed the wrong man, just ordinary people, are forced to fight to save themselves. But I only like books where they do. You know, save themselves?”

“Remind me to never let you pick the movie.”

Daniel grinned. “Could I help somehow? Unpack boxes or something?”

Max directed him to the next group of boxes he had planned to tackle. Daniel slit open their tape with a letter opener Max pointed out on the mantel. He pulled each book out one at a time, reading the title to himself and sometimes out loud when he found them amusing. He perused dust jacket descriptions and flipped through pages before placing them neatly in stacks within Max’s reach.

The contents of each of the boxes were without rhyme or reason, a jumbled mess of subjects and authors, thrown together in a hurry by movers, to be dragged off and stored away untouched for nearly eight years.

“You have a lot of books on architecture,” Daniel commented, pulling out yet another book on the subject, this one about Frank Lloyd Wright. “Are you an architect?”

“No.” Max shook his head. “Labor lawyer, or was. But if I could do things all over again...”

Daniel seemed to think about that for a few minutes. “I think if I could do things over again, I guess I’d want to be a teacher.”

Max thought the kid was still so young that changing his career hardly required a do-over. “Have you thought about that? Changing careers?”

Daniel brought the book over, but instead of placing it on a stack he dropped to the floor across from Max and started flipping through its pages. Max didn’t think he was going to answer. When he did, he kept his eyes glued to the book.

“No. I didn’t even actually graduate. When I was nearly twenty, I got my GED with help from that youth shelter on Parsons you mentioned. Worked day labor and at a fast-food drive-through, tucking money away so that I could afford to learn hair. Paid every dime myself.” Daniel’s eyes flicked up from the pages to catch Max’s and looked back down. “It’s not an important kind of job, but I’m good at it, and I like it.”

“Liking what you do is a big plus. But why a teacher, if you did change?”

Daniel looked up and smiled at the question. “Because the teachers, the ones who helped get us ready to test for our GEDs? They taught us all the stuff we needed to know to pass, the math and the science and social studies. But it was also like they taught us that we had the power to make our lives what we wanted. We could pick our happily ever after and make it happen. It wouldn’t be easy, and some days it might feel impossible, but we had all been strong enough to run when we needed to, and we didn’t need to settle for almost when we could have everything. I think teaching that to kids, ones who you might not even know need to hear it, that seems like something important to me.”

Max thought that sounded important too.

“If I could help—” Max started, but Daniel shook his head. “Then what are your plans?”

“I plan to stop drinking. Again,” Daniel said, placing the book on one of the piles and pushing himself up to open another box. “Then I plan to get a job at a walk-in hair butcher, get myself out of your hair, and wait until the time limit on my noncompete contract expires. One year before I can work at a competing salon, before I can work somewhere I might have a future, but a year I’m worth fighting through.”

Max didn’t think he wanted Daniel out of his hair, not yet anyway, but he understood wanting to make one’s own way.

“Okay, but you need to let me do two things for you,” Max said.

Daniel took a moment before saying anything. “What are they?”

“I want to send you to rehab. You have to let me do that.”

Daniel thought about that before nodding. “But I get to pay you back. It may take me forever, but I get to at least try.”

Max agreed, nodding his head.

“And what is the other thing?” Daniel asked.

“I’ll let you know.”

“Timothy, please get Keith Reale on the phone for me. He’ll be in my personal contacts.” Max walked quickly through the outer office and into his own. His last meeting had run longer than expected, and now he had exactly twenty minutes, and a handful of things he wanted to accomplish before the magazine interview he hadn’t felt ready to accept.

“Absolutely,” Timothy said, picking up the phone. “I’ve emailed you the list of shelters you requested this morning and included their most recently released operating expense reports and contact names. Also, Mr. Ying called to ask if it would be possible to push back your interview half an hour, which I assume you’re okay with, since your one o’clock ran late.”

“Fantastic. Tell him that’s fine.”

Once Max hit his office, he started unbuttoning his shirt. Grabbing another from the closet, still in the cleaner’s plastic, he stepped into his bathroom and hung it on a hook by the door. He had been on the move all day and wanted to look a little less disheveled for the photographer who would no doubt be there for the interview. There was always a photographer.

If the rest of the day went as planned, he would be home before five. He wanted to be home before five. He tried not to think too much about why.

He splashed his face with water and had just started patting himself dry when he heard Timothy.

“I have Mr. Reale on line one for you, sir.” Timothy’s voice echoed over the intercom.

“Thank you,” Max called out, slipping on the fresh shirt and heading to grab his phone.

“Keith”—Max dropped into the chair behind his desk—“you know how you owe me a favor?”

Keith laughed, and Max grinned.

“I haven’t owed you a favor in a hell of a lot of years, Maximilian.” Max could almost hear Keith smiling. “But if you let me shave off that sad thing you’re trying to pass as a beard, not only will you look ten years younger, but I

might consider letting you take me to dinner. But only somewhere fancy. I wouldn't bother for anything that wasn't top shelf."

Max threw his head back and laughed. "You are such an ass."

"Takes one."

Max peeked at his watch. "Listen, I really do have a favor to ask of you."

"All right." Keith sounded curious. "I'll do it if I can."

"It's about a kid you fired, a Daniel Kohl." Just saying the man's name brought a smile to his face, which Max only found a little disconcerting. "Do you know who I'm talking about?"

"Not off the top of my head. Hold on." Max listened as Keith banged on his keyboard for a moment before he came back on. "I see him here. He was part of the new crop. He hadn't even gotten a chair yet, but it looks as if we had him scheduled for one we had opening up. But he was dismissed for—" There was another pause while Keith started typing again.

"I know why, Keith. The kid came in drunk."

"That would do it. What about him?"

"I need you to give him his job back." There was complete silence while Max waited for Keith to say no. He would say no, and then Max would talk him into it. It had been the same since they were young.

"I can't Max. What kind of precedent would that set?"

"He has a drinking problem, Keith. Didn't you tell me your place will pay for rehab for your employees?"

"Yes, if they come to us, not if they show up at work drunk and get their ass fired first." Keith sounded confused. "What does this guy have to do with you?"

Max thought about how to answer the question. If he told Keith that Daniel was practically a stranger, living in his house, who was such an odd combination of sweet and fucked up that he had spent most of the last few days thinking about him, Keith would certainly dismiss his request as temporary insanity.

"He's a kid going through a rough patch."

"Okay," Keith said, dragging out the word. "But that doesn't answer my question."

No it didn't.

"Listen, I've only got a couple more minutes here." Max decided just to cut to the chase. "He's a friend, and he's wanting to turn his life around. He's had it tough, and in a way neither one of us can relate to. And you of all people know the kind of determination it takes to survive that particular brand of boot camp hell you like to call your hair academy. Give him another chance. He's checking into rehab in three weeks, and I would love to be able to tell him he'll have something waiting for him when it's all said and done."

Keith was quiet on the other end of the line for several moments before he finally answered.

"All right, if it means that much to you." Max could almost hear the other man thinking. "I'm sure the rumor mill is working overtime, but we haven't made any sort of formal announcement yet. We'll say he is on leave for personal reasons and is expected back... When?"

"Nine weeks," Max answered.

"Nine weeks." Keith let out a sigh. "Okay, but I get to shave that beard."

Max laughed. "No, I'll let Daniel shave the beard in the chair you're going to hold for him until he's sober."

"Oh my God, you really do owe me for this one, Litt."

"I love you too, Keith." Max held back another laugh. "Tell Olivia her man's a peach."

"The word you're looking for is *pushover*, and she's well aware."

Max hopped up to finish buttoning his shirt and couldn't stop smiling. He wanted nothing more than to skip out on the rest of the day to head home and give Daniel the good news. He grabbed a black tie, flipping up his collar to tie it, and straightened the knot before slipping into a blue vest. He wanted to lose the suit jacket for the interview, wanted something more casual than the suits he had become accustomed to in the courtroom.

His father had worked hard to cultivate an image as some sort of explorer/adventurer/conservationist, with his white linen shirts and khaki cargo pants. A look like that would never work for Max, so he was happy to settle for looking a little less like a lawyer.

He turned to find Timothy in the doorway watching him.

“Yes?” Max finished buttoning his vest and walked back to his desk.

“Were you going to need me to pick us something up for dinner? I assume we’re working late again this evening?” It was a valid question. Max and Timothy had been working late more evenings than not over the past three weeks, and there was still a lot left to do, both in getting Max up to speed on the pies his father had the foundation’s fingers in, as well as reevaluating those projects for future funding.

“We won’t be working late this evening, but thank you. I am taking off right after the interview with Mr. Ying. In fact, you should feel free to take off anytime. You’ve been putting in a hell of a lot of hours. I’m sure there’s someplace else you would rather be.”

“Absolutely.” Timothy gave Max a relieved smile before backing out the door. “Right now I think just about any place else would do. You’re the only man I’ve seen in weeks.”

Max entered the house, and for the first time in a very long time was not greeted by the dogs at the door. Listening, he followed the sound of murmuring voices to the library where he found the pair sitting at Daniel’s feet as he spoke quietly to a redheaded man Max didn’t recognize.

“So, is it dirty?” Daniel asked, arms folded, studying Max’s uncle’s painting over the fireplace, and Max had to work hard not to laugh. The man next to Daniel made no such effort.

“No, it’s a nude,” the stranger said, on a snort. “Naked is dirty. Nude is art.”

“Shut up.” Daniel grinned over at him. “Honest to God, I don’t see the difference.”

“Well,” the other man said, taking a moment to think. “If you asked fifteen people, you’d have yourself fifteen different answers. But I would say that a nude focuses on the anatomy and removes the personal. Does that make sense?”

Daniel shook his head.

“Okay,” the stranger began again. “Both of us have the same anatomy, two arms, two legs. We each have a face with two eyes, a nose and a mouth.” Daniel nodded. “But I have freckles and a scar.” The redhead pushed his bangs away from his forehead and pointed to the brow above his right eye. “You

remove the little characteristics, those flaws that make me *me*, and the focus is no longer specific. I go from being a person to a thing. I become a thing of beauty.”

The smaller man struck an odd little pose as if to display said *thing of beauty*, nearly jumping out of his skin and laughing at himself when he caught Max watching them from the doorway.

“Who do we have here, Daniel?” Max asked, approaching the two men, both of whom acted almost guilty.

“This is Vincent with...” Daniel said, and then looked at the redhead. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch the company name.”

“Avery Renovation,” the man said, holding out a hand for Max to shake. “And you’re Mr. Litt. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Max accepted his hand. “Was I expecting you?” He really had no idea.

“Not me. I was with Nathaniel Avery when he received a call from your man Archer about a project. We were in the neighborhood so Archer asked us to stop by. I believe I heard something about a building out back. Mr. Kohl here has been kind enough to keep me company.”

The greenhouse. Max had nearly forgotten. He had been so preoccupied with telling Daniel about his conversation with Keith, it had slipped his mind.

“That’s right.” Max ran his hands over his hair trying to switch gears. “Why don’t I head outside to see how that’s going?”

“We’ll go too,” Daniel said, hopping up and down a little. “I’ve only seen it from the guest room window. I’d love to get a closer look.”

Max paid very little attention to the proceedings after the initial introductions, distracted as he was at having Daniel wandering the place, examining the long-dead plants and peering through the clouded window panes. There was an earthy quality to the smell that lingered in the structure, underlined with something faintly briny. Not unpleasant really, just different. It reminded him of the library and the small number of volumes he had inherited from his grandmother that had long ago started taking on the complicated layering of scents unique to old books.

He answered questions, elaborated on what Archer had already explained to the man taking notes and shooting pictures, but it wasn’t until Daniel had gone

back outside that he became more present in the conversation. Even then, he still caught himself watching Daniel throwing a ball to Cornelius in the grass between the house and the greenhouse.

After the contractor had everything he needed to pull a quote together, Max thanked the men but stayed behind when Archer walked them out and through the back gate, letting himself watch Daniel with the dogs and enjoying the quiet of the old place.

When Daniel looked up and smiled, Max smiled back, waving him over.

“You’re home early today,” Daniel said, stepping through the door. “Archer says you’re almost never home before seven.”

Daniel wore a pair of old jeans, a white T-shirt, and that old hoodie again, and Max suspected the man had run out of his work clothes. He made a mental note to check and make sure Daniel’s laundry was being taken care off.

“Well, I have some news to give you.”

Daniel looked up at him, nervous. “What sort of news?”

Max grinned, leaning back against one of the long potting tables. “I spoke to Keith Reale today.”

Daniel’s expression was priceless. “You know Keith Reale?”

“Yep, friends since we were both five, maybe? First kid to ever punch me in the nose and, in fact, he was my first kiss.”

Daniel’s eyes grew huge. “But he’s married to a woman and has kids and everything.”

“I never said he enjoyed it.” Maxed laughed. “We were both eleven, he owed me a favor, and there was something I needed to figure out.”

Daniel’s eyes dropped to Max’s lips, lingering there a moment before looking back up to his face.

“What—” Daniel cleared his throat. “What is it you wanted to tell me?”

“You are officially unfired.” Max could not stop the grin. “You can return in nine weeks, not only with your position but with the chair they had already planned to give to you. They’re going to hold it.”

Daniel stood stock-still for several seconds before throwing his arms around Max’s neck and hugging him tight. “Thank you, Max. Thank you so much.”

When Daniel pulled away, he wiped furiously at his eyes, but it did little good to stop the tears. “I don’t even know what to say.”

Max reached out to wipe a tear way from Daniel’s cheek, his fingers stilling for a moment at Daniel’s light touch on his wrist. “Just tell me I did the right thing. That *that* really is what you want.”

“It’s more than I ever dared dream.”

Chapter Five

Max came in late from work to find Daniel reading on the sofa in the sitting room. He had barely seen the man over the last week and a half. On the few occasions he had, Daniel had been heading to his room, or walking out with his nurse—a middle-aged woman called Pepper—for a jog, or to the gym, or any number of other techniques the private nurse had in her repertoire for weaning a man off one thing or another.

When Max had gone to make arrangements with a facility specializing in alcohol rehabilitation, he and Daniel had argued. Daniel said he preferred the idea of detoxing in Max's upstairs room with its subtle green walls and soft, white bedding, before heading to a facility somewhere. But Max thought the facility for the entire process, start to finish, was the safest way to go. In the end they compromised. Daniel would be allowed to detox in the house but only if he permitted Max to hire a nurse. Daniel had even wanted to argue about that, but eventually gave in.

After a complete physical and a barrage of tests, the nurse had suggested a quick taper; the consensus being that Daniel had been drinking far too long for it to be safe to stop cold. She assured them both that he was healthy enough otherwise for them to at least try the quick taper first, decreasing his intake by halves each day. She monitored his pulse and his blood pressure, and watched for any signs of withdrawal, but Daniel told Max that he hadn't experienced anything at all like the umpteen times he had tried to stop in the past.

When Daniel realized Max was in the doorway, he looked up from his book, smiling. "Hi."

"Hello. What are you up to?" Max dropped his jacket on a chair and loosened his tie.

"It's called reading. It's good for the soul. You should try it."

Smartass.

"Yeah, I got that part." Max sat down on the coffee table in front of him. "You just... well, I haven't seen you much."

"I know." Daniel laid the book aside, unfolding his legs out from under him. "I wanted to see you."

Max had wanted to see him too.

“And I wanted to give you the good news.” Daniel beamed one of those smiles that took him from attractive to breathtaking, and Max had the strongest desire to kiss him.

“What’s the good news?”

“Pepper says I’m ready. I haven’t had a drink in”—Daniel reached out to grab Max’s wrist, turning it so he could read his watch—“forty-seven hours, eleven minutes. Not a drop.”

“How do you feel?”

“Well, I won’t lie. Mentally, it’s killing me. I swear to God, in the last few days I have chewed more gum, run more miles, swum more laps, and eaten more complex carbohydrates than I have in the last twenty-two years combined.”

“Why complex carbohydrates?”

“Pepper says it helps with the cravings.” He shrugged. “Oh, and I’ve gained a little weight.” Daniel patted his bicep. “Give me a few months and I just might be packing some serious guns.”

Max thought Daniel was perfect before.

“Congratulations, Daniel. You should be so proud of yourself.”

“I owe it all to you, Max. You saved me. No one else would have. No one else cared enough to try.” Daniel leaned forward, grabbing one of Max’s hands with both of his. “Thank you.”

Daniel didn’t let go, and Max didn’t pull away. He knew he should, but instead he just looked at the man staring up at him through long lashes and making slow circles on the back of Max’s hand with his thumbs.

Eventually, Max managed to shake himself from the moment.

“I didn’t do much, Daniel. You did the hard work.” He slowly tugged his hand from the other man’s grasp.

“You did more than you know, Max.” Daniel smiled. “I feel like I’ve lived most of my life surrounded by ugliness, you know? And then you came along, this perfect thing, and showed me that there’s more than just the ugly stuff, there’s beautiful things out there too, if you look hard enough.”

“I’m not perfect, Daniel.”

“You just don’t see it.” Daniel smiled over at him, that lovely trusting smile, and Max frowned.

“Daniel, you know why I bought you dinner that night? Do you know why I decided to bring you here instead of dropping you off at that shelter?”

Daniel shook his head.

“Because I was trying to make up for something that there is no making up for.”

“What?” Daniel asked, brows knitting.

“You remember my brother... stepbrother? The one in the pictures?” Max asked and Daniel nodded. “He was maybe fifteen when my father married his mom. They weren’t married much more than a couple of years, so I can’t even tell you her name.”

Daniel nodded, watching Max intently.

“Well, my dad married this young thing, way too young for him, and the two of them ran off together, like my father always did, to some other part of the world and left him in that lonely mausoleum of a house. He had tutors and cooks and a number of staff that took care of him, but mainly it was just him for months on end. Then the both of us.

I moved back home after I graduated from law school. I was already regretting my career decision, and since I didn’t actually have to work, I didn’t.”

“Okay.” Daniel leaned back on the sofa. “What does this have to do with you helping me?”

Max rubbed at the back of his neck. He had never told a soul, outside of Thomas and Keith, the details of all that had happened, and he wasn’t really prepared to do that now.

“Long story short, things got weird between us, and I packed up my things, and I fled to Austin with my boyfriend. I left him alone to that terrible, lonely existence that I still remembered all too well from my own childhood. I remembered how isolating it could be, but I left him anyway.”

“What happened?”

“He fled too. He was only seventeen, maybe. He may have only been sixteen. But when I left him alone, he ran away, and by the time I found out, my father was divorced, and I had my own life.”

“It wasn’t really your fault, though,” Daniel said, a frown tugging at his mouth.

“If I had handled things differently maybe he wouldn’t have run away. If I had tried to work things out between us, or even taken him with me, things could have been different.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re a bad person, Max. It means you’re human.”

“Maybe. But I don’t want you to look at me and think I’m something I’m not. That I’m better than I am. I bought you dinner to help alleviate a little guilt. It’s become more than that to me, but that’s all it was in the beginning.”

“At the shelter,” Daniel began, meeting Max’s eyes. “When I told you I didn’t want you to give me money?”

“Yes, because you thought it could be dangerous.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said. But actually, I had taken your wallet. I swiped it when you were getting my duffel out of your trunk.” Daniel grinned.

“You little shit.”

“Well, you’re missing your chance, Maximilian.” Amanda walked into Max’s office unannounced, dropping into her favorite leather chair.

“Missing out on what, exactly?” Max placed the phone back on the cradle. He had finally managed to grab a few minutes to call Daniel, wondering if he would be interested in dining out that evening, something special before he checked into the rehab facility on Saturday and disappeared from Max’s life for the next six weeks. Apparently the call would have to wait.

Amanda looked at him as if he were an idiot.

“What? I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Timothy has met someone.” Amanda honestly sounded disappointed, and Max smiled.

“Good for him. I’m glad.”

“Really? But the man was perfect for you, Max. Handsome and clever. He believes in your cause. He comes from *money*.” She emphasized money as if Max had ever in his life given a thought to what the men he dated possessed. Even before inheriting his father’s fortune he had been well off from his own income and the money he’d inherited from his grandmother. He had already been well enough off that he would never have to worry.

“Absolutely. He deserves someone who appreciates all those qualities.” Max gave Amanda a sympathetic look. “And also has a penis. I’m sorry Amanda, but I’m pretty sure your lack of one was already a deal breaker.”

Amanda laughed. “If I were thirty years younger, it would have been worth a try.”

Max grinned and tried not to think about *that*.

“He’s met someone, Max, but that window isn’t closed.” Max just shook his head.

“It’s true isn’t it?” Amanda said after watching him for a few moments.

“What? I’m not as tuned in to the gossip mill as you appear to be.”

Amanda ignored the jab.

“Who is Daniel?” Amanda ignored Max’s raised eyebrow. “There is talk of a Daniel.”

“He’s a friend I have staying with me at the moment.”

“How do you know him? What does he do?” He wasn’t sure when the woman had become so obsessed with coupling him off.

“He’s a stylist at Keith’s place.”

She looked disappointed. “So he’s not someone you’re romantically involved with?”

“Not at the moment, no,” Max answered, seeing no point in pretending. “But that’s my hope, eventually.”

After nearly three weeks under the same roof, Max had no doubt that was exactly what he wanted. If he hadn’t felt like the other man had too much of his own stuff to sort through, things that shouldn’t be confused by a desire to try and please him, Max thought he might have already taken Daniel to bed.

As it was, most of their time together was spent working on the library and talking, playing with the dogs, and trying hard not to touch each other.

“And what about Timothy?” Brought out of his thoughts, Amanda’s question didn’t initially make any sense.

“What about him?”

“You’re honestly not the least bit interested?”

“I’m sure he’s great, Amanda, but he’s not the man I want to spend forever with.”

Her face softened at his words. “And you want that with this Daniel?”

Max nodded. “Yeah, it’s early days yet, but I really think I do.”

“And you’re sure he’s not after your money?” Her look of concern made Max smile.

“He doesn’t even know the extent of it. He doesn’t actually know who Maximilian Litt is.”

“How old is he?”

“Twenty-two.” Max grinned at Amanda’s expression.

“A twenty-two year old kid who doesn’t watch the news or ever pick up a newspaper? Sounds perfect.” She rolled her eyes. “You’d better use a prenup.”

“I said I was *falling in love*, not stupid.”

“You’d be surprised how often those are the same thing.”

“Mr. Litt?” Timothy stuck his head in his door. “Security called and said you have a Daniel Kohl in the lobby for you.”

Max managed not to grin. “Great. Would you mind escorting him up? I have one last call to make, and then I’ll be taking the rest of the afternoon.”

“Would this Daniel Kohl be the reason you’re always so hell-bent on getting out of here on time?” Timothy asked, grinning.

Max narrowed his eyes.

“I’m going. I’m going.”

When Max finally emerged from his office, he found Daniel chatting happily away with his assistant. He was wearing one of Archer’s old coats, and Max added that to his mental lists of things to buy Daniel on their outing that afternoon.

The two men looked up, smiling, and Max was a little relieved that they seemed to have hit it off. Timothy had become indispensable to him at the office and, even if he hadn’t admitted it to the other man, Daniel had become indispensable to him in every other way.

“Sorry, everything always takes longer than planned.” Max slipped on his coat. “Are you ready to go?”

Daniel hopped up, practically bubbling with excitement. “Yep. What are we going to do?”

“It’s a secret,” Max said, and heard Timothy chuckle.

“God, I hate secrets.” Daniel turned to Timothy. “It was great meeting you.”

“It was nice meeting you too.” He shot Max an amused grin, and Max wasn’t sure he wanted to know why.

“So,” Daniel said as they headed out of the room. “Litt Foundation? Does the name have anything to do with your family, or is that just a coincidence?”

Max could hear Timothy’s laughter all the way to the stairs.

The two of them hit all the best shops, and much to Max’s irritation, Daniel fought nearly every purchase, claiming he could make do with what he had, that he preferred his old things, and eventually promising he would pay Max back. As far as dates went, Max had been on better. Not that he had asked Daniel out on a date, but in the back of Max’s mind, he had hoped to give him a perfect day.

When it was just starting to get late, and both of them were hungry, Max suggested an elegant little seafood restaurant that was unique in that it had wonderful food and yet no liquor license.

“What would you think about tacos by the river again?” Daniel asked, and Max tried not to let his disappointment show. He had wanted the two of them to end their evening with a romantic dinner. The next morning the man would be disappearing from his life for the immediate future, and he had the strongest urge to do everything he could so that Daniel would remember him. Would think about him.

“If you prefer,” Max said, and Daniel beamed.

They sat at the river’s edge, on a bench not far from where they had sat that first night. This time they shared their steak tacos, and a bag of warm tortilla chips, and drank water from glass bottles that Max had insisted they pick up before hitting the truck.

It was colder this time so Daniel sat closer, and Max was fine with that.

“You’ll think this is stupid,” Daniel said, looking out at the river. “But this has always been my idea of the perfect date. Outside, by the water, without the buzz of people around you.”

Daniel looked over at Max with those lovely, warm hazel eyes, and Max knew that for Daniel's own good or not, he wasn't going to be able to resist the lure of the man much longer.

Max looked down when he felt Daniel's cold fingers twine with his own and thought that maybe, just maybe, this would be good enough for a little while longer.

They sat there together, holding hands until Max's phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out to see his office number and held back a sigh.

"This is Max."

"Mr. Litt, I'm sorry to bother you, but there has been an emergency help request, and you're the only that I could reach who has authorization to release funds."

"It's not a problem, Timothy." Max gave Daniel's hand a quick squeeze. "We can be back in just a few minutes."

They dropped the bags and containers from dinner into the trash and recycling barrels and headed across the bridge toward the foundation's building, hand-in-hand, and a world away from just three weeks before.

Inside, Timothy gave them an apologetic smile. "I'm very sorry to interrupt your night, Mr. Litt."

Max shook his head. "Not your fault. Did you forward the request to me?" Max asked, and Timothy nodded. "Great, then you can head home for the night, and have a wonderful weekend. Daniel, I'll call Thomas and have him come get you."

"I can drop him, Mr. Litt," Timothy offered. "My boyfriend is picking me up, but he won't mind, I'm sure."

Max pulled Daniel into his office. "Is that okay with you? You two seem to get along well enough."

"I'd rather stay here with you," Daniel said, dropping his eyes to Max's lips, and Max knew that was a bad idea.

"I'm not sure how long this will take." Max took Daniel's hand in his again and smiled. "I'll be home as soon as I can, and I'll see you tomorrow."

"You two are so cute together." Timothy smiled at Daniel in the elevator. "You make a great couple."

Daniel shook his head. “We aren’t exactly a couple.”

Timothy gave him a disbelieving look.

“I swear,” Daniel assured him. “I don’t deserve him right now, but I’m working on it.”

“I’m not sure he sees it that way.”

The elevator door opened up to a tall blond with dark eyes, and Timothy beamed.

“Daniel, this is Matt. Matt, this is Daniel, a friend of Mr. Litt.” He gave the guy a wicked smirk, and Matt laughed, leaning in to press a kiss to Timothy’s lips.

“Leave him alone, sweetie, you’re making the kid blush.”

“I’m just playing, Daniel.” Timothy smiled over at him before looking back to his boyfriend. “Mr. Litt has had a last-minute emergency, so we’re dropping Daniel off at the house.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

The three of them headed out to climb into a silver hardtop Jeep, Daniel folding himself into the backseat. He wasn’t a huge guy, but he was tall, and the backseat was not exactly comfortable.

“Sorry, my car’s in the shop,” Timothy told him from up front. “It’s got a loose tie rod.”

Daniel had no idea what that was, but he nodded like he did.

They made small talk for the short trip, no more than fifteen minutes, with Daniel mostly asking questions, trying to avoid those he could tell Timothy was dying to ask *him*. Daniel had one question he really wanted to ask, but refrained. He wanted know if Timothy and Max had ever been involved. The other man was attractive enough that Daniel found it hard to believe they hadn’t been, even if they obviously weren’t now.

By the time he climbed out of the back and onto the sidewalk, Daniel felt stiff from the cramped confines of the trip and a little silly from his less-than-subtle attempts to keep the conversation off of himself.

“Thank you for the ride,” Daniel said, watching Timothy climb back up into the passenger seat.

“No problem.” Timothy smiled.

“Nice to meet you,” Matt said, leaning around his boyfriend to give Daniel a once-over and a wide grin. “You have a good evening.”

The man winked and Daniel laughed.

When they drove away, leaving Daniel alone, he hoped more than anything he would see Max before he had to leave the following morning.

Daniel woke with a start, only a few hours after giving up on any continuation of his and Max’s night together, and crawled into bed. The sudden waking up had become a regular occurrence the last few days. His dreams were a tangle of childhood memories and memories of the street, and he normally found himself more exhausted in the morning than he had been when he went to bed the previous night.

Daniel had always thought that giving up the drinking in the morning would be the hardest for him. The idea of facing each day without a liquid buffer had seemed nearly impossible at the beginning. He was surprised when it turned out that the drinking to help him sleep was what he feared would break him in the end.

Here he was, completely sober, and Daniel thought he would feel elated, and part of him did. But more often than not he seemed to swing between near panic at the enormity of the step he had taken and wanting nothing more than to crawl into Max’s bed to beg the man to fuck him or to let him fuck Max. The desire for comforting from the other man was nearly overwhelming.

He worried that his infatuation was somehow linked to his father or some other fucked up shit, but he figured that it would all be worked out during the therapy sessions he had been told to expect over the next few weeks. Either way, there was something comforting about being with Max.

Daniel no longer viewed Max as bossy but more as the type to take charge, facing obstacles as they came and with no less determination than he faced everything else. It was a nice contrast to every other man who had been part of his life—those who forever viewed the bad things that befell them as something unfairly dumped on them by the world.

He thought he liked that aspect of Max’s personality even more than he liked the man’s looks.

Most of all, though, Daniel liked Max’s compassion for those around him. Yeah, he said it was fueled by guilt, but everyone’s life was full of those

regretted moments, and most people didn't change themselves to make up for it. It never occurred to most people to even try to be better.

Unable to quiet his mind, Daniel climbed out of bed and, pulling on a T-shirt, padded his way to the bathroom. He brushed his teeth, tempted to just get ready for the big day ahead, almost sure he wouldn't be going back to sleep anytime soon. Then he thought that perhaps if he curled up on one of the library chairs, that the room, with its soothing smell of paper and its memories of Max, might just help him drift back to sleep for a few hours.

He had made it to the first floor when he heard a rustling noise coming from his destination. He walked quietly, peeking in the doorway to find Max still dressed in his clothes from dinner. He held a book on his lap but appeared to be lost in thought, staring out the room's large window instead of at the pages. It gave Daniel a chance to appreciate the man's wavy dark hair and rugged features, and he had to fight that same overpowering urge to touch him.

For the first time, he wondered how old Max was, and if he was making a complete fool out of himself. He had done little to hide his attraction to the man, and until this evening he had felt too inexperienced to know whether the tension that seemed to stretch between them was one-sided or not. But when they had held hands in the park, and even when they were in Max's office, Daniel had felt certain there was something there, even if his certainty wavered whenever they were apart.

Daniel must have made some sort of sound because after a moment Max turned his way and gave him a smile.

"You're either up really early or up really late," the man said, scooting over to make room on the couch.

"Up early, I guess." Daniel took the offered spot on the other side, angling himself so he could see Max's face. "And you haven't made it to bed."

"Reading." Max smiled at Daniel's doubtful look. "Well, thinking really. Why are you up?"

"I'm nervous, I guess," he confessed, watching his fingers as they drew imaginary swirls on the bit of sofa between them.

"You shouldn't be." Those words had Daniel looking at him. "Look how far you've made it already."

Daniel smiled but it faded almost as quickly.

"My dad was a drunk." Daniel laughed to himself. "I don't think I've told you that. I swore I would escape that mean bastard as soon as I could. I swore

I'd never let him lay another hand on me." Daniel rubbed at his eyes, and Max turned so that he faced him, leaning against the arm of the couch. "But the most important thing of all was that I promised myself I would never drink. I didn't want to learn that his weakness was mine."

"Daniel, I think you're stronger than you realize." Max gave him that reassuring, everything-is-conquerable smile, and it took everything in Daniel not to reach out and stroke his fingers over the dark stubble of his chin, as if somehow touching Max would make his words true.

"Will you kiss me, Max?" Daniel asked, reaching out to grab the man's hands before he could stand up and walk away. "Please. Let me pretend I've got someone to come back to."

Max only hesitated a moment before leaning in to press his mouth to Daniel's.

It was more than Daniel had ever hoped for—Max pulling his hands away to thread his fingers into Daniel's hair, angling him, the man's tongue breaching his mouth. Daniel was hard in an instant, but he did what he could to conceal it, feeling in all certainty that its discovery would have Max leaving the room.

When Max started to pull away, Daniel couldn't help his plea. "God, please don't stop."

Max smiled, pressing another, much softer kiss to his lips.

"You need to get some sleep." Max's lips brushed over Daniel's with the words, and Daniel shivered.

"So do you." Reaching up, Daniel pushed the tumble of Max's hair back from his forehead, enjoying the warmth of the man's skin underneath his fingertips. "Would you want to—?"

"No." Max stood, reaching a hand out to pull Daniel up as well. "It's best this way, I assure you. This needs to be about you, what you want to do for yourself. I can't be in there confusing the mix."

Daniel wasn't at all sure that it wasn't already too late, but he didn't argue.

"Thank you for kissing me," Daniel said, watching Max walk to the door. "And it was real, wasn't it?"

"Of course it was."

Chapter Six

Max sat in the back of the car, lost in thoughts of Daniel.

On Saturday it had been officially six weeks, and he was still waiting for some word, either confirmation that Daniel would be staying longer or that he needed to be retrieved from the facility. Here it was, Monday morning, and so far there had been nothing since Daniel's original text the first night.

I'm thinking about you.

Max had been surprised by how much those words meant. It hadn't occurred to him that Daniel's absence would feel like a physical ache, something he would feel nearly every waking moment. He knew he had never felt this way for another man. If he were to be completely honest, he was a little surprised he actually could.

Thomas gave him a sympathetic look when he dropped him at the door of the foundation, and Max gave his shoulder a quick pat, an apology for being such a moody asshole for the last two days. He shooed off a few committee members wanting to *talk* more about *these changes* and even begged off when Amanda tried to grab him in the hall, all before he had even made it to his office.

"Morning, Mr. Litt," Timothy greeted him when he walked through the door, hopping up to follow him into his office. "The word has finally gotten out, I think. We have been bombarded with funding requests all morning and, perhaps even better, donations. The interview really did the trick."

"That's fantastic." That was exactly the kind of news Max needed today. And it was bound to keep him busy, sorting through applications. He had yet to hand responsibilities back to many others since the announcement of the focus change—just to the small number he felt he could safely trust.

"I think your approach appeals to perhaps a less affluent group, but it's a much, much larger one. And I think your looks didn't hurt either." Timothy smiled, and Max scowled at him. "Oh, yeah, that's the one."

By a quarter till noon, the two of them had sorted through all of the funding requests they had received as of nine that morning. No doubt more were piling up. For now, their system was to break each request up by nature, need, and the number of individuals the program, project, facility, etc., helped and determine

where money would do the most good. The foundation had the ability to finance hundreds of millions of dollars a year, but still there would never be enough.

Max was so caught up in numbers, when his cell phone rang he nearly forgot to pick it up. When it finally caught his attention and he glanced at the screen, it displayed Thomas's name.

"He's home," Thomas said before Max was able to say a word. "Your boy's at the house with Archer."

"Where are you?" Max stood up, signaling for Timothy to stay seated when he too started to rise.

"I'm nearly back to you."

Max ended the call, slipping the phone in his pocket, and headed to grab his keys from his desk and his coat from where it hung in the closet.

"I need to leave."

"Okay." Timothy watched him from where he sat. "Is everything okay? Is there anything I can do?"

"Everything is fine. I just had something come up at the last minute. Can you—" he started, but Timothy held up a hand.

"It's all under control, boss. Don't worry about a thing."

"Thank you."

"This one sounds good." Daniel sat at the counter, Archer's laptop open in front of him. "Separate entrance, private bath, and it's right on a bus line, which is great until I can afford a car."

Daniel scribbled the details down on a notepad.

"You sure that's what you want to do, kid? Rent a room in someone's house?" Archer peeked over Daniel's shoulder, looking at the photos. "You're right. It doesn't look half bad."

"Absolutely. My therapist says that I need to focus on building this new life." He clicked on the next listing. "She said I was on the right track before, you know, staying away from old friends and things that triggered those memories I was less than proud of. That I probably hurt myself by closing

myself off to new friendships. That I need to construct something new to replace the old.”

“Don’t you want to talk to Max first? He’s been a cranky shit since you left.”

“Really?” Daniel smiled, a dreamy one judging by Archer’s snort. “I’ll talk to him, but I have to do this. If I really want something with him, we need to be on a more equal footing. Me living in his guestroom, eating his food? That’s not exactly equal.”

“Makes sense, I guess.” Archer moved to put more groceries away.

“You think I’m wrong?” Daniel watched him from over the screen.

“Nope.” He shook his head. “But I’ve been with Max for a long time, and he might not make it easy.”

They heard the front door open and close, and Daniel grinned. “You think it’s him?”

“I think you better go find out.”

“Do I look okay?” Daniel asked, and Archer just laughed, pointing to the door and telling him to get off his ass.

Daniel pushed out of the kitchen and hurried down the hall, just in time to catch Max slipping out of his coat.

“Hi.” He grinned, and Max turned and smiled back. “You’re home early.”

“You’re home late,” Max said, still smiling.

Home.

It was funny to Daniel just how much this house actually did feel like home.

“I panicked, I guess. They have these group sessions on Sunday that focus on coping skills you can use back out in the real world. Even though it was kind of the same stuff each time, I went every weekend. I guess I needed one last ‘you can do it, and here’s how’ pep talk.”

Max nodded, and they looked at each other for a few moments.

“I’ve heard you’ve been a grouch since I left.”

Max nodded, stepping a little closer. “I’ve been terrible.”

Daniel took two steps back, hitting the base of the stairs. “I really expected more from you.”

“Did you?” Max took another step forward. “I missed you, and you didn’t call.” He squinted at him. “Why exactly was that?”

“Because you were right.” Daniel let out a breath. “It needed to be about me. I wanted this for myself, and I couldn’t confuse that with what I want with you. I didn’t want to feel like one couldn’t exist without the other.”

Max stopped his playful pursuit, waiting for Daniel to go on.

“And my feelings for you were so complicated, this confusing mixture of attraction and gratitude, and being scared. I needed to sort it all out.”

“And did you come to a conclusion?”

“Well,” Daniel stepped backward, taking the first step up which brought them to eye level. “There is one last piece of information I need.”

With that, he reached out to tug Max forward and press a kiss to his mouth.

It was everything Daniel had been craving since that moment in the library, everything he had spent the last six weeks playing and replaying in his mind, but this time Daniel was the aggressor, twisting his fingers in the fabric of Max’s shirt, tugging him closer.

Max opened with the lightest press of Daniel’s tongue, and suddenly he was tasting the man and everything became this one moment, the sensation of Max’s fingers playing over his hips, the delicious burn of his stubble, the raw sound that came out of Daniel’s own mouth when Max slipped a hand into the back of Daniel’s pants to skim warm, exploring fingers up his cleft.

Daniel forced himself to break the kiss.

“Would you want to—?”

“Get upstairs this instant.” Max’s voice was a low growl, and Daniel had the urge to drop to his knees and taste him right there, but instead spun around and ran up the stairs.

Making it to Max’s room, Daniel threw himself on the bed, kicking out of his shoes and socks and frantically trying to open his jeans and shimmy his way out of them.

Max had already lost his jacket and tie in the hall and was nearly out of his button-down when he entered the room, slamming the door behind him.

“They’re all going to know,” Daniel said, stopping to watch the man finish slipping out of his dress shirt and yanking his undershirt over his head.

“They’re going to figure it out when I have you yelling my name in about three minutes,” Max said, pulling off his shoes and socks.

At his words, Daniel started trying to work himself out of his jeans again, the swell of his cock making it a bit more challenging.

Max stepped over to grab the hem of Daniel’s pants, helping to pull them the rest of the way off before stepping out of his own and climbing onto the bed beside him.

Max was absolutely the sexiest man Daniel had ever seen, beautifully defined muscles, his skin a warm olive, flawless except for a time-faded scar that ran just above his hip bone and wrapped around his side. Daniel felt small and pale in comparison, but the desire he saw in Max’s expression and the feel of the man hard against his thigh had Daniel forgetting any insecurities.

“You said three minutes, Max. Tick tock.”

A moment later Daniel was pressed into the mattress, the reassuring weight of the larger man on top of him, his mouth being explored, and all other thought vanished. Daniel thrust up, craving more, craving faster, which only seemed to slow Max’s movements down, his brutal kiss from a moment before slowing to a languid lapping of tongues, and then to nothing at all.

Max’s warmth disappeared for a moment. Returning, he kneeled between Daniel’s legs, pressing one of Daniel’s thighs up and bending to take his mouth again. When he felt Max’s fingers, slick with lube, press between his cheeks to circle his entrance, Daniel pulled his leg up higher to give the other man even better access.

When one of Max’s fingers finally pushed inside, Daniel let out a small moan, and tried to move, tried to get him deeper, begging for more.

“God, yes. Please.”

“I’ve dreamed about this, Daniel,” Max murmured, nipping at Daniel’s shoulder, pressing open-mouth kisses to the side of his neck, as he worked his finger in small circles, stretching him.

Daniel whimpered.

“I’ve dreamed about my fingers in you, my tongue in you, my cock in you.” He emphasized the statement with a twist of his fingers that had Daniel begging.

“Shut up. You’ll make me come.” And that was the last thing Daniel wanted. Not until Max was buried deep inside of him.

Max slipped a hand away to put on a condom and slick himself, coming back with more lube and pressing himself against Daniel’s entrance for only a moment before pushing in. The initial push was a slow, steady thrust that had Max’s balls pressed to Daniel’s ass. Only then did he stop long enough for Daniel to grow accustomed to the feeling, that indescribable pleasure of being stretched and filled, muscle pulsing around an invading cock.

Daniel moved tentatively and groaned. “Move, Max. Please move.”

Max thrust hard, wrapping his arms around the back of Daniel’s arms to grab onto his shoulders. He pounded into him with long strokes that had Daniel breathlessly begging for more. When Max dropped a hand to help push Daniel’s leg higher, he hit the spot that had Daniel screaming and reaching between them to tug at his own dick.

“Fuck, Daniel,” Max panted, his movements already becoming erratic.

It wasn’t going to last long for either of them. But Daniel had known that. They had wanted each other too long. Had waited for what felt like forever.

Daniel felt the unmistakable tingle of orgasm radiate through his limbs and up his spine and yelled, spasming on the thick length buried deep inside of him, and spilled between them. Max groaned on top of him, Daniel’s orgasm tearing at the last bit of Max’s control, and he came right after.

The two of them lay panting together, Daniel’s head resting on Max’s chest, Max stroking his back. There were so many things Daniel wanted to say, so many emotions longing to break free. He felt cared for and loved, and those feelings were so foreign to him, he had a hard time not shaking from the immenseness of it. Daniel was not sure how much time had passed when Max pressed a kiss to his hair and, slipping from the bed, grabbed his hand and walked them to the shower.

They climbed in, washing each other and kissing under the spray, and Daniel found himself smiling.

“You are the most lovely creature I have ever seen,” Max murmured, lathering Daniel’s chest and kissing up his jawline.

Daniel tilted his neck, loving the feel of Max’s beard against his throat.

“I was thinking the same thing about you.” He felt Max’s smile.

They lingered there, touching, mapping each other with fingers and tongues and occasionally teeth. Max appeared to like to nip and nibble.

When Daniel's fingers trailed over the ridge at Max's hip he was reminded of the scar. "How did you get this?"

Max stilled a moment, pulling Daniel close to press a kiss to his wet hair before answering. "My stepbrother."

Daniel pulled away. "What? Why?"

The other man sighed.

"I think I told you our relationship got weird?" Daniel nodded slowly. "One night, out of the blue, Matthew climbed into bed with me when I was asleep. He..." Max looked uncomfortable, and when Daniel tried to reassure him with a stroke of fingers over his cheek, Max turned to kiss their tips.

"He said he loved me, was *in* love with me, and completely lost it when I told him that he wasn't, not really." Daniel knew his face must have shown his growing horror at the story by the way Max shook his head. "You have to understand his life. It's hard to appreciate the isolation of that house. My father was obsessed with the idea of abduction, or accident, or something. I don't even know. He tried to keep us safe, but he was never there so he also kept us alone. Anyway, things got out of hand, and I needed stitches, a lot of them. And the next day, Conner and I packed up and left for Austin. I took the Texas Bar and never looked back."

Daniel thought he finally understood why Max hadn't tried to find his stepbrother when he eventually discovered that the boy was gone. On some level, Max hadn't wanted to find him. The man's guilt made a little more sense now. Daniel didn't say that though, instead he just pulled Max into his arms and pressed a kiss to his lips. He understood being hurt by the ones who were supposed to love you, but more importantly, he also understood that you sometimes had to put yourself first.

They kissed for a long time before finally climbing out to dry off and crawl under the covers, Max wrapping his arms around Daniel and pulling him close.

Daniel focused on the warmth of the man behind him, the smell of him, and fell into a dreamless sleep.

When they got hungry, they managed to untangle themselves long enough to slip into some sweats and wander downstairs for food. It was actually late

enough by then that they found a note from Archer on the island letting them both know that he had given up on dinner. That he had left them fruit and cold cuts in the refrigerator and fresh baked bread in the pantry, but that he wasn't paid enough to be forced to listen to their monkey noises, and he would see them in the morning.

Daniel blushed. Still, it was nice having the house to themselves in the evening. It was always such a hub of activity during the day that the nights seemed more tranquil for it.

They picked at the roast beef and fed each other fruit and kissed, leaning against the counter. Max had just grabbed them each a glass of water when he noticed the notepad on the island.

"What's this?" He picked it up, reading through Daniel's scribbled notes. "Daniel, what is this?"

"It's a list of rooms for rent."

Daniel thought Max actually looked hurt.

"But why? Why are you looking for somewhere else to stay?"

"Max." Daniel walked over to slip his arms around the other man's waist, Max's own wrapping around him as well, and rested his head against his shoulder. "It's important for me to build my own life."

"But can't you see yourself building that life with me? I certainly can."

Daniel felt the tears and closed his eyes, concentrating on keeping his voice steady. "I'll need to think about it."

Max squeezed him tighter, and Daniel felt him nod.

They didn't say anything else about it, climbing the stairs, their hands clasped together. They brushed their teeth and fell into bed again. Max pulled Daniel's T-shirt over his head, pushing him back down into the pillow.

Max straddled him, fingers trailing down Daniel's jaw, down his neck and over his chest, the muscles of which were still a little tender from Daniel's nearly daily trips to the fitness center at the facility.

When Daniel let out a groan, Max pressed a little harder, hands fanning out and pushing up.

"God, that feels good. So much better than all the sex."

Max laughed, bending down to kiss him again, blanketing Daniel with his larger body, and kissing him as if it could erase the moment in the kitchen and the last few weeks for both of them.

While Daniel had been away he had ached for Max, not just for his touch but also for his company and for his friendship. He thought, perhaps, that there was no building a life that didn't include this bed and this man, and that possibly, without knowing the specifics, the advice he had been given was wrong. Maybe tomorrow morning he would go downstairs and tear the sheet from that notepad, wad it up, and throw it away.

Downstairs.

“Shit, I think we left the dogs in the kitchen. Archer will kill us,” Daniel said, starting to push up.

Max stopped him. “You stay here. I’ll kick them out of there. Let’s hope I remembered to close the pantry door and that the damage is still at a minimum.”

He gave Daniel a quick kiss, climbing off of him, and left the room humming.

Chapter Seven

Daniel woke up to a quiet room, except for the swish of the ceiling fan, and to the faint smell of Max's cologne. He rolled over to press his face to Max's cool pillow and realized the man must not have come back to bed.

He knew where Max would be: sitting in the library, brooding over Daniel moving out. Daniel didn't want to go anywhere. He wanted to stay here, with Max until forever, and was half tempted to tell the man so, but first Daniel needed to know that Max understood things were not going to be perfect. Daniel was almost certain he would slip up, maybe not now, but eventually. As much as he loved the man, and he did love him, there would be slips and falls and tears. Daniel couldn't bear the thought of hurting Max in the process.

Maybe they just needed to talk.

He wasn't going to be able to sleep anymore anyway, not without Max next to him, so he climbed from the bed to slip back into Max's sweats and padded out the door, down the stairs and toward the library.

In the near darkness, Daniel practically stumbled over Zira.

"Jesus, sorry girl." When the dog didn't move, he squatted down to shake her. "Zira?"

What the fuck?

When he heard Max's whistling from the library, he headed in that direction at a run. "Max, something's wrong with Zira. I think she sick."

He took the corner, carried too far into the library by his own momentum, bumping into one of the chairs and tumbling a stack of books in the process.

"Did you hear—?"

Max lay in a heap on the floor, unmoving, Cornelius not three feet from his side.

"Oh my God."

"Hello again, Daniel."

Daniel spun around, heart pounding, to find a man standing behind the desk and pulling items from a bag on top of it. Duct tape, bungee cord, and a bottle of something Daniel couldn't identify but that sloshed loudly in the near silence of the room.

“Matt?”

The guy didn't look at him, but past him, where Daniel knew Max lay on the floor, and Daniel fought hard not to turn around and look too, afraid to take his eyes off of him.

“God, Maximilian. Did you think you would be allowed to forget?” He flashed Daniel a quick smile. “The pretty ones always think they can get away with everything.”

It was like the last piece of a puzzle you didn't know you were putting together had snapped into place.

“Matthew?” The name came out before Daniel could even think to stop it, and the guy's smile grew a little wider.

“You know what, Daniel? I don't know why the fuck you're here.” The blond laughed. “Honest to God, that is some shit luck you're packing.”

“What do you want?”

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” The man gestured wildly with his hand at Max on the floor and at Daniel. “Did you think you could seduce him and he'd just forget about me? Your fucking ego must be huge.”

Daniel felt himself start to shake. “I didn't seduce anyone.”

“God, you are just like all those other guys he fucked.”

“Matthew,” Daniel pushed the words out. “I don't even know what you're talking about.”

“He loved me.” The words were a roar, and a long-dead instinct had Daniel flinching, wrapping his arms around himself and trying to take up less space.

“He thinks he can fuck me and leave me, thinks he can ruin and abandon me?”

Daniel didn't believe a word of it.

“He didn't use you, Matthew. He didn't sleep with you.”

“How do you know?” Matthew sneered, his complete attention back on Daniel. “He's just like his father. A user.”

“I know because he wouldn't have done that. You were just a kid.”

“He loved me.”

Daniel tried to glance about, looking for the phone he had heard ringing from this room. He had teased Max about it, about having a landline, telling him he was an old man and asking him if it had a crank.

“Don’t bother, Daniel.” He looked back at Matthew. “I cut that before Max even opened the door to let those ugly beasts out.”

Matthew went back to pulling items out of the bag: a jar, a box of something that rattled, a gun, a long-bladed knife.

Daniel wanted so badly to run, felt the fear so deep in his bones that the only thing that kept his feet planted was the fear of what the man in front of him might do to Max, what he had already done to him.

“If you love him so much, why would you hurt him?” Daniel’s voice shook with each word, but he pushed them out.

The guy laughed. “I would never hurt Max. I’ve loved him since I was fifteen, since the moment he walked into my life with all that brooding and all that thinking. Think. Think. Think. No, I would never hurt Max. I’m here to kill *you*.”

Daniel ran.

Daniel knew he’d made a mistake the moment he slipped and slid his way down the back steps and onto the slick of the cold, damp grass.

He knew not to go upstairs. He’d read too many books and seen too many movies to think even for a minute that *that* would have been a good idea. So his focus had been on getting outside, getting out of the house, and to other people as quickly as possible. The moment he saw the walls he knew that no amount of adrenaline was going to have him leaping their height and getting away.

He tried anyway, running the length of one side, searching for the gate he knew had to be on the property. When he found it, its height and the lock put it firmly out of the realm of possible escape routes as well.

Daniel was about to scream, yell for help, when he heard the back door open and the sound of bootfalls on the porch, so instead he dropped to the ground, pushing himself into the shadow of the fence.

The whistling started again, the same tune Max had been humming, and Daniel watched Matthew slowly descend the steps. He knew there were only two real options here, unless calling out for help and getting himself shot

counted. Somehow he needed to double back, get into the house, and either run out the front door to the nearest house for help, or run upstairs and try to find Max's cell. He mentally kicked himself for the fight he'd put up when Max wanted to buy him one the day they went shopping. If he could have gone back in time he would have let the man buy him as much fucking technology as he wanted.

Matthew started an almost methodical sweep of the yard, back and forth, scanning the shadows and bending to touch the grass as if he thought he were Tonto or some shit. Daniel pushed silently away from the fence, slowly making his way toward the greenhouse. If he could get inside, or at least keep the structure between them, Daniel thought he just might be able to make a run for the house while the other man searched the far side of the grounds.

Daniel tried the first door he came to. It opened easily and, by some miracle, silently. He had envisioned the heavy wooden tables and their endless supply of possible artillery: terracotta pots, mounds of earth and pebbles, old wooden-handled hand rakes and shovels, shears, and any number of gardening tools. But it was all gone. Even the floor had been swept of debris.

Fuck.

The only things inside were sheets of drywall and a few buckets of plaster. There was also a long folding table covered in blueprints, an old radio, and a big jug of hand sanitizer.

Why the hell no pens or pencils? Scissors would be even better.

He nearly passed the table up completely, but thinking better of it moved back to grab the jug. Twisting off its pump, Daniel poured a puddle of the jug's contents on the floor in front of the door he'd just entered—an early warning signal in case Matthew had seen him sneak inside. He took the rest with him, the jug clasped tightly in his hand, and moved quietly to the far door, the one closer to the house. He stayed near the ground and away from the windows, afraid that light from the back of the house or from the moon overhead would somehow draw attention to his movements.

Daniel was nearly to the other door when he realized the whistling had stopped. He stood still, concentrating on any sound, at least anything that could be heard above the racing of his heart. But there was nothing. He walked the last few feet to the door and peeked outside. The yard was empty, the back door of the house gaping wide, and Daniel had the most horrible thought: that when Matthew had not been able to find him, he had gone back for Max.

Daniel went to pull open the door, his only thought to get to the man he loved, and let out a scream when Matthew stepped into view on the other side of the doorframe, and grinned. Daniel bolted in the other direction, running back to the door at the far side as fast as his legs would allow, jumping over the puddle and crashing through the old diamond-paned glass door, tumbling down onto the grass, feeling the burn of splinters and glass shards on his bare chest.

He heard the sound of the man at his heels—slipping and falling on the slick of sanitizer covering the old tiled floor—and the string of curses that followed.

“I’m going to fucking kill you, you fucking piece of shit.”

He pushed up, running for the back door of the house, slipping and almost falling once, and then righting himself before he went down. Hitting the steps, he was yanked off his feet, a screaming pain shooting through him where he was held by his hair.

“That was just too easy.”

With every ounce of strength Daniel had, he swung back, slamming the plastic jug he still held into the side of Matthew’s head. It was enough force to have the man drop him, staggering back, and Daniel turned to do it again with more of a swing this time, sending the guy stumbling back farther.

“Move!”

Daniel dove to the ground at the sound of Max’s order, rolling over in time to see him deliver a blow with one of Archer’s iron skillets, a blow that dropped Matthew hard to the ground, the guy showing no effort to stand back up.

Daniel ran into the house to grab the bungee cord off the library desk, and the two of them did the best job possible of binding the unconscious man’s arms and legs, only then running for the phone.

They stood there for a long time, watching the man, bound and bleeding on the grass, and listening to the ugly and welcome blare of sirens as they grew closer to the house, before Daniel’s breathing had slowed enough to even speak.

“I thought I was supposed to be the one with the wicked stepbrother.”

Epilogue

Reagan poked her head into the stockroom. “James, Audrey, and I are heading out. We were thinking about hitting some bars tonight. Are you in?”

“No, but thanks for the invite,” Daniel said, waving a quick good-bye before going back to making notes on his last client’s color chart—a 105-red with treatment additive to help the color hold longer.

He had hoped to slip out a little early that evening and surprise Max when he had a cancellation in the last slot. But no such luck. The time slot had been booked again just after three, and for a color, and colors always seemed to run over.

Daniel looked at his watch, disappointed to see that it was already well after seven. Between going to school and the days he worked at the salon, he didn’t feel like he saw Max nearly enough. But tomorrow was Saturday. With any luck they could sleep in and grab brunch somewhere, and maybe even take the new puppies to the park.

Placing the client file with the others waiting to be put away, Daniel pushed his way out of the stockroom and hurried down the corridor to put away his things and do one last quick sweep of his station. The sooner he was climbing into his car, the quicker he would be home.

He turned into his row of empty workstations to find Max sitting in his chair, and grinned.

“What are you doing here?”

“I missed you,” Max told him, tugging Daniel onto his lap when he got close enough. “And I thought maybe we could grab dinner out. We could just leave your car and have someone come get it tomorrow.”

“We are not leaving my baby.” Daniel poked Max in the side with a finger. It had been Daniel’s twenty-third birthday gift from Max, a vintage Ferrari Spyder in a blue almost the exact same color as Max’s eyes, but somehow not nearly as beautiful.

That had been when Daniel realized the extent of his boyfriend’s money. Max had confessed, afraid of Daniel’s reaction, afraid he would be upset at the secret and uncomfortable with the wealth. Afraid he would be mad.

Daniel had laughed, telling Max that he watched enough television reruns to know it was stupid to regret having a magic wife. Max hadn't understood what Daniel was talking about.

"What do you suggest then?"

"Well, let me think." Daniel ran a finger from Max's lips, over his chin, and down his neck.

Sitting here like this, it was hard not to think about the first time the man had shown up in his chair at the end of the night requesting some promised shave that Daniel still didn't fully understand.

He had never shaved another man's face, but he had what he needed, and after some convincing—he liked Max's beard—ran the electric shaver over Max's neck and chin and jawline, and then went in with a hand razor.

Touching the man—fingers slick with lather had been so erotic, and the touch of the other still so new, that they barely made it out of the salon and into Max's car before they were on each other. Max pushed him back against the seat and freed him from where he strained against the fly of his pants.

The sight of Max's mouth wrapped around his cock and the distinctive sound of the man working himself had Daniel shooting off in what felt like seconds, Max following close behind.

They had cleaned up in a hurry, hastily grabbing anything they could find, and sped home to do it all over again.

The feel of Max's hand stroking up his back brought Daniel out of his memories. Looking up, he caught Max studying him. His look, the one that always made Daniel feel loved and cherished, and even after all these months made his heart skip a beat.

"I think we need to go home." Max's eyes heated at Daniel's words. "Maybe crawl into bed."

"Are you tired?" Max asked with a wicked grin.

"Not quite."

The End

Author Bio

Amy Spector is new to writing and even newer to writing romance. She likes her stories to feature people who deserve a happy ending, and she tries her best to give them one. Admittedly, she likes to make them a little miserable first.

Amy has been lucky enough to find her own HEA and lives with her husband, several rather noisy children, and a dog named after her favorite horror movie actor of all time.

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