



NIC STARR

WAITING
Hoping
WISHING



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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

WAITING, HOPING WISHING

By Nic Starr

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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WAITING, HOPING, WISHING

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Photo Description

A gorgeous young man is lying on a bed in nothing but his grey boxer briefs. He is clean-cut with a tanned, smooth and beautifully defined body. He should be enjoying the luxurious bed with its crisp, white linens as he relaxes in the hotel room, but his look is pensive. In the first photo, he is clearly worried and slightly sad. In the second photo, he is focused on his phone, as if it can provide the answers he is looking for.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He's been waiting for that text for more than a week. Please tell us either what happens next or what happened to get him here and whether he frowns or smiles next.

Thank you so much,

Sincerely,

Melanie~~

P.S. Prompter requests:

** HEA. (The picture scene can be the beginning or the end of the story.)*

** No BDSM, dub-con, or non-con, please.*

** At least some smexin', please. (I love frottage, but most of the standard sexiness is good, too.)*

** Humor or sweetness is a plus, but total fluff isn't required.*

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, homophobia, new adult, blue collar, slow burn/UST, (partially) in the closet, coming (the rest of the way) out

Word Count: 21,530

Dedication

For Melanie, whose choice of photo and letter prompted this story—I loved writing the story and I hope it meets your expectations. To Robyn, in appreciation of all your suggestions, support and encouragement—it's been a ton of fun. To Nicole, for your fabulous feedback and to Beany, for your wonderful editing. To Meredith Russell, thank you for the gorgeous cover. Finally, thank you to the Love's Landscapes organisers and volunteers who make this event possible.

WAITING, HOPING, WISHING

By Nic Starr

Chapter One

Dean came out of the bathroom and made a flying leap onto the bed, landing on his stomach. At the same time, he reached out to the bedside table and snatched up the phone, hitting the send button.

"Hello?" he greeted as he flipped over onto his back.

"Hey, Dean, it's me." He smiled at the voice and the familiarity that meant Matt didn't need to introduce himself.

"Hey, Matt. How are things?" He fully expected small talk and the usual "fine", so he was surprised by the response.

"Fucked." Matt cut straight to the point.

Dean had absolutely no idea how to respond, so he stayed silent. After a moment or two, Matt filled the silence with his quiet voice.

"Stuart and I are splitting up."

Dean continued to stare at the ceiling, unable to voice a response, heart singing just a little inside, but at the same time, immediately recognising that Matt would be hurting.

"It's been coming. I mean, you know things haven't been the best lately."

"Yeah, but I thought you guys were working it out?"

"So did I. Well, at least I thought things were on the improve. It seems Stuart didn't have the same idea." Dean waited for Matt to go on, but he didn't continue.

Dean had played sounding board to his friend over the last couple of months, listening as Matt confided the problems that he and Stuart were having. They'd met in Sydney, being introduced through a friend of a friend, and been together for a couple of years now. About a year ago, Stuart had a job offer in Melbourne, and Matt had successfully arranged a transfer within the company he worked for and had followed his boyfriend to the new city. The first six months had gone really well, at least according to the stories Matt had shared—a great terrace house, good jobs, new friends, new restaurants and hot clubs to visit. The last six months were not so rosy.

As far as Dean was aware, it came down to a clash of what they wanted out of life. Matt had tired of the party scene. He'd not been a huge club goer while

in Sydney, enjoying the occasional big night out, but being just as happy getting together with friends for a quiet dinner, getting out of town for the weekend, catching a movie or doing something a bit more active. Dean and Matt had spent many a great time together indulging in their shared passions for all these things.

During the new flush of his relationship with Stuart, Matt had seemingly embraced the excitement of a new group of people and being on the arm of his handsome new admirer, but Dean knew he'd been ready to settle down around the time of the move to Melbourne. Rather than wanting to move to Melbourne to set up a home, it seemed that Stuart had gotten itchy feet and just wanted a fresh party scene. And it was clear from the conversations he'd had with Matt, that Matt had been happy to enjoy the new experience, at least for the first few months, until he realised it was pretty much the same shit, different city.

"It turns out he doesn't want to settle down, isn't ready for a commitment. What does he think relocating to another city is, if not a commitment?" Matt sounded more angry than hurt. "I wouldn't have done it if I didn't think he was making a commitment. It may not have been half the way around the world, but I had to negotiate with work, find a new home, leave my family and friends. Leave you."

Dean remembered the night Matt told him he was moving as if it were yesterday, and not a year ago. That was the night he realised he'd left it too late to finally tell his best friend how he felt. Not that he *would* have, but the possibility had been there—he *could* have. Acknowledging that admitting the truth was no longer an option was like permanently closing a door, turning the lock and throwing away the key—final, absolute... heartbreaking. So Dean had just continued doing what he'd always done, locked away his feelings and continued to love and support his friend from afar.

Dean finally found his voice.

"Is there anything I can do? Do you want to talk about it?" *Please say no, please say no.* He didn't think he was up to offering advice, not without being able to psych himself up to it. He needed preparation and time to get himself into a calmer state.

"No, at least not yet. But I do need to get away. I need some time to clear my head. I was thinking of coming to Sydney the weekend after next. Is it okay if I bunk down at your place?"

"You know it is. There's always a place for you here. Just let me know your flight details and I'll pick you up from the airport."

“Thanks, Dean. I knew I could count on you. I’ll catch a cab, though, and see you back at your place if that’s all right.”

“Sure, no worries. See you then.”

Dean hit “end” and dropped the phone on the bed beside him, then fell back onto the pillows and exhaled with a big sigh. Hope flared briefly as he realised that Matt would now be single and available, but he stamped it out quick smart. He knew there was no way Matt could fit into his life, not in the way he wanted anyway. He stared at the ceiling, watching the fan slowly circulating, and contemplated the coming weeks with a sense of foreboding and anticipation.

Dean worked tirelessly to make something of himself, to gain the skills and experience he needed to eventually establish his own business. It was hard work, but he was proud of what he’d managed to accomplish in a relatively short time. Dean’s apprenticeship had taught him the skills of a plumber. It wasn’t the sort of job that suited everyone. He’d been the butt of a few jokes amongst his friends, and quite a few comments had been made about the downside of clearing out people’s pipes, but hey, someone had to do it.

He was employed by a big operation, a company that took contracts on large residential jobs, but in another year or so, Dean would have enough saved to set up his own business. He’d be able to buy his own truck and tools and keep himself afloat until he’d had time to build up his own client base.

Dean pulled his truck to a stop outside his parents’ house. He put on the handbrake and grabbed his phone before he locked the truck and headed inside. He tried to join his family for a meal at least once a week, often complaining, but in reality enjoying spending time with his parents. His brother, Warren, and his brother’s fiancée, Janet were usually there, too.

He didn’t bother knocking, just pulled open the fly screen door and called a greeting as he entered the front hall. “It’s just me,” he called as he made his way towards the kitchen. His family didn’t stand on ceremony, and most of the entertaining happened in the kitchen or the family room. As expected, his mum stood by the stove, stirring the contents of a saucepan.

“Gee, Mum, that smells great,” Dean said as he leaned over her shoulder to look into the pot. “You know I love your beef stew.”

She left the spoon resting on the side of the pot and turned slightly to kiss him on the cheek. “It’s good to see you, darling. Your dad is in the study watching the news if you want to go see him.”

“Sure, just yell if you want any help.”

Dean stopped by the fridge and grabbed a drink before he went to visit with his dad. Apart from a quick greeting, they sat companionably in silence while watching details of the latest atrocities that were taking place in the world. As the news bulletin transitioned into the weather forecast, his mum called out from the kitchen to say Warren and Janet had arrived and the dinner was ready. His dad flicked the remote to turn off the television, and they made their way to the dining table in the family room.

“Hey, Janet. It’s great to see you,” greeted Dean as he gave her a quick kiss and looked towards his brother with a nod. “And you too, big brother.”

“You’re always such a charmer,” laughed Janet as she took her usual seat at the table.

They all took their places as his mum, Nancy, brought a large ceramic casserole dish to the table and placed it on the trivet in the centre. She started dishing out great ladlefuls of the wonderfully aromatic beef, as his dad sliced the loaf of bread and placed it in the basket. The bread was passed around, as was the butter, and they all got stuck into the delicious meal.

The conversation followed the usual pattern, each of them giving an update of what had happened in their lives over the past week, before Janet piped up.

“There’s this guy at work you just have to meet. He’s absolutely perfect for you.”

“Oh geez, here we go again,” Warren said under his breath, and gave Dean a sympathetic smile.

“He works in the Finance department. He’s so friendly and he’s totally gorgeous. Blond hair, blue eyes, hot body—everything you could ask for.”

“Really,” Dean stated, then decided to humour her. “Perfect match, hey?”

“Definitely! He’s very clever. He’s only been with the company for six months, but he’s made his mark already.” Janet worked at an energy company with a role in the Sales division. “And you know the best thing?” she looked at Dean expectantly.

“No, what’s the best thing?”

“He’s gay!” she laughed.

“Well, thank God for that. I’d hate for you to set me up with a straight guy,” Dean deadpanned.

Her heart was in the right place, but Janet seemed to work on the theory that gay men only needed their sexuality in common—the fact that they were gay should be enough for a relationship. Janet didn't rise to the bait.

“So you'll meet him?” She didn't wait for an answer. “We've got team drinks after work coming up. You and Warren can meet me towards the end, and I'll arrange for you to meet Justin. I'm sure you'll really like him.” She turned immediately towards Nancy and started updating her on the wedding plans.

“Oh, man. You so have to meet this Justin now,” Warren announced. “Otherwise I'll never hear the end of it.”

Their dad just looked at them both with a resigned look on his face. Dean decided it was best not to get into it. He just wasn't comfortable discussing dating guys in front of his dad. For all the acceptance of his mum, his brother and Janet, he knew his dad struggled. He never said anything directly, but his silence and inability to make eye contact during these conversations spoke volumes.

Saturday was the day that Dean looked forwards to most during the week, and he'd spent it in a way that was both productive and relaxing—a bike ride, grocery shopping and some housework. Once the cleaning was done, Dean booted up his laptop to pay a couple of bills and check his email. There was nothing that really needed his attention, so he closed the email program and launched Facebook, automatically checking Matt's wall to see what he'd been up to recently. He didn't know why he felt so guilty, but he felt a bit like a stalker. However, he couldn't resist the lure of the details of Matt's life posted for him to see.

Matt was his closest friend and had been since they were at school. They'd been part of a group of boys who'd bonded over the usual sporting activities, but had recognised something in each other which had sealed their fate as best friends. When he was fourteen, Dean had been caught gazing at the naked backside of a front-row forward. Josh Lyons might not have been the best player on the senior team, but he was definitely the best looking. Dean hadn't even been aware that he was staring, pretty much unblinkingly ogling with his mouth hanging open. He may as well have been drooling because his admiration was so obvious. So when his classmate, Peter, had called him on it—“Watcha gawking at, fag?”—he'd had absolutely no comeback and stood

there like a stunned mullet. Even now, he cringed just remembering how stupid he had been.

He'd remained silent, too afraid to open his mouth and waited for the other shoe to drop. But before Peter could get another word in, Matt had slipped, knocking into Peter, and causing him to drop the armful of equipment he'd been carrying.

"Sorry," Matt quickly apologised. "The tiles are slippery."

By the time everything had been picked up and placed back into Peter's arms, he'd obviously forgotten his original target, and was berating Matt for his clumsiness and stupidity. He finally stormed off, leaving the two boys alone. Matt glanced around before grabbing his hand and giving it a quick squeeze. No more was said, but the message was clear.

From that moment, Dean learned to watch every step he made and censor every word uttered. He became a master at sizing up a scene, identifying the risks and steeling himself against anything that would be a temptation. His eyes never wandered, he spent most of the time in the change room looking at the floor or the inside of a locker. He kept himself distant and out of harm's way.

But a good thing came out of that day—he'd discovered someone he could finally talk to. As the only gay boys, at least the only gay boys they knew of, they'd naturally gravitated together, giving each other friendship and support. But it didn't take long for them to realise they had a lot in common, besides just their attraction to boys. They were alike with their sense of humour—the sillier the better; enjoying the same types of movies—drama and comedy; and both had a love of music. Matt was prepared to cycle with Dean on the weekend and Dean repaid this by playing indoor cricket, although he didn't particularly enjoy team sports. And of course, they both shared a newfound interest in gay porn—thank goodness for the Internet.

They may have been similar in many ways, but they still had their differences. Matt was much more scholarly than Dean and did well at school, wanting to do further study. He tutored Dean in the subjects he struggled with such as history—he hated remembering the names and dates and details of events from so long ago. Dean was practical and hands-on, so he helped Matt in woodwork and with things like repairing his bike. Matt was more outgoing and confident, and took the lead on their new adventures.

In their younger days, they'd spent their time playing or watching sport with their friends from school, or hanging out at Dean's house to play video games

or watch movies. Matt's favourite movie, the one they'd watched time and time again, was *The Outsiders*. They'd come across the classic movie with its cast of hot, young actors and loved the story of boys from the wrong side of the track. Matt still had a thing for Rob Lowe to this day. Dean also had fond memories of the time they'd managed to hire *Brokeback Mountain* when it was first released. He'd been a bit nervous watching it with Matt, and still blushed when he thought of his own reaction to the movie.

Then Dean had left school early at the end of Year Ten to take up his apprenticeship, while Matt continued at the local public school through to Year Twelve before going to university. When Dean had started as a plumber and was no longer seeing the guys from school regularly, he was worried that his friendships would disappear. He needn't have been concerned—Matt wasn't going to let him go so easily. If anything, and despite Dean's heavy workload, they spent more time together. They saw less of the other guys, but this wasn't something that overly upset Dean. He was happy just to spend time with Matt, often lying on his bed listening to music with his headphones on while Matt sat at his desk and completed his assignments.

Occasionally, they'd go to parties together. A time or two, they'd managed to slip by less-observant door security and hang out at a local pub. Matt usually led these adventures, dragging the group along and convincing them of how much fun it would be to have a beer or two while underage. It was a challenge to beat the system. Once they'd become legal, it was Matt once again who'd shown Dean the ropes, encouraging him to venture out to Oxford Street and discover the world of gay clubs. But it had been agony watching Matt hooking up with other guys, not that either of them hooked up very often. Matt found the short-term sexual gratification of hook ups left him feeling guilty and dissatisfied.

For Dean, the attraction was there, both the physical—definitely the physical—but also the mental attraction. He knew deep in his bones that Matt was the man for him. But they never hooked up. Things had never moved beyond friendship. Not only was Dean painfully shy about his sexuality when he was younger, he also didn't want to rock the boat and risk the friendship that meant so much to him. The one person he could truly be himself around with no pretence, no trying to hold anything back, no having to watch his words or worry that he'd be seen giving someone the wrong look.

As he remembered the good times with Matt, he opened the folder of photos on his laptop and started clicking through—birthday parties, family dinners, at

the cricket, at the beach, Matt on the back of a motorbike, Matt standing on top of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and hundreds of ridiculous selfies that Matt had taken and messaged him. He saved each and every one, and they still brought a smile to his face.

He loved Matt so much he wanted him to be happy, even if that happiness was to be found with someone else. If he'd had any hint or inkling that Matt had an interest in him, maybe things would have been different, but Matt had only shown interest in others. Whenever they headed into the city and hit the gay bars, Matt always found someone who caught his attention, while Dean struggled with his shyness and fear, compounded by his unrequited feelings.

With a sigh, Dean shook himself out of his memories, slammed the laptop shut, and stood up from the desk. He retrieved his washing hamper, and decided doing the laundry would distract him from thoughts of what he could never have.

"Dean, sweetie, over here!" Janet called out enthusiastically, unfortunately waving the hand that held her wine glass and sloshing the remnants of the drink over Warren, who stood at her side. "I'm so glad you could make it. I wasn't sure you were going to get here on time." She turned to nudge Warren. "Honey, can you go and get Dean a drink while I introduce him around?"

Warren gave him a brotherly squeeze on the shoulder as he headed towards the bar, and Janet wrapped her arm around him, giving him a friendly peck on the cheek.

"Some of them have gone home." She waved her arm in the direction of a group of people seated around a large table "But the stayers are still here. See the guy on the end?"

He looked in the direction she was indicating. "That's Justin. I told you he was gorgeous, didn't I?"

She was right. Justin was a good-looking guy. He'd taken his jacket off and also removed his tie, leaving him in an open-necked shirt. The white business shirt with a fine, pale stripe in the fabric, served to complement his fair skin. He obviously didn't get to spend a lot of time outdoors, or maybe he just did a good job with the slip, slop, slap. As Dean studied him, he looked up from the conversation he'd been having with the young lady seated beside him and smiled shyly Dean's way. Slightly embarrassed at being caught staring, Dean looked back towards Janet.

“Yes, he’s good looking,” he agreed. “But that doesn’t mean that anything is going to happen.”

“I know, but it could,” she responded with a grin. “That’s the beauty of meeting new people—you never know what is going to happen. You need to be prepared to put yourself out there, Dean, otherwise you’re never going to find the man of your dreams.”

Dean didn’t contradict her, although he was tempted to tell her he’d already found Mr. Right. It was just a shame that Mr. Right didn’t know it.

He looked over at Justin again. He looked a bit younger than Dean, but maybe he wasn’t, given he was some kind of whiz-kid at the company he and Janet worked for. His baby face could be deceiving. He was fair-haired with a longer lock that fell across his forehead, which he kept flicking out of the way by tilting his head. He was slight in build, but not skinny, and appeared tall. Although from his seated position, it was hard to say for sure.

Warren returned with the drinks, passing a beer to Dean while Janet wandered over to the table where her friends were sitting. It wasn’t long before she returned, this time with Justin in tow.

“Boys, I’d like you to meet Justin. Justin, this is my future husband Warren Clark and his brother, Dean.”

Warren stuck his hand out and shook hands with Justin before Dean did the same. “Nice to meet you.” Justin gave him a tentative smile, before looking down at the drink he was holding.

Janet tucked her arm in to Warren’s. “If you’ll excuse us, boys, I need to talk to Warren about something.” She dragged him in the direction of the bar while Warren hunched his shoulders apologetically. Janet was definitely not subtle.

He turned his attention back to Justin who was now watching Janet’s retreating back with a look of fear on his face. *God knows what Janet’s told him*, he thought, knowing it was obviously something, given Justin’s reaction.

“Listen,” he began. “I’m not sure what Janet’s told you about me, but I’m pretty harmless.” He gave Justin a reassuring smile.

Justin looked at him and returned the smile, visibly relaxing. “Yeah, she did have a few things to say, but nothing bad, I swear.”

“Shall we sit down?” Dean asked, relieved the tension was dissipating.

They moved to a small table, rather than joining the larger table with the half-dozen or so of Janet and Justin's work colleagues still seated around it. Silence descended as Justin looked nervously around, and Dean wondered how to start a conversation.

He'd originally thought he would give Janet's matchmaking a chance, or at least try to keep an open mind and not dwell on Matt's upcoming visit. But since the call from Matt, Matt was all he could think about, and his heart just wasn't in it, overriding his best intentions to put himself out there. He also acknowledged that, for all his good looks, Justin just wasn't his type. The perfect man for Dean was someone who would take charge—he found confidence a real turn on. Justin was too shy and nervous, and was definitely not going to make the first move. That was okay; Dean would put him out of his misery.

"Justin, I know Janet had grand hopes for us hitting it off, but I wanted to let you know that I'm not really looking for anything at the moment. I'm sure you're a great guy, but I don't think it's going to work out."

"Oh, thank goodness." Justin smiled. "I was going to say the exact same thing to you. Janet's got it in her head that she needs to help out her lonely brother-in-law. That had me worried at first, as I wondered what was wrong with you." He laughed. "I was relieved to see you weren't an ogre or anything, but I hate to tell you this, you're not really my type."

Dean grinned in relief. "I'm not, am I? So what exactly is your type?"

"Well..." Justin glanced around the room before finally resting his eyes on a guy playing pool. "See that guy holding the pool stick?"

"The one with the dark T-shirt, buzz cut, bulging biceps and tattoos? No, I didn't notice him."

Justin laughed, "That's the one. That's my type."

As they watched, he leaned over the table to take his shot—nice ass, nice biceps, nice girlfriend. Dean gave Justin a rueful look as the object of their attention placed his arm around a slender girl who folded herself against his side. His hand was in the waistband of her jeans, giving the major clue that Justin wouldn't be snagging this particular prize.

"Yeah, story of my life." Justin sighed.

"Tell me about it," Dean echoed. So Justin did.

They actually ended up spending a great evening together, comparing love lives, or lack thereof, and by the end of the night, Dean thought he might just have found a new friend. They now just needed to work out how to break it to Janet. When she'd left an hour or so earlier with Warren, she'd given them both a quick kiss and given Dean a wink, telling them both to behave.

"Let's not tell her anything. Let's just say we've exchanged numbers and leave it at that. She can come to her own conclusions."

Dean was amused by Justin's suggestion. "Great idea. It'll give us both some breathing space. I could do without the matchmaking for a while."

Justin agreed. "Her heart's in the right place. She just wants everyone to be as happy as she is now that she's found her man. But I think she's tried to set me up with every gay man she knows. I'm hoping you were last on the list."

As they parted, Justin rang his mobile phone, enabling Dean to save the number into his phone. It gave him a good feeling to know he had a least one friend besides Matt who understood him, and he was looking forwards to getting to know Justin better.

As Dean lay in bed later that night, he wondered if he'd ever meet anyone who could replace Matt in his heart. Was he unconsciously measuring everybody against Matt? Was he doing himself a disservice by not at least giving other guys a chance? Maybe the time had come to put a stop to the hopeless waiting and wishing for something that he would never have.

Chapter Two

It had been one of those days, hot and sweaty work as they laboured to finish the job and meet the deadline.

"Vince, you take the dishwasher and the kitchen sink. Johnno, you connect the fridge. Shout when you need a hand moving it."

"Sure, boss," grinned Johnno.

"Hey! Cut it out," warned Dean. He knew Johnno was only winding him up, and tried to lighten his response, but it irked him no end when the guys referred to him as *boss*. He was supervising the job, but the last thing he wanted to do was provide any more separation between him and the men. Things were all 'round better if he was just seen as one of the guys.

Between the three of them, it didn't take long to complete the job, and before he knew it they were packing up the tools. He looked at his watch and noted it was nearly midday. "Okay, boys. Let's grab a break and we can finish up after lunch."

There were another two teams on-site so they grabbed their lunches and wandered over to where the others were congregating in an open space, but under the shade of a huge gum tree. He sat on the grass, not caring about the leaves and debris, but eager to get stuck into some food—it was hungry and thirsty work. Like most of the other guys, he brought lunch in with him in the mornings, as it was too far to drive to the nearest shop. Not only that, it was cheaper to bring lunch from home, and Dean was grateful for every penny he could add to his savings. The quicker the money accumulated, the quicker he would be able to get a loan and start his own business. He opened the lunch pack, pushed the ice brick out of the way, retrieved a ham and cheese sandwich, and dug in with gusto.

Vince produced a Tupperware container full of chocolate slice and handed it around to the boys.

"This is great," praised Terry, around a mouthful of the rich treat. He shoved the rest in his mouth and grabbed a second one. "If my wife packed me lunch like this every day, I'd be in heaven."

"And as big as the side of a house," teased Johnno. "Not to mention the fact that you don't have a wife."

"Yeah," chipped in Vince. "No girl in her right mind would want to settle down with you."

Terry leaned across and punched him in the arm. "What would you know? I'm always having to fight them off with a stick."

The bantering continued, and Dean watched the boys as he finished his sandwich. They always gave each other a hard time. It was friendly teasing, nothing meant too seriously, and he enjoyed watching them try to one-up each other. As with most conversations between this group of guys, the discussion turned to the activities of the past weekend—girls and football. When he'd first started working as an apprentice, he'd been introduced to the world of the Aussie bloke—pool, beer, sport and women—stereotypical maybe, but actually a true reflection of the guys he worked with. It had been an eye-opener and reinforced to Dean just how different from his co-workers he was. Now he was much more comfortable with the joking and enjoyed spending time with the guys. All but Terry, that is. Terry was the asshole of the group, mean and bigoted, and one of the main reasons Dean liked to keep his private life to himself.

"Don't forget the barbeque on Sunday," Brett reminded them as they finished up.

As they started packing up the remains of their lunch and getting ready to head back to work, Dean thought of the weekend barbeque. He wanted to be thankful for the invitation and look forwards to the chance to hang out with the guys in a casual setting away from work, but sometimes it was a strain and he found it difficult to relax. The longer he knew them, the harder it was to avoid the questions about his *dates*, and why he never brought someone along to the pub or their other gatherings.

He wanted to be honest. He was honest with himself about his sexuality, he was honest with his family about being gay, but he just didn't know how this group of guys would react to that side of him. It was probably a stereotype, but until he was proved wrong, he believed the blokes he worked with day-to-day—the builders, plumbers and electricians—wouldn't understand his attraction to other men. These guys were tough, hardworking and into their football, beer and girls. He'd had a run-in, well more than a run-in actually, with Terry early on in the job and discovered the hard way that it was best just to keep quiet and be one of the boys.

His mum had decided to use the weekly dinner with his family to have a heart-to-heart.

"We just want to see you happy, darling. Your father and I don't mean to pressure you, but you seem so sad, Dean, and we only want to help. I just wish you'd talk to us." His mum grabbed him and pulled him into a surprisingly strong hug. "You're our baby—" He pulled away.

"Okay, Mum, now you're pushing it." But he gave her a smile, which she returned.

She put her hand to his cheek. "You're not doing yourself any favours, you know. You need to get out there and live your life, darling. I know it's hard, but hiding away won't make it get any better."

She moved away, opening the overhead cupboard and taking down a wine glass before moving to the fridge and taking a bottle of chilled white wine from the shelf. "Would you like a drink, darling?"

"Sure," Dean responded, taking a beer from her, twisting off the cap and throwing it in the bin. After his mum poured herself a glass of wine, he took the bottle from her and put it back in the fridge. They took their drinks and moved to the table.

"What about those clubs in town? Have you thought about going there?" she questioned.

"Mum!" he said in shock, totally surprised his mother would suggest such a thing.

"Don't *mum* me," she said. "I'm not as old and out of touch as you might think. I've even been to a club or two in my day, which wasn't that long ago, I'll have you know." She laughed and took a sip of the chilled Chardonnay.

"Really?" he asked, surprised.

"Really," she affirmed.

"Then why would you want me to go there?" Dean really was confused. He was sure her idea of what a gay club entailed was probably not too far from the truth, and couldn't fathom why she'd want him to be in that type of environment. *I am her baby after all*, he thought.

She took another sip of her drink before placing down her wine glass and looking at him solemnly. "It's not the club, Dean. I just want you to go somewhere where you can be yourself. Somewhere where there's at least a

chance that you'll meet someone. Ever since Matt moved away, you've been so alone."

At the mention of Matt's name, Dean stiffened.

"At least when he lived here in Sydney you had someone to talk to, someone you could truly be yourself around. You haven't been the same since he left. You don't talk about him much. Do you stay in contact?"

Dean answered truthfully, the bare facts with little embellishment, just answering the immediate question. "Yeah, we talk. And there's Facebook and a Skype call every now and then. He's actually coming to stay next weekend."

"Oh, that's nice, darling. I'm glad you're still close. I remember when you were boys and lived in each other's pockets. You must bring him around for a meal. I'd love to see him. It's been much too long."

It had been much too long—eleven months. He had thought not seeing Matt would be the best thing, thinking that it would be easier with some space between them, and he'd tried not to think of Matt and his boyfriend Stuart establishing themselves in a new city. His mum was right, they had been really close, maybe too close, and the distance now was preferable. But the eleven months apart hadn't had the desired effect, and Dean's feelings for Matt were as strong as ever.

His mum rose from her seat. "Speaking of dinner, excuse me, darling. I'm going to see how the roast is coming along." She left him sitting at the table, nursing his half-finished beer and dwelling on the past.

His mum's questions about Matt only served to make Dean think about him all the more. They'd exchanged a few messages over the last few days, but Dean was looking forwards to having Matt in Sydney where he could provide the support Matt needed. For such a long time, Matt had played the role of protector, looking out for Dean's best interests and seeing him through difficult times. It would be nice to do the same for his friend for a change.

Of course, thinking of Matt in his hero role reminded Dean of one of the worst nights of his life.

One night, when Dean had been exiting a gay club, he'd literally run into someone. He tried to apologise to the person he'd bumped into, shocked to see it was Terry who had recently started working at the same company. Terry was

peed, and he was not a happy drunk. He shoved Dean hard, forcing him back against the brick wall of the building, knocking the wind out of him.

“Don’t touch me, you little faggot,” he hissed as Dean tried to right himself, this time pushing him so aggressively that the back of Dean’s head snapped into the brick hard enough to leave him reeling. He raised his hand to the back of his head where the pain was radiating violently, and realised too late that Terry thought he was going to punch him. In his drunken state, Terry raised his fist, and if not for the arrival of his equally drunken mates, Dean had no doubt Terry would have hit him. He was left paralysed with fear and labouring to catch his breath.

Matt had been furious when Dean had finally gained the courage, a few months later, to tell him what had happened. He had wanted Dean to report him to the boss, but too much time had passed, the incident hadn’t happened at work and he didn’t think Terry was a real threat to him. Dean wasn’t even sure how much Terry remembered of the incident, if anything, due to how much he’d obviously had to drink. He had never said anything directly to Dean; however he made a lot of snide and derogatory remarks about gay men, so Dean preferred to stay on the safe side. He kept out of Terry’s way and tried not to say or do anything to antagonise him. Matt hadn’t been so forgiving and had wanted to seek Terry out—to make sure he knew his actions weren’t acceptable, and most likely give Terry a taste of his own medicine.

Dean had been relieved when Matt had agreed not to rock the boat, but it still made him feel warm inside to know he had someone like Matt who cared enough about him to go to battle on his behalf. Matt made him feel safe and secure. Now it was his turn to make sure Matt was given all the love and support he needed to get his own life back on track.

On Fridays, they tried to finish the day at the local. The local was whatever pub or bar happened to be closest to the current work site. This time it was a pub close to the city, a block or two from the building site and the typical hotel for this type of location—two bars, a tiny beer garden, a bistro and a gaming room. They’d managed to grab one of the few tables outside and made the most of the late afternoon sunshine while they enjoyed a couple of beers. They’d already had one round and a small cheer went up when his co-worker Steve returned bearing a metal tray laden with round two.

“Here you go, boys,” he said as he handed over the glasses filled to the brim with the amber ale.

"I'm so glad this week's over. The weekend couldn't come fast enough," Dean said before taking a long swallow of the cold beer.

"Yeah, bring it on," exclaimed Johnno in agreement. "A chance to sleep in, no place to be, nothing to do. Bloody brilliant!"

They all nodded in agreement, raising their glasses to toast the two days with no seven o'clock starts and hard labour. All except Vince.

"It's all right for you blokes. I've got the missus on my back. She's got plans for the yard this weekend. Not only do I have to do the lawns, but clean out the gutters, too," he complained. "You boys don't know how easy you have it, what with living at home with the folks or living in a small flat. There's nothing relaxing about living the dream on the quarter acre block, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise." He downed the beer in one long gulp.

"Aw, come on, Vince, it can't be that bad," Johnno cajoled. "Not with a missus like yours."

They'd all met Vince's wife, Anne, and she was as nice as they came. Vince loved his home, his wife and his kids, and everything that came with it. He had the good grace to look sheepish.

"So what's everyone up to on the weekend?" asked Joe, and the conversation moved on to weekend sporting activities, family engagements and household tasks.

Dean watched his work buddies, enjoying the conversation and the teasing. The sun was warm on his shoulders, the beer cold in his hand, and the conversation a comfortable buzz surrounding him. He relaxed as he thought of the upcoming weekend, his own plans including a night on the town—for once he'd take his mum up on one of her suggestions. A drink, a dance, and maybe he'd get lucky. Certainly nothing to lose, and it sure beat sitting around on his own for yet another Saturday night. Sure, he could meet up with one of the guys, either a work buddy or one of the small group of school friends he still kept in contact with, but it wasn't the same. He needed to be able to be himself and let his hair down so to speak.

"Who wants chips?" Joe's question dragged him out of his reverie, and he stared at his empty glass and then the group around him before standing.

"I'll get them. It's my round anyway."

After placing the order, he made a quick trip back to the table with a couple of bags of chips and some straw baskets to put them in. He then returned to the

bar and stood waiting for the beers to be pulled. As he waited for his order, he looked around at the crowd that was starting to fill the small bar. He and the guys had gotten there early. Their early start also meant they finished work early so they'd been able to arrive at the pub not long after three. As it was coming up to five, the corporate crowd was now starting to filter in.

Just looking at the men in their dark suits, with their crisp shirts and ties, reminded him of Matt. *God, he had a thing for a guy in a suit!* Matt looked great in anything, but when he wore a suit, he unintentionally did things to Dean that were torture. Tall and slim, just a little taller than Dean at six foot two inches, his strong shoulders and narrow waist were just made for the tailored lines of a suit.

Dean found himself staring at a couple of guys who approached the bar and stood next to him. The younger man picked up the wine list from the bar, and together with his companion, browsed the extensive selection of wines stocked by the inner city pub. Just watching the fair heads tilted close together brought a lump to his throat as he thought of his friend. Matt's hair was a dark blond which he kept fairly short in the usual corporate standard, although he always left a little length on top, a sign of his slightly rebellious nature. But where Matt differed from these two handsome men, at least in Dean's eyes, was in his sex appeal—it didn't matter if it was late at night or first thing in the morning, Matt's strong jaw always had a well-groomed, dark shadow of stubble. The contrast of sophisticated suit and sexy scruff was enticing, and when combined with his olive complexion and clear, blue eyes, set a standard that no man had been able to beat.

"You 'right, mate?" the voice of the man behind the bar interrupted.

Dean jerked his attention back to barman, "What? Yeah, everything's fine." He left a tip, picked up the tray and made his way through the now busy room back to the boys.

He passed out the drinks before squeezing back into his seat and reaching for the chips that were almost gone. He dragged the basket in front of him and made do with the crumbs.

"Sorry, mate." Terry laughed. "I guess we were hungry."

"Hey, look at that, will you?" Terry nudged his shoulder, using a tilt of his head to indicate the two men who'd entered the beer garden and headed towards a table nearby as another group departed.

It was the guys from the bar. One held an ice bucket, filled with ice and a bottle of white wine. Two wine glasses rested in the top of the bucket. His companion carried a chip basket in one hand and used his other to gently steer his friend. He assumed it was the sight of the man's hand on the small of the other man's back that had caught Terry's attention.

Terry rolled his eyes in... was it disgust? Dean wasn't one hundred percent sure, but his meaning was clear. Luckily though he didn't say anything further.

Dean determined that he would make this his last beer of the day. Suddenly the enjoyment of an afternoon at the pub had faded, and he wanted nothing more than to go home and have a quiet night in.

He wished he felt as good as he knew he looked. At a touch over six foot, tanned and muscled, Dean was in good shape. He had the taut body of someone who worked physically for a living, not the muscles obtained from countless gym sessions. His tight, dark jeans and fitted, black T-shirt, made the most of the slim hips, flat stomach and well-formed chest and biceps. There was nothing flashy about his appearance, just simple clothes and boots with a plain leather band tied at his wrist, but he knew he'd made the most of his assets. Dean had never gone over the top with his appearance, just accentuated his natural good looks—what you saw was what you got—Dean, pure and simple. But Dean pure and simple was pretty hot. He'd been told he was good looking often enough in the past to believe it, but he didn't like to play on his good looks. Well, not too much.

He knew he wouldn't have any problems attracting attention because he hadn't in the past, and that's what he counted on tonight. He'd been looking forwards to getting out, to some dancing and flirting, and maybe finding someone for something more. If he was honest, it was the something more that drove his plan to hit the clubs. It had been a while since he'd last visited this part of the city, and he'd been looking forwards to the Saturday night out. Thinking about Matt had almost made him change his mind about heading out, some weird sense of being disloyal, but he pushed the thought aside and resolved to have a good time.

As he stood at the bar, waiting for his vodka tonic to be poured, he scanned the crowd. As usual, the club was doing a busy trade. The corners of the room were relatively dark, the gloom being brightened at regular intervals by flashes of light. Over the dance floor the flashes were more constant, the seething mass

of dancers illuminated by strobing beams of light. It was hot and crowded and noisy, perfect to get lost in. He felt someone push up close next to him, drawing his attention back to the bar. It was crowded, but not so crowded the guy had to be pressed to his side—the games had started already. He glanced at the tall, dark-haired man at his right. The greying at the temples gave him a distinguished look. Despite his maturity, or maybe because of it, he was an attractive guy. He indicated the glass he put on the damp surface of the bar and leaned close to be heard over the pounding music. “Buy you a drink?” So, good looking, generous and gentlemanly.

Dean swept his eyes over his admirer, preparing to accept his offer when it occurred to him that Mr-tall-dark-mature-and-handsome was just the type of guy that Matt usually went for. *Shit! Why did he have to think of that?*

“No, thanks anyway,” he said. “I’ve got it covered.”

He picked up the glass the bartender had just placed in front of him, threw a twenty onto the tray and turned away from the bar. He pushed through the crowd and headed towards the back where some small tables were situated, cringing slightly at the stickiness underfoot.

Over the next hour and a half he repeated the action—head to the bar for a refill, turn down any guy who approached him, back to the relatively secluded spot he’d secured, slowly finish his drink, repeat. However, by the time he reached drink number four, things were looking a lot better. He’d moved to a booth and was enjoying the atmosphere, body relaxed and swaying to the music, so when Mr-tall-dark-mature-and-handsome made his second approach, he forgot all about his reasons for turning him down in the first place.

The guy wandered over to Dean’s table, indicating the empty space beside him. He leaned over and raised his voice to be heard over the low throbbing bass.

“Do you mind if I join you?”

Dean tilted his head, nodding towards the seat beside him, and the guy moved in, not needing any more of an invitation. He placed his drink on the dark timber tabletop and pointed to Dean’s drink.

“Do you want another one?” he asked.

What was it with this guy? All he seemed to want to do was ply him with drinks. They hadn’t even exchanged names yet.

Dean thought for a few seconds, but had enough sense to realise another drink was the last thing he needed. He shook his head to decline the offer.

He watched the older guy play with his own drink, swirling the straw and moving the ice cubes around in the glass. He must have been mid-thirties or even forties, at least judging by the silvering hair at his temples and the faint lines fanning out from the corners of his eyes, although in the dim light it was difficult to tell. He was wearing dark pants and a dark, buttoned shirt, the top few buttons undone and exposing an expanse of his chest with only a smattering of dark hair. He was well put together—great clothes, fabulous hair, neatly groomed scruff on his jaw—but his actions didn't reflect any of the confidence he should have been entitled to feel. Long moments passed, and he kept stirring the drink, the ice cubes now no more than ice chips.

Dean found himself getting pissed off at the guy's silence, for God's sake, Dean thought, he approached me, you'd think he'd have some sort of line ready or at least strike up a conversation! Strong and silent definitely wasn't the type Dean preferred, more like strong and take charge. He sighed and took another large sip of his drink as he prepared to get this thing moving.

He started with the obvious. "I'm Dean."

"Ah, hi. I'm John."

"Well, it's nice to meet you, John." Dean had to lean towards him to be heard over the music. John didn't expand. There was silence again.

This wasn't going to be easy, and Dean wondered why he was bothering. He really only wanted one thing, and he wasn't at all sure that John was going to be the one to give it to him. But just then, John looked at him, dragging his eyes from the top of Dean's dark hair, down his torso and finally stopping at his crotch. Okay, so maybe this was going somewhere.

"Do you want to dance?" Dean asked, deciding the dance floor was the most obvious way of getting them together.

"I'm not much of a dancer," John responded. "I seemed to miss that part when they gave me my gay gene."

Dean laughed. Well, it appeared that maybe John had a sense of humour.

After a brief period of convincing John to dance, ending with Dean squeezing past him and then dragging him by the arm to get him out of his seat, they found themselves amongst the crowd. The vodka started to kick in and a wave of dizziness swept over Dean causing him to stumble on his feet and knock into John. John just grabbed him, wrapping his arms around Dean's waist and holding him upright. They moved like that for a while, swaying back

and forth, rather than actually doing much dancing, but still it didn't take long to get hot and sweaty.

They were surrounded by guys making out on the dance floor, the crowded space a perfect opportunity to bump and grind. The half-naked bodies left little to the imagination and reminded Dean of why he had come to the club in the first place. He was here to scratch his itch, to find someone for a night to satisfy his urge. Over John's shoulder, he watched two guys push up against one another. Equal in height and dressed similarly in jeans and no shirts, their chests glistened with sweat. The leaner of the two, with fair skin and auburn hair, had his hands on his dance partner's shoulders, and as Dean watched, shoved him backwards until he came up against the wall and couldn't move any further. With nowhere to go, he was pressed hard between the plaster and the man who was now holding him by the wrists and grinding against his body. His head fell back and Dean saw, rather than heard, him groan. He was held tight, and the relentless pressure from his partner kept him immobile and straining, unable to do anything but be at the mercy of the red-haired man.

Dean let out a groan of his own as he watched the scene unfolding before him, his cock thickening as he imagined being the one forced against the wall, mouth forced open to accept the kisses of his partner. John gave his shoulders a gentle squeeze and pulled back to smile at him. So maybe John wasn't the man of his dreams and maybe he wasn't going to take charge and give Dean what he wanted, but from the feel of things, he wouldn't be adverse to Dean's advances.

They made their way back to the table, via a quick stop at the bar, for refills. Stupid probably, but Dean wasn't driving, and he now found the idea of losing himself in the drink, noise and the other man was so appealing. He tumbled back into the booth, sloshing the vodka onto the table where the alcohol pooled, adding to the sticky mess that was already on the timber top. "Whoops." He laughed, licking the liquid from his fingers.

He proceeded to end the night in a way he knew he'd regret in the morning. The temporary alcohol-induced happiness and short-term sexual gratification left him feeling guilty, unfulfilled and wanting.

Chapter Three

It had been a shit day at work. They'd been plumbing apartments again when a burst pipe outside had meant turning off all the water to the building. He and Joe had been diverted to do the repair work, although it wasn't usually something he did, well at least not recently. It was hard and dirty work and he was covered in mud from head to toe. All he wanted to do was jump in the shower and stand there until the water ran clean. He'd been on the go since before six that morning so he was bone-tired as well as filthy. So the plan was shower, and an hour's nap, and then prepare for Matt's arrival. He figured he'd have a few hours, trusting that Matt would have finished his day at the office and then needed a couple of hours to get himself to the airport and fly to Sydney.

He took the lift instead of the stairs, stumbling with exhaustion as he reached the door of his flat. It took him a minute to fumble with the key in the door before he finally got it to turn. As he pushed it open, the door was suddenly pulled from the inside, and he found himself falling through the opening into the small foyer. "Umphhh!" Matt's arms came up and caught him as he fell forwards, and he looked up in shock.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Matt laughed. "Saving your butt, it looks like."

He still had his arms wrapped around Dean, so Dean pulled himself together and stood back up straight. His heart slowed a little and he flushed with pleasure as he took in the sight before him. Matt stood in all his glory. He'd removed his tie and jacket, but still wore his dress pants and white shirt, which now had dirt on the sleeves. He took a large breath, exhaled and stepped back.

"Geez, you scared me half to death. Sorry about your shirt, mate, but you deserve it. Frightened the living daylights out of me," Dean exclaimed.

He reached across and brushed the grey dust from the sleeve of Matt's previously spotless white shirt.

"What are you doing here so early anyway?"

Matt turned and started walking back towards the living room as he spoke. Dean suppressed a groan as he watched him walk away, his beautiful arse perfectly showcased in the dark trousers.

"I was too antsy to wait for work to be over and couldn't concentrate, so I took a half-day. They owe me time anyway, what with all the extra hours we've been putting in."

Matt plonked himself down on the couch and made himself comfortable, leaning back into the throw pillows and throwing an arm along the back.

Dean stayed standing, not wanting to dirty the fabric of his lounge. He felt off balance, still shocked from the surprise of falling into Matt's arms and overwhelmed by the feelings of pure joy at having Matt finally here, but also feeling concern for his friend.

"I'm just going to take a quick shower and change. You'll be all right? Help yourself to a drink or something."

Matt laughed and pointed to the beer bottle already open on the glass coffee table.

"Right. Well, I guess I'll shower, then. I'll be back soon."

He walked down the hall, turning to sneak a quick glance at Matt, seeing him pick up the remote and aim it at the wide screen television. He looked so at home on Dean's couch, feet on the table, relaxed and comfortable.

He kept the temperature cool to help distract himself from the knowledge of Matt sprawled across his couch, and focused on a quick and functional wash. He felt somewhat more composed after his shower, but was still slightly on edge, rattled by Matt's early appearance. He dressed in an old pair of comfortable, worn jeans and a grey T-shirt, and looked at his reflection in the mirror, pleased it didn't reflect his inner turmoil. He pushed his damp hair back from his forehead before padding, barefoot towards the kitchen.

He called to Matt as he walked through the living room, "You hungry? I'm going to throw together a stir-fry."

"Sounds great." Matt followed him to the small kitchen.

While Dean gathered the ingredients from the fridge and grabbed the kitchen utensils he'd need, Matt wandered around to the far side of the island bench, taking a seat on a stool before taking a sip of his drink.

Dean eyed him as he started preparing the vegetables. Even slightly ruffled, he looked gorgeous. His jaw was shadowed with the day's growth of stubble and his hair fell forwards into his blue eyes. He'd rolled his sleeves up, which exposed the strong muscles of his forearms with their light smattering of hair. He imagined touching those arms, or even better, those arms holding him.

“So do you have any special plans for the weekend?” he asked as he cut into a red capsicum and attempted to divert his errant thoughts.

“Not really. I just needed to get out of the house for a couple of days. Maybe we could hit a club tomorrow night or grab a movie or something.”

“Sure,” Dean responded. He picked up the capsicum and started cutting it into long strips. “So you’re okay to stay in tonight? I thought we could eat and then watch a movie.”

“Yeah, okay.” Matt smiled and reached across to grab a cutting board, dragging it in front of him, along with some carrots. That little smile made Dean’s heart flutter just a bit. He sighed and passed Matt a vegetable peeler. “I really do appreciate you having me this weekend, Dean. I know it can’t be a barrel of laughs, having me land on your doorstep like this.”

“Hey, that’s what friends are for, right? Besides, you’re no trouble. You should know that by now.”

Matt nodded, finished peeling the carrots, then picked up a knife from the bench, and started slicing them into thin round discs. After finishing one carrot, he placed the knife down on the wooden board.

“Stuart doesn’t think that. That I’m no trouble, I mean.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “Supposedly I place too many demands and have too many expectations.”

He started peeling the label off the corner of the beer bottle.

“So it was Stuart’s choice to break up?” Dean couldn’t help but ask as he picked up the last carrot from Matt’s board, bypassing the onion which he remembered Matt didn’t like.

“No... yes... sort of.” Matt took a minute to think over his answer. “I guess it was both of us in some way. It hasn’t been working for a while, for a lot longer than a while, if I’m perfectly honest. I thought the move to Melbourne would help and show Stuart that I was committed to making our relationship work. It turns out that moving in together wasn’t really the commitment I thought it to be. Apparently, although he was willing to move in together—to *buy* a house for God’s sake!—he doesn’t think he’s ready to settle down.” Matt gave a funny sort of half-laugh.

Dean was pissed off to hear that Stuart had used Matt like that, had led him to think they had a forever kind of relationship and played on his emotions. However, he wasn’t surprised. Stuart had never had Matt’s best interests at

heart. He had a job offer that meant he had to move cities, and he would have gone whether Matt was prepared to relocate or not. Stuart was a user and had never been known to put anyone before himself. Sure, he'd been fun to be around, the life of the party, but he wasn't there when the going got tough. Like the time Matt's dad was rushed to hospital with a suspected heart attack. Matt had called Dean, and together they'd raced to the hospital and spent a countless number of hours pacing the corridors while they waited for news. When Dean finally suggested calling Stuart, he'd been held up in a meeting and unable to join them until the end of the work day. Matt hadn't seemed too upset by that, but Dean was fuming at the way Stuart treated his boyfriend.

"Anyway," Matt was saying. "It doesn't really matter now. To be perfectly honest, I'm relieved. I think I knew Stuart wasn't the one, but it seemed easier just to stay together. All that matters now is that it's over, and I need to work out what I'm going to do."

Dean looked up as he placed the snow peas he had sliced into a bowl and reached for the chicken fillets. "Have you had any ideas?"

"Well Stuart's moved out the house, but we haven't worked out what to do with it. I think it's an okay time to sell."

"Have you thought of moving back to Sydney?" Dean asked hopefully.

"I have, but it's not that easy. When I got the job transfer, it was a sideways move, but since then I've had a promotion, which means more responsibility and more money. If I move back to Sydney, the only position available would be a step backwards. Plus, until the house sells I need to keep paying my half of the mortgage. If I come back to Sydney, I'll also need to fork out rent."

Dean tried not to let the disappointment show. "So you'll stay in Melbourne?"

"It looks like it, at least for now," Matt said. "Speaking of work, how's the contract going? Terry still giving you a hard time?" Matt successfully changed the subject, and they spent the remainder of the time preparing dinner chatting about Dean's job and the guys he worked with.

"I know you worry about how they'll react," Matt said. "But is it really worth hiding for the rest of your life? From what I can see, Vince and Johnno seem like great guys. Are you sure they'd react badly? Maybe they wouldn't necessarily be celebrating, but I can't see either of them making too much of a deal either. And you keep telling me that Terry won't cause any real trouble."

"You don't see how they all behave. It may sound stereotypical, but these guys are true blokes. The few times anything remotely gay has come up, they've laughed and made jokes. And I might not be afraid of Terry anymore, but I still think it's best to leave well enough alone."

"But the others haven't done anything other than poke fun, have they? Maybe they don't know how to react, and it's easier to make fun than deal with their own fears," Matt persisted. "I'm not saying that making jokes is right, and I'm sure it makes you uncomfortable as hell. Plus, I'm not in your shoes and only you can know what's really going on, but have you ever thought you're maybe using them as an excuse?"

Dean looked at Matt in shock. *What the hell?*

"I know you don't like to talk about it, but I sometimes think what happened that night is the cause of your fear of coming out. Anyone going through an experience like that, of being assaulted, is bound to have fears. You never reported it and you never really spoke to anyone about it. You only mentioned it to me in passing and wouldn't really talk about it. No wonder you are afraid of coming out."

"But I'm not afraid of coming out!" Dean insisted. "I'm out to you and to my whole family. I've gone out with guys and I go to clubs. I'm not closeted."

"You're right, but you're also wrong. You're not really out and free," Matt said. "You're not free to live your whole life in a way that will make you happy. You're fearful of the reaction of people you spend five days out of seven with. That's not being out. What happens when you meet someone, someone you finally let into your life? Will you hide them too or will they be able to meet your friends? How will you introduce them and talk about them?"

Matt had a point, but as far as Dean was concerned, it was never going to happen. He wasn't likely to meet someone he'd want to have in his life like that anyway. That ship had sailed. He'd felt a brief flicker of hope when he'd heard that Matt was breaking up with Stuart, thought he might finally take a chance to talk about how he really felt, but Matt's plans to stay in Melbourne, and his own reluctance to come out at work, dowsed that idea.

"You know I love you and just want the best for you, right?" Matt walked around the bench then put his arm around Dean's shoulder and gave him a friendly hug. "Come on. Let's get this stir-fry finished so we can eat in front of the TV and watch that movie you were talking about."

A short while later, they picked up their meals and cutlery and made their way to the lounge, balancing great bowls of stir-fry on their laps while they watched *The Outsiders* together, just like they had so many times when they were younger. No matter how often they'd seen the movie over the years, Dean still loved watching it with Matt. He loved seeing Matt's enjoyment and maybe teasing him just a little about his Rob Lowe crush.

As the credits rolled, Dean turned to look at Matt and found him already looking his way. The room was dimly lit, but his eyes glittered as they reflected the light from the TV. For a moment, Dean was fifteen again and back in Matt's room, filled with the longing that had started all those years ago and been part of his life for so long. In that moment, he wanted so badly to reach for Matt, to pull him into his arms and press his lips to his mouth. He wanted to kiss him with all the passion that he'd restrained for a decade. But once again, Dean lost his courage and was the first to look away. Their gazes separated and the spell broke.

They stood against the far wall, squeezed together, sipping their drinks and checking out the crowd. Dean watched Matt's eyes roam over the men in front of them. They were facing the dance floor, which was a seething mass of bodies. It was like a smorgasbord, a range of choices for every taste—young and old, tall and short, muscled and lean, smooth and hairy chests, bearded bears and baby faces.

Dean loved just standing next to Matt, feeling him at his side and enjoying the sensation of his body nudging his every now and then as someone sidled past and forced them closer together. His presence was comforting and something Dean was all too aware of. Finally, Matt put his drink down on a nearby table and took the glass out of Dean's hand before grabbing him by the hand and dragging him through the crowd and towards the dance floor. He followed as Matt pushed his way through the crowd until they found themselves deep in the centre of the heaving mass. They started to sway to the beat, moving in time with the others around them, becoming part of the crowd of dancers who were moving to the beat.

He kept his eyes fixed on Matt as his friend smiled at him before Matt was grabbed from behind by an eager pair of hands. The hands were attached to an attractive, older guy—tall and built—who pulled Matt backwards, hard against his chest. Matt didn't miss a beat as he turned his head to look at the guy who held him captive.

The sense of disappointment that washed over Dean wiped the smile from his face. He knew the inevitable would happen, but he'd hoped he'd have Matt's attention for longer. He resigned himself to losing Matt to his sexy new dancing partner and turned to head back to the area of small tables. As he pushed through the crowd, arms grabbed him around the waist to stop his exit. He wasn't in the mood to dance and flirt, and tried to free himself, but the voice in his ear stopped him. "Where do you think you're going?"

Matt's arms held firmly and he moved even closer.

The feel of the body pressed tightly against his back rendered him incapable of speech. *Oh geez*, he thought as his body instantly responded to his best friend pressed against his arse. Dean shivered as Matt's hands wandered across his belly and his breath caressed his cheek. Muscles instantly tensed and his erection began pressing against his fly. Between the music and the lights and the feel of Matt's body, he could hardly come up with a coherent thought—no thoughts beyond, *oh my God!* Being held like this was heaven. Being held like this was hell. As they continued to rock, chest to back, pelvis to arse, Dean could only pray that this torture would never end.

He could feel Matt's erection through the denim of his jeans that forced him to utter a frustrated groan. He knew Matt's excitement was a natural response to the friction, most likely being helped along by whomever Matt was watching over his shoulder. But oh, how Dean wanted that to be for him. They danced like that for a long time, Dean making the most of the unaccustomed contact, lost in the feel of being held in Matt's arms, lost in his fantasy of a different sort of future with Matt.

Eventually Matt released his arms and stepped back, and Dean felt the sudden loss of contact acutely. It wasn't until he was released that he realised just how much he'd loved the security of the tight hold Matt had on him, the way he'd been held in position, captured and unable to escape until Matt had freed him. His face burnt with shame at the realisation of what he was feeling and how he'd let his body respond to his friend. But Matt just turned him around, threw his arms around his shoulders and pulled him close again, giving Dean no choice but to encircle Matt's waist in a hug of his own. This time they swayed together, foreheads touching as Dean endeavoured to still his beating heart and get his breathing under control.

The music picked up in pace and the seething mass of bodies started to move faster to the darkly sexy song. It felt totally surreal as Matt pulled back

and stared at him, his hands never leaving Dean's shoulders, never breaking contact. His eyes were dark and his handsome features shadowed, but when he smiled, it lit up his whole face and Dean's heart with it. Matt's hand left Dean's shoulder and travelled up to graze along the side of his face, soft and slow, just a gentle whisper that scraped against his stubbled skin. His eyes never left Dean's until finally, that tender smile turned into a sexy grin and he suddenly moved.

He struck like lightning—quick and without warning—wrapping Dean once more in his arms, then moving against him. But this time the dancing wasn't slow and seductive, it was sinfully sexy. Matt had a way of moving his body that really shouldn't be called dancing. The music flowed through his body, he had perfect rhythm and the way he moved was pure sex. The fluid motions of his hips as they rocked and swayed and pressed into Dean could only be interpreted one way. Although fully dressed and standing on a crowded dance floor, he was worshipping Dean's body. It was obvious in every provocative thrust against his body, every touch of wandering hands as they skirted down Dean's sides and across his belly and back up until fingers grazed his nipples. It was in the way Matt's eyes locked with his and in the feelings it generated. Matt made Dean feel sexy and alive and wanted. He surrendered to the irresistible urge—gave himself over to the moment and gave back as good as he got. They danced together, touching in ways they'd never done before. Dean gave himself permission to touch his friend and, after some initial hesitancy, did not hold back. Grasping hands and hard bodies, Matt not only allowed his touches, but also sought them out. He pushed his obvious erection against Dean's and wrapped his arms around his neck once more, pulling Dean closer. Their dancing gentled. They were both panting, hot and sweaty.

“Jesus,” Matt whispered in Dean's ear, as he caught his breath.

Finally, the heat of the crowded dance floor, together with their own exertion, drove them to take a break. Dean followed as Matt pulled him by the hand towards the bar and bought them each a bottle of water. Thrusting a cold water towards Dean, Matt twisted the cap off his own bottle. Beads of sweat in his hairline darkened his naturally blond hair, and even as Dean watched, a droplet rolled down the side of his face, across his jawline and down his neck. Dean followed the path with his eyes, enthralled by the movement of Matt's throat as he swallowed the cool water. He'd never been so physically aware of his friend, and gulped from his own bottle in an effort to cool things down.

“Come on. Let’s go home,” Matt said. He took Dean’s now empty bottle and placed them both on the bar, then took Dean’s hand, dragging him towards the exit.

When they got home to the flat, the door was hardly closed before Matt was pulling his still damp T-shirt over his head and shoving Dean down the hall.

“I need a shower. I stink.” Matt dropped his shirt outside the bathroom door and toed off his shoes. His bare torso gave Dean a glimpse of the gorgeous dragon tattoo covering his shoulder. Dean forced himself to look away as Matt started on the buttons of his jeans.

Oh, God! His breath caught—a choking sound in his throat as he turned towards his own bedroom doorway. Matt’s hand on his arm stopped his movement.

“Hey, are you okay?”

Dean raised his eyes, and they stood looking at each other for a few moments, before Dean nodded his head. Another moment or two passed where he could feel his heart beating rapidly, trying to bust out of his chest. Matt’s hand on his arm felt like a solid weight tethering him and preventing him from moving. He looked at that hand—long, strong fingers gripping his upper arm so firmly that the knuckles had started to whiten—before raising his eyes to Matt’s again. Another couple of heartbeats—

They came together in a crashing of mouths, eagerly grasping at each other. Dean wasn’t sure if it was him who had made the first move or whether Matt had instigated the kiss, but *oh, what a kiss!* Hot and wet, no restraint. Matt’s tongue was in his mouth, devouring him. One hand was behind his neck, tilting Dean’s head so that he could get better access, and he didn’t hesitate to give Matt what he wanted. The other arm was pulling him tight, moulding their bodies together. Then as fast as the kiss started, it gentled. The passionate invasion of his mouth became a slow and gentle suckling as Matt ran his tongue softly over Dean’s lips before ending the kiss and resting his forehead against Dean’s. Dean could feel the pounding of Matt’s heart as he continued to hold him close.

“Christ, mate,” Matt said, sounding as overwhelmed as Dean felt.

Eventually, Matt stepped back and the sense of loss was immediate.

Matt looked at him, those now dark eyes searching his. Seeking reassurance perhaps? Whatever he was looking for, he must have found it. He reached for

the buttons of Dean's shirt, starting at the top. The anticipation of watching those buttons being undone one by one was almost too much, as was the slight grazing of Matt's fingertips against his skin. Once the shirt was unbuttoned, Matt slipped it off his shoulders and pulled his arms free, letting the shirt drop to the carpet.

Once again, Matt took a step back. This time his hands went to the buttons of his own jeans. Dean found himself mirroring Matt's actions, undoing his own button and pulling down the zipper to expose the blue boxer briefs underneath. Their eyes never left each other, and as Matt dropped his jeans, Dean kicked off his shoes and hurried to remove his own pants, followed quickly by his socks. It didn't take long for them to both be standing almost naked outside the bathroom door.

Finally, Matt made a move, taking Dean's hand and pulling him towards the bathroom door. Dean followed and then waited while Matt turned on the shower, adjusting the temperature until the water ran warm and the steam started to fill the small room. He turned to Dean, leaning to brush a gentle kiss on his lips. It was tender and sweet, the whole encounter a surreal dream, and he was overwhelmed by the immense emotions bubbling up inside. Unsure what to do or how to react, he stood there, allowing Matt to minister to him.

Matt grasped the waistband of Dean's boxer briefs, a hand at each hip, as he looked once again at Dean with question in his beautiful eyes. Dean nodded. As Matt bent to take the briefs off, Dean's previously restrained cock sprung free. Once released from the confines of the fabric, his dick bounced upward to slap his belly, his response to Matt no longer a secret. Not that the briefs had done much to hide his obvious erection. He held his breath as Matt stared at the sight in front of him before finally looking up and smiling. The grin didn't leave his face as he stood, spun Dean by his shoulders and pushed him backwards into the shower. He wasn't sure whether to be disappointed or relieved, conflicting emotions as his body reacted the way his heart had always wanted to.

Dean's heart rate rose as Matt shimmied out of his own boxer briefs and joined him in the shower. He took in the vision of the gorgeous man in front of him as Matt lathered a sponge before soaping him gently—chest, arms, and stomach—then turning him to cleanse his other side—shoulders, back and arse. The glide of his smooth hands over Dean's equally smooth skin, now slippery with soapsuds, was heaven. The touch, combined with the pounding of the warm water, was maddeningly seductive. His cock still stood proud, but his muscles relaxed and he focused on the sensations.

The bathroom continued to fill with steam and the citrus aroma of the body wash filled his nostrils. He leaned his hands against the cold tile of the wall as Matt's hands continued to wash with their seductive caress. Matt's fingers alternated between firm kneading of Dean's tight muscles and long gentle strokes down the length of his torso. One of Matt's hands snaked around his middle and the palm pressed flat to his belly, as Matt plastered himself to Dean's back. Matt's right hand massaged Dean's shoulder.

Wanting to touch, Dean started to lower his hands and began to move, but Matt grabbed his hands, pushing them back against the tile, his body holding Dean firmly in position. Unable to help himself, Dean pushed out his arse. He could feel the erection against the curve of his left butt cheek, and moaned at the thought of having Matt this close, but wanting him even closer still. As if aware of what he was thinking, Matt moved his body and arms at the same time—as his left hand moved to press against Dean's belly again, he twisted slightly and allowed his cock to fall into the crease of Dean's arse, pulling him tightly back against him.

Matt then started the ultimate torture, drawing that perfect erection slowly up and down between Dean's butt cheeks. His movements started slowly, just gentle sliding movements against the slippery skin, but he soon started to speed up while at the same time pulling even harder to hold Dean closer. Infuriatingly, the hand on his pelvic bone, just skimming the hair there, didn't move to touch Dean's erection, a touch he was now desperate for. He released the wall to grab for his cock, but once again, Matt reached his wrist, forcing the hand back to the wall, then slowly ran his hand down Dean's arm and back to his waist. The action made Dean harder, if that was possible, his lust driven to an all-time high by Matt being the one to control what was happening.

He groaned, thrusting uselessly into the air, his untouched dick aching for any kind of touch, the action forcing his arse back onto the thrusting cock behind him. He couldn't remember ever being this turned on. And then it happened. Matt's hand finally moved an inch or so lower and gripped his cock. There was nothing soft and gentle to the touch, his grip was firm and sure. Dean nearly lost his footing with the intense pleasure that overtook him. Matt's hand on his cock became his sole focus and his orgasm wasn't going to wait. Years of wanting were about to erupt and he couldn't do a thing about it. He pushed back against Matt's cock, loving the slide against his hole, and forwards into the sure grip, but it was Matt who controlled the movements, Matt who was giving the pleasure and dictating Dean's release. Matt moved slightly, his

cock now shoving hard into Dean's hip, leaving Dean wanting. But not for long—the stroking of his dick sped up and Matt's other hand found its way to his arse, his fingers massaging and seeking. As one of those gorgeous long fingers found his opening and pushed inside, he thrust back, at the same time screaming out his release and jetting long strands of come onto the tiles. Matt squeezed him tight and groaned, and Dean felt Matt's release pulse from him as he pressed against Dean's side.

They stood in their embrace for a long time, both catching their breath, before Matt finally moved. Without a word, he took the washcloth and used more body wash to gently clean Dean off. Matt washed his own come from Dean's hip then soaped his balls and arse, before wringing the cloth and hanging it on the rail. As the water started to run cool, he turned the taps off and stepped from the shower. Matt wrapped a plush, navy blue towel around Dean's waist before getting another towel and using it to wrap around Dean's shoulders, coaxing his shaking body from the shower cubicle, before drying him off.

A short while later, Dean was tucked up in bed. Body totally relaxed, his limbs felt heavy and sleep wouldn't be far away, but he stirred as Matt sat down on the side of the bed before he pulled up the covers and slid in between the sheets.

“Matt—”

“Shush, baby. We'll talk tomorrow,” he heard Matt whisper as strong arms pulled him into Matt's side. He snuggled against the perfect warmth of Matt's body. As his head rested on Matt's chest, the gentle rise and fall of Matt's breaths, lulled him to sleep.

Chapter Four

The sun was high, casting a bright light into the room and shining directly onto the bed where Dean lay. He opened his eyes briefly before squeezing them shut and throwing his forearm across his eyes in an attempt to keep out the light. He chanced opening his eyes again and glanced at the clock. Eight in the morning. He could still grab a couple of hours sleep, so he rolled away from the window, pulling the sheet over his bare shoulder at the same time.

As he turned on his side, he came face to face with Matt. He looked beautiful in his sleep—his dark blond hair tousled and his features relaxed. The scruff on his jaw had thickened overnight, giving a rugged, sexy appeal to his already good looks. Usually there wasn't too much of Matt's skin on display in his corporate uniform of a suit and a long-sleeved button-up shirt. When he was relaxing, he was a jeans and T-shirt kind of guy. So Dean made the most of his undressed state to study his tattoo.

Dean knew he had the tattoo and had seen it before, but he'd never really had the chance to study it up close. It hadn't been appropriate to give it more than a cursory glance. Now he took the time to admire the talented artwork, the fine lines and the delicate colouring. The tattoo took up most of Matt's right shoulder. The dragon curled over the smooth skin of his shoulder and snaked down his bicep. It was masterful and beautiful. The dragon was a symbol of wisdom, strength and bravery. Dean wished he was like Matt and had the courage to follow his own dreams, all of them. He reached out, drawn to the dragon, and traced a finger lightly over the design, causing Matt's muscles to quiver under his touch. He looked up, afraid he'd woken him, but Matt's eyes stayed closed. He took his arm away and closed his eyes, enjoying the simple delight of waking up with Matt beside him.

When he next opened his eyes, it was to find Matt staring at him intently. He looked serious for a moment and then he smiled, reaching to place a hand on Dean's cheek. "Morning, sleepyhead," Matt greeted. He was obviously a morning person.

"Morning," he said in return, his voice gravelly with sleep.

Dean sat up, twisted to push the pillow up against the headboard and lay back against it, at the same time becoming aware of his nakedness. He pulled the sheet up to his waist, tempted to pull it higher, but not wanting Matt to think he was uncomfortable.

Matt mirrored his actions and they sat next to each other, staring out the window. Just when he was actually starting to feel a bit awkward and thinking of what to say, Matt started talking.

"You want to hear something funny?" Matt said, with a short deprecating laugh.

Dean turned to look at him, concerned at his tone. Matt didn't expect an answer and continued.

"When we were younger, I always hoped it would be you."

"Me?" Dean frowned at him, unsure about the direction the conversation was taking.

"Yeah, you and me. You know, together as a couple." He gave that little mirthless laugh again, just a sharp, quick burst before twisting and looking Dean straight in the eye. "I used to imagine us together. I got so pissed off that you seemed oblivious."

Dean oblivious? He couldn't remember a time when he thought Matt wanted him as more than friends. Surely he would have noticed that? For goodness sake, he would have jumped on that!

"It was my last year of school and you were in the second year of your apprenticeship. I was focused on studying for the end of year exams and you used to come over and sit on my bed and listen to music while I hit the books. You'd be lying there, headphones in, eyes closed or maybe staring at the ceiling, and I would be trying to concentrate on the books, but all I was aware of was you. You'd been working hard and all the physical activity had caused you to bulk up. I was still a tall and skinny kid, and you were tanned and fit with muscles." Matt laughed again. "I had it bad."

"I didn't—" Dean started, but Matt interrupted him.

"No, let me finish. I need you to hear this before you say anything."

Dean nodded and kept listening.

"I finally got up the courage to say something. It was the middle of January before my first year of Uni started and I went to your place one night. You were in your room watching a movie, just an ordinary night. You made room for me next to you on the bed and we finished watching whatever was playing. You then changed the disc. I don't even remember the movie. I was just lying there waiting for the right moment and practising what I was going to say. The words

were going around in my head, over and over, as we lay there in the dark. You watched the screen and I watched your face as the light flickered over it.”

“I remember that night,” Dean said. “We fell asleep.”

“Yeah,” Matt agreed. “We fell asleep. The next thing I knew it was the early hours of the morning. Somehow, I’d curled up into your side and thrown my arm over your chest and my leg was resting across your thigh. I remember laying there, my nose in the crook of your neck, just enjoying the smell and the warmth and the closeness. The next thing, you woke up and bloody threw me from the bed. I landed so hard on the floor, I had bruises for days.”

“What?” Dean was surprised. “That’s what happened? I hurt you?”

“If it’s any consolation, I don’t think you meant to hurt me. I think you were just surprised to wake up in that position, and so pissed off at me for making a pass at you. I don’t blame you, after all you were asleep and I had no right to touch you.”

Dean laughed, his laughter suddenly turning in a sob. “Oh God, Matt. I don’t even remember pushing you from the bed. I just woke up in the morning and wondered where you’d got to. I just assumed you’d gone home to your own bed.”

“Well that explains why you never mentioned it. I was on tenterhooks for days waiting for you to say something.”

Now it was Dean’s turn to talk. “Do you remember a couple of years ago when I told you about that incident at work?”

“Of course I do,” Matt answered. “But it wasn’t an incident, it was an assault. You should have reported that guy Terry to your boss or gone to the police. He had no right to rough you up like that.”

“I know, but that’s not the point. The point is, it happened only a couple of weeks before you came over. For months afterward, I couldn’t bear to be touched. I had nightmares for a year.”

Dean picked up Matt’s hand, which was resting on top of the sheet and turned to face him.

“Matt, I wouldn’t have pushed you out of my bed. At least not intentionally.” He wanted to be sure that Matt understood what he was saying. “I would have *invited* you into my bed.”

Matt looked at him, his eyes bright and maybe a bit shocked, before pulling him forwards into a hug. Matt’s warm breath caressed his neck and they stayed

like that for several minutes, just holding each other. Dean wondered how much they'd missed all these years, and hoped that Matt was thinking about the same thing.

The question was, *what now?*

The barbeque at Brett and Lindy's place was on Sunday afternoon and Dean felt obligated to attend, although he was tempted to give it a miss. He wanted to stay home and talk to Matt, to firm up their plans, but Matt was understanding and insisted they go.

"It's only a couple of hours, and I think it's important that you maintain the friendship with these guys. Plus we can talk later on the way to the airport."

At first, they'd had a great time. They drank a few beers—well, he drank beer and Matt sipped from a glass of wine—and stood around the barbeque cooking chops and sausages. When the meal was ready, they'd sat around the table and shared the food along with some funny stories. The couple of beers, combined with a full belly and the warmth of the afternoon sun, lulled Dean into state of peace and he enjoyed standing back and watching everyone laughing and having a good time. Particularly Matt, who looked relaxed and very much like he was enjoying himself.

Things started to go downhill when Terry arrived. Matt had tensed immediately when the introduction had been made, and Dean was grateful that Terry hadn't tried to shake his hand. Instead, he'd wandered over to the esky, pulled out a beer and sat in a seat at the end of the table. Dean glanced at Matt and tried to convey a look to indicate he was all right and not to cause a scene. He was relieved when Matt seemed to pick up on his message and nodded his head.

Dean had had a long time to come to terms with the incident with Terry. First, he'd tried to put it behind him because of the feelings thinking about it generated. It had been all too easy to remember the fear of that night. Then he tried to reason that Terry wasn't even aware of his actions and made excuses for the man. It was also easier to play down the whole thing because he knew it still upset Matt to think about it, no matter how much Dean had downplayed it and reassured him that he didn't need to worry.

Dean pushed his memories away, making an effort to pay attention to the conversation around him.

The conversation moved from weekend sport to an accident on a local building site, and then to the renovations Brett and Lindy were doing to their red-brick bungalow. Matt chipped in with his own tales of the nightmare that was his renovation project. Dean was really interested to hear just how much work Matt had done on his Melbourne terrace house. He hoped it would reflect in the sale price once it was put on the market. After a while, Matt excused himself to visit the bathroom and went into the house.

"Lindy, you did a great job with the food, and you've both done wonders with the house," Dean said.

"And speaking of wonders," interrupted Terry. "What about your friend? Where did you pick him up from?"

"Matt? He's been my best mate since school. Why?"

"Just seems a bit not your type, that's all," Terry said, once again not saying anything directly, but his meaning was obvious.

This time Dean had had enough. He felt his face flush and his anger build, and he knew the time had come to finally take a stand if he was ever to be free to have the future he wanted with Matt.

"You know absolutely nothing about my type, Terry. If you did, you'd know just how far off the mark you really are!"

After a brief moment of stunned silence, Terry took a step towards Dean, but stopped at the sound of Matt's deep, authoritative voice, as he came to stand by Dean, "Is there a problem here?"

"No problem, your boyfriend here was just telling us he's a bloody fa—" He didn't get any further as Matt's fist slammed into his jaw, effectively halting any more words from spouting forth.

Dean and his work buddies got between Terry and Matt before any more blows could be exchanged. They held Terry back as he regained his voice and began shouting. "You fucker! Just you wait! Let me go!" He pulled at the arms restraining him in an effort to get to Matt.

Dean grabbed Matt by the arm and dragged him into the house where he could calm down and not antagonise Terry further. He wrapped his arms around Matt and whispered softly in his ear. They were still standing there when Brett came into the room, but they quickly pulled apart.

Brett looked at Matt. "Don't worry about it, mate. The bloke's an arse. I've told him he's not welcome here."

They re-joined the group, but not for long. It was good to see everyone's concern for their welfare and it was reassuring to know the other guys had his back, but they just wanted to get out of there so they called a cab.

They hadn't come to any final conclusions when the time came for Dean to take Matt to the airport on Sunday night, at least not in terms of making solid plans about Matt moving back. They were both still flustered by the events at the barbeque on top of everything else that had happened that weekend.

They arrived with time to spare before Matt's flight left so they decided to have a coffee at the airport cafe. Dean stirred his latte, adding a sugar, before looking across the small table at Matt. Matt, always his protector, and now his lover. He knew they were meant to be together, that they were more than best friends, and what had happened at the barbecue just reinforced his conviction. If Matt had the courage to stand up for Dean, then Dean could at least have the courage to tell Matt exactly how he felt. No more hints and shy looks. The time had come for words.

"I want you to move home," he blurted out. Well, at least it was out there now. "I want you to be with me. I don't care what anyone at work or anywhere else thinks. I love you. I want to be with you, out and free." He let out a shaky breath and looked at Matt to gauge his reaction to his sudden confession.

The look on Matt's face was priceless. God, he wished he could take a picture. Matt looked as though someone had just given him a precious gift, the most glorious smile lighting up his face. That one look was enough to flood Dean with warmth, and he knew he'd made the right decision.

"I want that, too," Matt said softly, his smile never leaving his face. Matt reached out and they entwined their fingers and he whispered the words Dean thought he'd never hear, words that made his heart sing. "I love you, too."

After a few moments, Matt's face grew thoughtful.

"I'm not sure how it's all going to work out. There's a lot of variables with my job and the house. But, I'll talk to Stuart and my company, and see how quickly we can sell the house and transfer my job back home. I'll phone you when I know something."

Matt's flight was called and they stood and embraced quickly, squeezing each other tight.

"Stay gold, mate," Matt whispered in his ear.

Dean couldn't speak, just nodded his head. Matt put his hand on the back of Dean's neck pulling him in for a soft, sweet kiss. Then Dean watched the man he loved walk away.

Chapter Five

It was frustrating, the waiting, hoping, and wishing. He hated the wondering, the not knowing. What was going to happen next? They'd already wasted so much time and although Dean was desperate for an update from Matt, he didn't want to hassle him. He was under enough pressure as it was, having to deal with Stuart and make so many arrangements.

It had been four days since Matt had returned to Melbourne, and he'd suffered through every single one and couldn't believe it was only Thursday morning. He was desperate to find out when Matt was returning, but he was also eager to see him, to support him, and most importantly, let him know just what was waiting for him back in Sydney. They'd talked since he left, but what if Matt didn't understand the true depth of his feelings or what if Stuart managed to convince him he deserved a second chance? *That didn't even bear thinking about!*

He started to freak out about Stuart until he made a decision. He wasn't going to sit back and wait, he was going to go after Matt, make sure he didn't feel like he had to deal with everything alone. He was not going to pace the flat for another minute or spend another restless night. He'd rather go to Melbourne and see Matt sooner rather than later.

Decision made, he called work and arranged a few days of personal leave and jumped online to buy a plane ticket. Packing took no time at all, just throwing the basics into a duffel bag, a quick call to his mum to let her know he'd be out of town for the weekend and he was free to go.

The flight was uneventful and it was just after nine-thirty that evening when he checked into the hotel. As tempting as it was to call Matt straight away and let him know he was in town, he decided to resist the temptation. Matt had work tomorrow and there'd be plenty of time together tomorrow night and over the weekend.

Instead, Dean used the time to arrange a dinner booking, calling the front reception desk and asking about the nicer restaurants in town. He wasn't really into fine dining, so he was pointed in the direction of a popular bistro, and thankfully was able to make a reservation for the following evening.

Satisfied with his arrangements, he took a shower, threw on some sleep shorts and crawled under the covers. He was definitely looking forwards to the

next night when he wouldn't be in the bed alone, but could spend the whole night with Matt. He'd briefly thought that perhaps he shouldn't have booked a hotel, but he didn't like the idea of staying at Matt's place even though Stuart had moved out. Besides, he thought Matt would enjoy the luxury of the hotel room with its king-size bed and huge spa bath. Those were his last thoughts as he drifted off to sleep.

He'd been waiting all week for that one important call. The one that would mean his future could really begin. Matt had said he'd call on Friday, once he'd been able to confirm arrangements with his job. Matt was also planning to meet Stuart for lunch that day to discuss the next steps in getting rid of the house. If they put it on the market straight away, Matt had told him, they could anticipate a sale in a matter of weeks, and settlement six weeks after that. That would be the severing of the final tie to Stuart.

Dean decided to use the morning to do a bit of sightseeing in Melbourne. He hadn't seen a lot of the city so there were plenty of options open to him. A quick stop by the hotel concierge saw him armed with a map and on his way. The hours went quickly as he wandered the streets and parks of Melbourne, finally stopping to have lunch by the river. It was lonely sitting at the café by himself, and he found himself continuously looking at his phone waiting for Matt's call. Eventually, he finished his burger and coffee and headed back to the hotel.

The hotel had a pool, but Dean hadn't packed anything to swim in. However, he'd brought along shorts, T-shirt and runners so he decided to use the hotel gym to kill some more time. With his phone propped on the treadmill dashboard, he listened to music while jogging through the kilometres, half-hoping his workout would be interrupted by a phone call. However, it was not to be.

After sweating it out for an hour or so, he headed back to the room for a quick shower and finally collapsed on the huge bed, sinking into the plush white quilt. He checked his phone one final time, disappointed to see no messages, and tossed it onto the bedside table. The stress of the week, combined with the day's physical activity, resulted in slumber quickly overtaking him.

He only meant to shut his eyes for a minute or two, but the dim light outside showed it had been longer than that—either it was getting on in the afternoon or

the weather had come over cloudy. A quick glance at the bedside alarm clock indicated the latter—it was still only mid-afternoon. He closed his eyes again, but was jolted fully awake by the buzzing of his phone as it skittered on the table where he'd left it. The sound indicated a text message. Excitedly, he jumped up and reached for the phone, never moving so fast in his life. His excitement didn't last long as he read the message.

Things not going to work out as planned. Will talk to you about it later. Matt.

What the fuck?

Dean sat in the taxi as it headed along the expressway towards the airport. He had no idea if he'd be able to get on a flight, but anything was better than staying another minute in that goddamn hotel room. What had started out as a romantic trip to Melbourne had quickly become a total fuck-up. He'd hardly given it a second thought, just seen that message, the total opposite of the one he'd been waiting for, and knew he had to get away. Matt was backing out. Things weren't going to work out between them. Matt had changed his mind. Maybe he'd gotten back with Stuart after all. He had chucked everything he'd brought with him back into the duffel, including the damp gym clothes, and been checked out within half an hour, on his way to the airport and back to Sydney.

He stared out the window of the cab, morosely noting the Friday afternoon peak-hour traffic crawling past. The grey skies echoed his mood perfectly, and the rain finally started falling, droplets running down the glass and obscuring the view. Belatedly, he remembered the dinner reservation and half-heartedly thought of calling the restaurant to cancel. He pulled his phone from his pocket and pressed a button, the screen opening to the last place he'd been. He found himself staring at the message again.

Things not going to work out as planned. Will talk to you about it later. Matt.

The more he looked at the message, the more pissed off he got. He went from shocked and heartbroken to totally pissed off in the blink of an eye. Then the confusion set in. Would Matt really end their fledgling relationship and friendship like that? He owed it to Matt and himself to find out before he left Melbourne. If it was over, he deserved better and he was definitely going to let Matt know how deeply he'd hurt him. He still couldn't believe that Matt would behave like that, but he wasn't going to allow him to get away with it.

In an instant, he had ordered the taxi to be turned around, and half an hour later was pulling up in front of Matt's house. He sat in the cab for a moment, listening to the rain's staccato beat on the roof of the car, and psyching himself up for the possibilities that lay ahead. Finally, he took a deep breath, withdrew some notes from his wallet, which he passed to the driver, and grabbed his bag from the seat next to him. He exited the cab and stood on the footpath, the rain soaking him in seconds, before walking towards the house.

Matt's house was a narrow brick terrace. He stood on the veranda, shaking water from his hair and dropped his bag at his feet before pressing the doorbell. It didn't take long for the red painted door to be opened and Matt to be looking at him in surprise.

"Hey, Dean," he greeted happily. "What are you doing here? Come inside out of the rain."

Matt reached for his arm to pull him into the house. Dean shook him off, but entered the house anyway.

"Dean?" Matt looked confused.

"I deserved better," he said in a low voice. "You might not want me, but you should have at least had the guts to tell me over the phone or in person. Not send a goddamn text message! Our friendship is worth more than that!" His voice vibrated with anger. "Or maybe it isn't?"

"What are you talking about? Dean, stop for a minute. You've got to explain, I don't understand what's going on," Matt sounded concerned and confused.

Dean dragged the phone from his pocket again, the now-damp fabric making it difficult to free the device. He finally got it out and waved it towards Matt.

"This. This is what I'm talking about. The text message." He was shouting by this time, and the tears had started to fill his eyes.

Matt grabbed the phone and hit the home button, bringing up his own text message. He stared at it for a moment before looking at Dean.

"I still don't understand. This is the message I sent to you this afternoon." Matt looked at the message again.

"Yeah, you said things weren't going to work out with us."

Matt looked confused at first, but then he smiled gently at Dean. "No, Dean. I didn't." He reached for Dean's hand, and Dean didn't pull away.

"I said things weren't going to work out *as planned*." He didn't wait for Dean's response, just launched straight into an explanation. "Stuart doesn't want to sell the house. He says the timing isn't right, and he wants to hold off until we can get a better price. He's going to rent my half and live here until we do eventually sell." He paused for a breath. "To top it off, work doesn't have a position for me in Sydney, so a job transfer isn't possible."

"So you're not moving to Sydney," Dean said, his voice flat.

"No. I *am* moving to Sydney. I resigned. I didn't want to wait for an opening. I wanted to come to Sydney as soon as possible. I'll get another job. It may take a while, but I'll find one." Matt looked pleadingly at Dean.

The sense of relief that Dean felt was overwhelming. His heart finally slowed down and he was able to take a breath.

"So that's what the message meant? You were referring to the house and the job?" he asked, wanting absolute confirmation.

"Yes. I was coming home to tell you in person." Matt looked towards the door and Dean followed his gaze. It was then he noticed the heaped pile of bags stacked near the open front door.

Matt looked at his watch and grinned.

"My flight leaves in, oh, about an hour. I aimed to be in Sydney by seven. I guess there's not much point going now is there?"

"I feel like such an idiot."

"You are an idiot," Matt laughed. "But you're my idiot."

At last, Matt reached over and pulled Dean into his arms, the heat of his body and the firmness of his chest warmed Dean inside and out. He lost himself in that hug, in the feel of Matt and the knowledge that they were about to start their future together.

They pulled apart slightly, but never lost body contact, just enough so that Dean could gaze into the depths of Matt's beautiful blue eyes. The love he saw reflected back was overwhelming.

"I shouldn't have doubted you. I don't know why I reacted the way I did." He felt like he owed Matt some kind of explanation and most definitely an apology. "I feel like I've spent my whole life waiting for you and couldn't believe it was true, that it was finally happening. And when I saw the message, I just panicked under the crushing disappointment. If I'd stopped and really thought it over—"

Matt interrupted, showing his forgiveness by halting Dean's words with a kiss. It was breathtaking, soft lips sweeping over his, lingering a little before fully claiming his mouth. As Matt's tongue glided against his and he tasted Matt's sweet mouth, as he felt the love and passion in the kiss, he knew everything was going to be all right.

He'd been waiting for Matt all his life and now the waiting was over. He'd been wishing and hoping that Matt would be his, and now it looked like all his dreams were going to come true.

Epilogue

Dean ran into the house through the open sliding glass door and lunged for his phone, which was skittering on the kitchen bench. He looked at the screen briefly before hitting the send button.

"Hello?" he greeted, slightly breathless from his rush to pick up the phone.

"Hey, Dean, it's Warren."

"I hope you're calling with good news," Dean responded excitedly. "Has she had the baby? Am I an uncle?"

As he spoke, he wandered out onto the back patio where a crowd of eager people surrounded him, waiting to hear what he had to say. He smiled at their obvious frustration at only hearing one side of the conversation.

He kept the conversation brief, just finding out the basic details, so that Warren could get back to Janet and the baby.

"Yeah, I'll let them know. I'm sure Mum will be up at the hospital as soon as she can get there. Give Janet our love and we'll see you tomorrow. Congratulations, big brother."

As soon as he ended the call, he put them out of their misery, passing on everything Warren had said.

"It's a boy. Eight pounds. Mother and son are doing well."

"Oh, what wonderful news." His mum said before turning to his dad. "Did you hear that, Bob? We have a grandson." His dad pulled his mum into a hug, and watching their happiness put a smile on Dean's face.

He turned and received his own hug as Matt swept him into his arms, obviously also delighted with the news. "Congratulations, baby. I can't believe we're now uncles!"

Dean held onto him tightly and whispered into Matt's neck, "Yeah, uncles."

As he stood, wrapped in Matt's warm embrace, he couldn't help but think that things were exactly as they should be. He was with the man he loved and surrounded by good friends and family. He gave Matt a squeeze and pulled back. The look he saw in Matt's blue eyes, that familiar look of pure love and joy, caused him to choke up. *Oh God, he was going to get all sappy any minute now.*

He took a breath to pull himself together. "I'll grab the champagne. We've got lots to celebrate." And they did, so many reasons to be thankful.

Matt smiled and released him, before turning to give his best wishes to Dean's mum. Dean could hear him as he headed back into the kitchen. "You must be so thrilled, Nancy. All the months of worrying, and now you have a beautiful baby grandson."

He didn't hear his mum's reply as he opened the fridge and retrieved the bottle that had been put there earlier to chill in anticipation of the big event, but he knew she would definitely be feeling the relief. After a wonderful wedding, made all the more special because he had Matt on his arm, Warren and Janet had fallen pregnant pretty quickly. Of course, everyone had been thrilled, but when complications with Janet's blood pressure had set in, the joy changed to worry. It had been a tough couple of months as they'd all waited for her to see out the nine months. He couldn't even imagine how Warren must be feeling now that it was over, and he was so happy for his brother.

He took the champagne to the bench and placed it down before hunting in the cupboard for some champagne flutes. The kitchen had seen better days, but he and Matt had only recently purchased the house so they hadn't had long to make their mark. They had grand plans to do the house up and extend out the back, but for now, they made do with things just as they were. Dean had all he needed, anyway. So long as Matt was living with him, he didn't care where they lived. He counted his blessings that Matt had secured work fairly quickly and the sale of the Melbourne house had been favourable, leaving Matt in a good financial position. He was so relieved that Matt was able to transition back to Sydney smoothly.

As he stood at the bench and looked out the window, he could see the small group on the patio. His mum had moved to the outdoor table and taken a seat. She was in animated conversation with the two men who were seated opposite her, both who were regularly at the table when Dean and Matt hosted their family gatherings.

Justin was all smiles and loud laughter as he said something to Dean's mum, which made her laugh in response. He had become a good friend over the last year and half, and Dean could not imagine not having him in his life. Janet still tried to set Justin up with any potential eligible man she came across, but he'd successfully outmanoeuvred her each and every time. He remained steadfastly single, but quietly hopeful that one day he'd find that elusive brawny, tattooed man.

Johnno was equally as exuberant, matching Justin with his outgoing personality, and had become indispensable to Dean, as his one and only employee. Without Johnno's skills and hard work, and his willingness to work the long hours needed, Dean didn't think his fledgling business would be the success it was today. In the twelve months since he'd set out on his own, taking Johnno with him, the business had gone from strength to strength, largely because of the quality of their work and word-of-mouth. He was even looking at bringing on an apprentice to join him and Johnno due to the amount of work they were getting.

But his greatest source of happiness was the home and family he'd built with the man who now captured his attention. His eyes were drawn to Matt, as they always were. It seemed they shared a natural homing device that meant they were always aware of the other's presence. Even as he watched, Matt looked across to the window, and a smile lit up his face as he spied Dean looking at him. He looked away and said something to Dean's dad. His dad patted Matt on the arm and nodded, before he headed to join the others at the table, and Matt headed towards the house. As always, he felt grateful for his dad's easy acceptance of Matt in his life. Of course, his dad had known Matt since Matt was a boy, but it was the warm welcome Matt received in his new role of boyfriend that surprised Dean. Dean was sure it was Matt that drew this response from his dad and that he wouldn't have been so accepting of anyone else—not that he'd ever have a chance to find out. Matt was his one and only.

"Babe?" Matt asked as he entered the kitchen. "Is everything okay? You're taking a while."

Dean looked at the wonderful man standing in front of him and welcomed him into his arms before whispering into his ear, "Everything is just perfect."

And it was.

The End

Author Bio

Nic Starr lives in Sydney, Australia where she tries to squeeze as much into her busy life as possible. Balancing the demands of a corporate career with raising a family and writing can be challenging but she wouldn't give it up for the world.

Always a reader, the lure of m/m romance was strong and she devoured hundreds of wonderful m/m romance books before eventually realising she had some stories of her own that needed to be told!

When not writing or reading, she loves to spend time with her family—an understanding husband and two beautiful daughters—and is often found indulging in her love of cooking and planning her dream home in the country.

You can find Nic on Facebook, Twitter and her blog. She'd love it if you stopped by to say hi.

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