



*Don't
wake me up*

A LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD STORY

HUNTER FROST

Table of Contents

Love is an Open Road.....3

Don't Wake Me Up – Information.....6

Acknowledgements.....7

Don't Wake Me Up.....8

Chapter One9

Chapter Two.....15

Chapter Three.....25

Chapter Four34

Chapter Five.....42

Chapter Six.....49

Epilogue54

Author Bio57

Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

DON'T WAKE ME UP

By Hunter Frost

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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

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

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook may be distributed freely in its entirety courtesy of the Goodreads M/M Romance Group. This eBook may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

Don't Wake Me Up, Copyright © 2015 Hunter Frost

Cover Art by Shayla Mist

This ebook is published by the *M/M Romance Group* and is not directly endorsed by or affiliated with Goodreads Inc.

DON'T WAKE ME UP

By Hunter Frost

Photo Description

A remarkably attractive man with blue eyes and dark hair is dressed in a stylish blue three-piece pinstriped suit. He stares ahead as if thinking of something, or someone, special. His hands are in his pockets, which suggests a casual attitude, but his face has an expression of fierce determination.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

That's him.

I first saw him when I was fifteen. My father invited him over for Sunday dinner and I couldn't even talk to him. He was too cute and I, too confused because I didn't realize I was gay. Now, I'm a college graduate and have my first job. Heaven help me on my first day at work to catch sight of one of the vice presidents of the company. It was him, the man I've been dreaming about for nine years.

I don't think he knows I exist. I'm not even in his department. But every night I go to sleep with dreams of him and every morning, wake up harder than I ever had before to thoughts of being with him. I'm afraid he'll rebuff me if I ask him out or even that I would be fired. I need this job, but after months of this, I'm beginning to think I need him more.

Sincerely,

Thianna D

P.S. Particular dislikes: no rape play, no mpreg, no mafia, no medical play, and no abuse.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: businessmen/suits, age gap, anxiety disorder, geeks/nerds, friends to lovers, office romance, workplace blow job, off-page sex, healing family relationship

Word Count: 17,929

Acknowledgements

A huge *arigato* to C.M. Walker, Ellie Williams, and Eric Alan Westfall for all of your time, effort, and patience.

DON'T WAKE ME UP

By Hunter Frost

Chapter One

I stepped off the Jackson Park bus into the mist of dusk, hoping to make it the short distance to our house before the charcoal-colored sky let loose its fury. At the driveway, a huge fissure in the concrete had sprouted weeds that I swore looked like Venus flytraps. I made a mental note to help Dad with the landscaping. He's either getting too old to notice, or worse, too old to care. Halfway to the door, Mrs. Hobbs, my third-grade teacher, called out "*Konnichiwa*" and waved at me as she watered the neighbor's lawn. *How did she know I speak Japanese?* With a befuddled glance up at the threatening clouds, I shrugged, waved back, and went inside. I tossed my keys into the glass dish, the loud clank echoing in the foyer.

Normally, Dad would call out to ask me how my day at work went. But it was unusually quiet. Maybe he'd gone out back to grill. Didn't he see the sky?

I loosened my tie and dropped my messenger bag on the armchair in the living room. When I looked up, Mason Richards stood in front of me, smiling. I jumped at the suddenness of it. God, he looked amazing. No one wore a suit like he did. Whether it was an extravagant three-piece ensemble with pinstripes and a silk tie, a double-breasted coat with French cuffs, or a super modern cut with thin lapels and slim slacks, the man was a vision. His blue eyes regarded me with something that made my stomach clench. I watched with bated breath as his sexy mouth moved in slow motion.

"I want you, Shane," he said, his voice smooth and deep. He stepped toward me. "*All of you.*"

I grasped the edge of the chair so I wouldn't fall over. Did the man I'd been dreaming of since I was fifteen, just say he wanted me? My cock went hard just as a bolt of lightning flashed near the window.

He grabbed onto my tie and tugged me up against him. I gasped as his fingers moved up to the skin above my collar, the sear of his touch on my bare flesh like sweet fire. His eyes stormed as they glanced down at my mouth.

"Oh, God," I breathed, as his lips descended toward mine.

Lightning struck again, this time sending a loud, incessant ringing reverberating throughout the house.

My eyes flew open as the horrendous ringing continued.

My alarm!

Shit!

I grabbed the phone from the nightstand and sat up as I fumbled to stop the annoying sound. If I didn't get to it within a few seconds, Dad would come knocking on the door to make sure I was up.

And I was up, all right. My crotch tented the covers below.

I sighed and threw myself back down on the bed. Why did the stupid alarm have to go off right before the good part? Fuck my life.

Not that I haven't had this dream before. Matter of fact, these dreams had increased since I caught a glimpse of Mason the other day at my new job. He's the Vice President of Royal Burch Investments, while I'm a lowly clerk in the accounting department.

I closed my eyes, imagining Mason touching me, his hot body in one of those fine tailored suits, pressed tight against mine. His lips would be firm, but soft, and he'd nip and suck at my mouth, his tongue diving deep as our cocks grew hard.

Hell, I shouldn't have gone there. My hand reached down as if it were Mason's hand stroking me, teasing me, driving me crazy with his touch.

My head tipped back, and I groaned, my palm and fingers finding my most sensitive spots.

The knocking at my door made me jump a mile in the air.

"You awake, Shane? Rise and shine!"

I cursed Dad's bad timing. "Yeah, yeah," I replied, my hand moving as far away from my dick as possible. Dad's footsteps retreated, and I wiped the sleep from my eyes.

I took care of my hard-on under the steaming water of the shower, and by the time I dressed and was seated at the table, I whistled a random tune.

"You're in a chipper mood. That's new." Dad put a large plate of eggs, bacon, and toast in front of me before taking a seat at the other end of the table.

"This is way too much food. You know I have a hard time eating in the morning as it is." I plucked the bacon off and tossed it onto Dad's plate. "And sneaking meat to me has yet to work."

“You don’t eat enough, and a little animal protein won’t kill you.”

“I’m eating eggs. That’s animal protein. Don’t pretend you don’t understand lacto-ovo-vegetarian.” I wished he’d just respect my choices and let it go. I’m twenty-four years old, for God’s sake.

It’s partly my own fault. My college job at the manga store may have been awesome, but it didn’t make a good living. This new job would give me the opportunity to set aside enough money to get away from Dad before he drove me nuts.

Dad grunted. He looked older today. His hair had gone gray while I wasn’t paying attention and there were wrinkles I hadn’t noticed before. He reminded me of Grandpa George, my mother’s father. Grandpa George died a long time ago. So had Mom. Funny how twelve years seemed like only yesterday. Fuck cancer.

Mom had been my sunshine. She went to every school function, every soccer practice, and every music lesson—anything that had been important to me. She was wonderful. Now, I know she was trying to make up for Dad’s absence in addition to being a saint. My dad ran a thriving construction firm, and he’d never been home or a part of my life except for a gift here and there or a quick pat on the head. Back then, I felt like he was a stranger living in our house. Not a whole lot had changed.

When Mom got sick, Dad tried to pick up some of the slack. But I refused to accept an outsider attempting to change my world, hoping to take the place of someone I loved. So I withdrew into myself, and I wouldn’t let him in. Mom’s death made me retreat even further. I had always been shy, but now, anxiety goes along with that shyness.

Dad cut his hours at work to spend more time with me, but the damage had already been done. I can appreciate his effort, and that’s about it. Yeah, I know I’m bitter. Still, I don’t hate him. After all, he did introduce me to Mason.

Dad had hired a young twenty-two-year-old Mason as an office clerk back when I was fifteen. He took a liking to Mason, perhaps because he was more like the son he wished he’d had—confident, outgoing, and intelligent, with natural charm. Mason worked his way up to accounting manager in less than two years. It wasn’t long before he left Dad’s company and moved on to bigger and better things. Mason had everything.

Dad even knew Mason was gay, but he didn’t seem to mind. Dad had invited him over one Sunday for dinner, and I couldn’t even speak to the man.

He was the most attractive person I had ever seen. I hadn't yet completely accepted that I was gay, but that day I finally gave in. A cacophony of feelings exploded inside me. I remember shaking his hand, concerned only with the clamminess of mine. My eyes stayed downcast through most of the meal, for whenever I glanced up at him I choked on my food. Mason had been extremely polite and smiled at me, but I wouldn't dare smile back with my braces and acne. He probably thought I was a total goober... or a snotty punk. If he thought of me at all.

That night I had jerked off like crazy to thoughts of Mason—his smile, his attitude, his exceptional taste in clothes, and his contagious laugh. It was love at first sight. No more than three weeks later, despite my rocky relationship with Dad, I came out to him.

Dad hadn't batted much of an eye at the news. Could he have already known? He told me he was proud of me for being brave enough to let him know. But then he always told me he was proud of me. It got old. You say something too much and people wonder if it really means anything. Dad asked if I wanted to talk to Mason about being gay. My answer was "no way in hell."

Since then, Dad had Mason over for dinner at least once every month, but I constantly found something else to do or somewhere else to be. I knew I wouldn't be able to talk to him or be in the same room with him without my anxiety taking over. I didn't want him to think I was some kind of freak. Often, I would take off and wait around the corner, just so I could catch sight of him as he walked up to the house. I felt like such a stalker. I'm still not sure why I did it. It was torture, feeling this way and knowing I could never have anything more. I don't know what I ever expected to happen. If I saw him with another man, it would destroy me. I began to think that might be a good thing. Like shooting a wounded animal to put it out of its misery.

Mason had told Dad about the job at Mason's company. I had an interview a few days later with my prospective boss, Mr. Jensen. The interview near did me in. With my overactive nerves and the way Mr. Jensen grilled me, I thought I'd never get the job. Mr. Jensen seemed to dislike me before I even walked in, judging by his formidable brow and permanent frown. I'm guessing it was my former manager's glowing recommendation that won him over. Maybe he could look past my awkwardness, knowing I made up for it with enthusiasm and hard work. He offered me the job a week later, and I started right away.

"Have you thanked Mason personally yet? It would be nice, you know," Dad said, before shoveling a forkful of eggs into his mouth.

I finished half of the food on my plate, downed the orange juice and got up to clear my dish. I made Dad wait when he asked questions that made me feel like a nine-year-old. "I wrote a thank-you note. I plan to give it to him today."

He seemed shocked. "That's great, Shane. A handwritten note shows a lot of class."

I didn't comment. I may have social anxieties, but I'm not a heathen.

I grabbed my bag and coat, still unused to wearing a suit.

"Here, take some money for lunch," Dad said, getting up and digging in his pocket as I passed by.

I waved him off, picking up my keys from the glass dish. "I have money. I'm a grown man, Dad."

He mumbled something, and I could feel his eyes on me before I closed the door behind me.

Of course the bus had to be late dropping me off at the stop across from Royal Burch downtown.

I jogged into the building, forcing myself to wave at the security guard when I passed. It frightened me to the core to engage people, but I wanted to make an effort. The guard waved back before I snagged an elevator.

Rushing out at the third floor, I glanced at the clock on the wall. Eight ten! Fuck... I flew into the accounting department and slid into my seat. Unfortunately, Mr. Jensen had chosen that moment to walk out of his office. I cursed again. He gave me a look that I hadn't quite figured out yet, seeing I'd only been there a week. The look couldn't be good, but as for exactly what it meant, I wasn't sure.

"Don't worry. He's giving you a mental warning. But he won't do anything about it until you're late five times or more. Trust me. I know."

The voice that could have read my mind startled me. I turned to see Kelly, my co-worker, smiling and tapping her pen.

"Morning," I mumbled. She seemed nice enough. Always cheerful and helpful. There were about four other people in the office that sat at desks toward the other wall, but they rarely talked to me. I'm not the most approachable person. I keep my head down and thoughts to myself most of the time. I'm working on that. Then again, that's probably why Dad thought this job would be perfect for me. All numbers and very little communication.

“Did you hear that Tanya finally went out with Craig from IT?” Kelly asked, rolling her chair closer to me, her long brown curls swaying. Her hazel eyes were magnified behind her thick, black-rimmed glasses, reminding me of Saya Takagi, a character from *Highschool of the Dead*, one of my favorite manga series.

I shook my head. I really didn't know anything about the company beyond what I had learned my first week. As for office romances, they piqued my interest. Possibly due to the fact that the one I wanted wasn't going to happen.

“It was a long time coming. They've flirted for ages, but I think they were afraid of the consequences. They work in the same department.”

“Isn't that against company policy?” I remembered reading that in the employee handbook.

Kelly nodded, and waved her arm. The bracelets on her wrist jangled. “Everyone is rooting for them since they make such a great couple. As long as management looks the other way, it should be fine.”

I smiled, suddenly rooting for them, too.

Kelly rolled back to her desk. “Look alive, Mr. Jensen is watching,” she said out of the side of her mouth.

I chuckled and checked my email. Like every morning since I started the job, I read the welcome email Mason had sent. I had it memorized by now. It wasn't anything special, a simple hi and welcome to the company, assuring me I would succeed in my new position. But Mason had written it. Or at least had his assistant write it. And then he sent it to me. Only me. I savored it. I even forwarded it to my home email and printed it out so I could touch it. Was that weird? I read it again, sighed and got to work.

Chapter Two

After a few weeks I had settled in quite easily to the daily grind at Royal Burch. The job itself wasn't too taxing and I'd come to understand the basics of office life, like the inner workings of the big photocopier, how not to get the microwave in the break room to burn my food, and the unfortunate knowledge of my co-workers' bathroom routines.

I managed to talk to Kelly without too much anxiety, and the others in my work space would get eye contact every so often. It was a start.

Mornings were still an issue. Waking up with thoughts of Mason didn't help me get out of bed any faster, and the bus didn't do me any favors with how often it ran late. Thankfully, Mr. Jensen hadn't been able to catch me five times yet.

I had completely forgotten about the thank you note I'd slipped into Mason's mailbox until I got a call on my work phone. I never got calls from anyone, but the screen definitely read "Lara Hedley." Why would Mason's assistant be calling me?

I swallowed, debating whether or not to pick it up, and finally answered on the fourth ring. "Hello, this is Shane McCarthy."

"Hi, Shane. This is Lara, Mr. Richards's assistant."

She paused as if waiting for me to acknowledge her, but words failed me.

She moved on. "Anyway, Mr. Richards has asked to see you for a moment."

My heart slammed against my chest. Me? But why? "I, um—"

"It won't take long. We're on the twenty-fifth floor. See you soon." She hung up before I could compose myself and respond.

I was left holding the receiver, wondering how the hell I would survive in the presence of Mason Richards, when Kelly touched my shoulder. I jumped.

"Sorry. You okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

I blinked. "Mr. Richards wants to see me."

"Really? The VP? What for?"

I shrugged, my heart going a mile a minute. "His assistant didn't say."

She grinned. "Have you seen him? He's a major hottie."

I nodded. "Mr. Richards and my dad are friends."

"Lucky you!" She smacked my arm playfully. "Then I'm sure Mr. Richards just wants to say hello. You know, see how you're doing?"

Unless he could tell from the note how infatuated I was with him, and he wants to fire me.

"I'd love it if he asked me up there." She winked at me, and I couldn't help but chuckle.

"He *is* hot," I said, surprising myself at how open I was being with Kelly.

She seemed taken aback by it, too. "You better get going. You don't want to keep him waiting." Her grin was infectious.

The small amount of confidence I had talking to Kelly completely disappeared by the time I reached the elevator. Riding up to the twenty-fifth floor, I concocted every horrific scenario about what could happen once I reached Mason's office, from tripping over my own feet to death by explosive diarrhea. Why couldn't I channel those nightly dreams I had about Mason into something positive I could use right now? Oh, right, anxiety didn't work that way. Negativity reigned. Besides, getting a raging hard-on in front of him wouldn't help my situation either. Why couldn't I have written a simple email back to Mason's welcome note? Why did I have to go above and beyond with something handwritten like an overzealous fool?

I adjusted the suit jacket that didn't quite fit. My shoulders had gotten wider since I bought it four years ago. Why couldn't I have worn my good suit today? I straightened my tie, which suddenly felt like it was choking me, and glanced at the frosted glass doors to Mason's office. *I can do this. Just relax. Be cool. He's a regular guy.* I sighed. Mason was anything but "regular." I steeled my nerves as best I could and pushed through the doors to see Mason's assistant sitting at a large desk.

She got up upon seeing me, moving the microphone on her headset away from her mouth. "Shane?" she asked, and I nodded. "You look pale. Everything okay?"

Shit. Could she really tell? I touched my forehead. Damp. How could I be sweating already? "I'm... I'm fine."

Lara hustled over to a filtered water dispenser near the wall and filled a paper cup. "You need a glass of water." She turned and motioned toward one of the black leather chairs in the waiting area. "Sit."

I opened my mouth to protest, but her eyes told me to obey. I sat down and she handed me the cup. "Thank you. I'm..." I wasn't sure what to say, so I went with honesty... "nervous."

She laughed as she sat across from me. "Nervous? Why? Because Mr. Richards is the Vice President?" She crossed her legs and leaned on the armrest.

I nodded. I couldn't be completely honest. I took a drink.

"Oh honey, you have nothing to worry about." She smiled, rolling the pearls of her necklace in her fingers. She had an air of wisdom about her, but I wouldn't dare guess her age. I wondered what it would be like to be Mason's assistant, attending to his every need. My heart fluttered, and I figured I should stop that train of thought.

"Mr. Richards is very easy to talk to, Shane. As a matter of fact, he'd hate to think you tied yourself in knots over him."

If she only knew the half of it. I licked my lips and finished the water. I felt slightly better. At least not as sweaty.

Lara got up and took the cup from me. I stood, and she brushed the shoulders of my coat. "You'll be fine."

I smiled at her. "Thanks."

She rang Mason over the intercom.

"Yes?" Mason's voice resonated in my gut as he answered.

"Shane McCarthy is here to see you."

"Oh great! Send him in."

My stomach flipped. He sounded so excited to see me.

Lara opened the door, and I walked in before I had time to talk myself out of it. The door closed behind me.

The office was bigger than I had imagined, but the furniture still managed to make it feel cozy. One wall was entirely windows and tons of light streamed into the room, making the overcast day seem more vibrant. The decor was hip and modern, with a unique twist that must be all Mason. I anxiously attempted to memorize every knickknack, every nuance of color, and every funky art piece.

Someone cleared his throat and I started, catching Mason smiling at me from across his cherry wood desk near the far wall. I shuddered. That beautiful, sculpted jaw, subtly dimpled chin, fine cheekbones and those bright crystal-blue eyes were focused on me. He got up and buttoned his suit with one hand, like only the most suave men do. He ran a hand through his brilliant gold-flecked chestnut hair, and I silently wished I could touch it one day. And God, his suit: a charcoal gray, three piece, pinstripe paired with a jewel-tone blue tie that brought out his eyes, and a stylishly set handkerchief barely visible from his jacket pocket. I saw the hint of his belt buckle, but I refused to let my gaze travel downward and embarrass myself more than I'm sure I already had.

He walked over and reached out to shake my hand. "So good to..." He trailed off, and his smile faded. Darkness came in from all sides, and my body went limp.

When I opened my eyes, I was on my back, staring up at the gray ceiling that reminded me of this morning's sky. I flinched as Mason's face came into view, so close that darkness threatened to overtake me again. I blinked wildly, willing myself to prevent it.

"Shane? Can you hear me?" Mason asked, his hand at my collar. His breath glided over my face.

"Yes," I croaked.

"Thank goodness, he's awake," came another voice that sounded like Lara.

"Did I faint?" I asked, suddenly... mortified.

"Yep. You were only out a few seconds, though," Mason replied, studying me intently. "I managed to break your fall."

Oh, God. I wished he hadn't. Brain damage would be less embarrassing.

"Do you feel well enough to sit up?" Lara asked near me, pushing up her cardigan sleeves.

"Sure," I answered. "It's only low blood sugar." And that I'm face-to-face with the man of my dreams.

"I have a glass of orange juice with your name on it when we get you up." Lara looked at Mason. "Let's get him on the sofa."

I had a fleeting vision of Mason carrying me, even though the idea was ridiculous. I was at least two inches taller and slightly broader in the chest and shoulders.

I rolled to the side to push up onto my elbow. Mason grabbed the opposite arm with both hands, hauling me up and Lara got under my shoulder on the other side. With their help, I was able to walk the few steps to the couch, and then they lowered me down. Mason sat close, his arm draped behind me on the sofa backing. It didn't help my anxiety, but I wasn't going to complain.

Lara handed me the orange juice and had me sip, slowly. "Did you eat this morning?" She put her hands on her hips, channeling my dad.

I shook my head, avoiding her eyes. I had another dream about Mason last night, meaning I got a late start. I ran out the door without breakfast.

"Low blood sugar is serious, Shane."

I nodded. "I swear I'll keep some energy bars at my desk."

"Keep them everywhere." She sighed. "Are you sure you're okay? I can call an ambulance if you need it."

"No. Thank you," I said. Could anything be more humiliating? "I'm okay. The juice is working." I did feel better.

"I'll watch out for him, Lara." Mason chimed in, and my temperature rose.

"Fine." She pointed to the plate of cookies on the end table by the couch. "Make him eat a cookie, Mason."

"I will." Mason chuckled as Lara walked out and closed the door behind her. Now that Mason and I were alone, I wished she would come back. I couldn't believe I fainted! How would I ever live this down?

"You better eat one," Mason said, presenting me with the tray of cookies. "She gets nasty when I neglect my health."

I took a cookie from the tray and managed a smile. A thousand wild thoughts bounced around in my head as Mason lifted the leg closest to me and rested his ankle on the opposite knee. Fuck, even his argyle socks were sexy! "I'm sorry, Mr. Richards." I bit the cookie, trying to distract myself from my addled brain.

"Shane, please. Call me Mason. Technically, I've known you since you were a teenager. Though seeing you today was a surprise. You're... all grown up."

I felt Mason's eyes on me as if they were laser beams. When I finally dared myself to turn and look at him, his mouth curled into a sweet smile.

I swallowed, proud of myself for not choking on my cookie.

Mason's cheeks seemed rosier as he looked away, playing with the middle button on his vest. "Your dad's doing okay?"

I nodded. "He's good."

"It's been too long since I've seen him. I'll have to invite you both to dinner sometime."

Of course, me *and* Dad.

"You have to promise you'll come. You must have a packed social calendar. You're never around when I come over for dinner. For a while I thought Frank shipped you off since I saw you once and then you disappeared." Mason chuckled.

"I'll try to keep a date open for you," I said, with a small smile. *What the? Did I just say that?*

"I, um... okay. Great."

Did Mason stutter? Shit, I must have really sounded like a jerk, and he didn't know how to respond. This was turning out to be the most crushing day of my life.

Mason picked some lint off his sock, and bit his lip. "I did have a reason for calling you up here. I swear I did." He glanced at me and then looked up to the ceiling as if to recall. He seemed distracted.

"Oh, yes! How are you liking your new position? I read your note yesterday. It really made my day."

I blushed.

"I thought you should know. It's nice to be appreciated."

Hoping to cool my body down, I took another sip of juice. Again, I was extremely aware of Mason's gaze.

"I... I think the job is a good fit. I work well with numbers."

"Wonderful to hear. Ty is treating you well, and you get along with your co-workers?"

I nodded. I really couldn't complain. Numbers weren't the most exciting thing, but they helped pass the time until I figured out what I wanted to do with my life. My boss may have been kind of grouchy, but nothing that I wouldn't have expected for a boss. And Kelly couldn't be a better colleague.

Mason's phone rang, startling us both. He smoothed a hand over his vest and got up to answer. He leaned over his desk to press the intercom, and I tried not to look at his beautifully shaped ass. I gulped. Lara said some name.

"Tell him I'll be right there."

"I've got to take this call. Here, I'll help you up." Mason held out his hand, and I thought about fainting again.

Shane, you have to get over this!

I put my hand in his and nearly fell backward. Did time stop? Electricity zoomed throughout my entire body.

"Easy now." Mason grabbed onto my arm with his other hand to steady me. He smiled.

What the hell just happened? "Must have gotten up too fast."

Mason still held onto me, but once he noticed, he let his hands drop. Slowly.

"Thank you." I adjusted my coat.

"Anytime." Mason grabbed another cookie and handed it to me. "Take another, or you won't hear the end of it from Lara."

I took it from him. Why did he have to look at me like that? Like he cared?

When I reached the door, I heard the squeak of Mason's chair as he sat back at his desk.

"Hey, Shane?"

I turned to see Mason with the phone receiver in his hand. "We should get some lunch or a drink sometime. I'll have Lara get in touch."

I think I nodded, but I couldn't be sure. He waved and then returned to the person on the phone.

As I left, I tried not to let visions of Mason and me on a date run away with me. Did he just ask me out? No. He'd have Lara get in touch. It was purely work related. A business meeting. We'd talk shop or network or something. And he'd write off the expenses.

Then why did I suddenly want to click my heels up? Must be the orange juice and the cookie. Had to be.

That night, I barely made it in the house before Dad appeared in the kitchen doorway.

“Come in here and eat. I made spaghetti.” He held a wooden spoon in his hand and wore Mom’s apron, the one with the yellow flowers turned dingy from use. I didn’t like seeing him in it.

I thought about protesting, but my stomach growled at me to follow the sweet aroma of garlic and onion. I entered the kitchen after him. Numerous pots and pans were strewn on every surface. A large pot with a pasta drainer sat on one burner of the stove, while another had red sauce that popped and bubbled.

“Did you have to use every pot we own?” I joked.

“Very funny. I may make a mess, but I’ve perfected this recipe,” he replied, stirring the sauce. “Get your plate, and grab some pasta.”

I took a plate from the cupboard and spooned some noodles onto it. Dad sauced it.

“Parmesan’s on the table.”

I sat down, and he did the same after removing the apron.

I dug in to my food and found it pretty darn good. “Tasty.”

“Glad you like it. Make sure you get a second helping.” The oven chimed. “Oh, the garlic bread.” He grabbed the bread out with a dishtowel, and threw a slice on my plate.

“Thanks,” I said. “Why the dinner? It’s Wednesday.” We had worked out a schedule. Dad would make dinner Monday, Thursday, and Sunday nights, while I’d cook Tuesday and Saturday. Wednesdays and Fridays we’d fend for ourselves.

“No reason.” He put a fork full in his mouth. “I was in the mood.”

Something seemed fishy.

He looked up briefly. “How are you feeling?”

“Okay. Why?”

He shrugged. “Just asking.”

“He called you, didn’t he?”

“Who called me?”

“Don’t play dumb, Dad. I can read it on your face.”

He sighed. "Fine. Mason did call me. I'm glad he did. I worry."

"You don't need to worry. I'm not a child."

"I'll still worry even when you're forty-five. Especially when you don't take care of yourself."

"Today was no big deal." I'd already heard enough from Lara and Kelly that afternoon after leaving Mason's office.

"You know you have problems with low blood sugar, but you didn't eat anyway. That's not very responsible, or mature."

I shook my head. "Give me a break! I made a mistake. It happens."

"But this lack of concern happens a lot. I don't know what else to do, since you don't listen to me or take my advice. It's exhausting."

I squinted. "Oh, I'm so sorry it's exhausting to you. Obviously, I should try harder for *your* sake."

Dad growled. "I don't get it, Shane. If your mother were here, this wouldn't be an issue."

I blinked, pausing with my fork in midair and took a breath. How dare he bring her into this? "No, it probably wouldn't. *She* was my best friend. I was everything to her, and she let me know every fucking day. *You*, on the other hand, were nowhere to be found. For either of us!"

Dad slammed his fork down and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked away from me. "I know," he said, his voice shaking. "And I'm desperate to make up for that. I've been trying since the day she was diagnosed."

I felt the tears begin to sting the back of my eyes, and I stood up.

It was already too late. "You're trying to fill a hole inside me that goes straight through, Dad."

He looked up at me, pain in his aging eyes. I'm sure the same pain I felt the first twelve years of my life, wondering why Dad didn't care enough to be there with Mom and me when we did things families were supposed to do together. I didn't like hurting him. But he asked for far too much. He could never replace her, and all it seemed to do was make me angry when he tried.

"If it makes you feel any better, I promised Mason and Lara I'd keep energy bars with me at all times."

He nodded but wouldn't look at me.

I shoveled in a few more bites of spaghetti before scraping the remainder into the trash. The plate clattered loudly as I dropped it the sink then went to my room.

Chapter Three

Dad and I didn't talk for the next few days. It weighed on me more than I expected it to, but I didn't know how to change that without being untrue to myself. I really didn't know if my resentment toward him would ever go away. It's not that I didn't appreciate what he had given me—a roof over my head, food, and occasional companionship, but I didn't know if I could ever call him a friend. He was my father by blood, but I hardly knew him.

I hadn't heard anything from Mason, or Lara, since my unfortunate episode in his office. I knew his offer had been made out of pity. Mason's heart was in the right place, even if I felt the disappointment deep in my bones.

When I left Royal Burch that evening, a heavy downpour caught me off guard. Huge drops of water pelted me until I made it to the shelter of the bus stop. The usual crowd gathered, much closer than normal beneath the small cover, and I couldn't help but fidget as my personal space was invaded. The bus was already five minutes late. After the next five minutes, people were getting restless, and I was about to jump out of my skin. The bus had never been this late before.

I recognized the metallic blue of Mason's BMW as it pulled up to the curb, and the window rolled down. Mason leaned across the passenger seat and waved at me. "Get in, Shane!"

My heart revved up like the engine of the M3 before me. "The bus should be here any minute," I yelled back.

"I passed it on Broadway. It's broken down. Could be some time before they send another. I'll give you a ride home."

"You don't have to do that. My dad can pick me up." I scrambled for any excuse. I'm such a chickenshit.

"I'll save him the trip. Frank would kill me if he knew I left you out here in the cold rain."

Of course, he didn't want to disappoint my father.

Not wanting to come off ungrateful, I gave in. I ran to the car as Mason powered the window up, and popped the door open for me. He took my bag, putting it in the back seat as I slid in beside him, and closed the door, shutting

out the rain. The car was warm, but I was sure it had more to do with Mason sitting so near. He smiled at me and I melted into the soft leather seats, intoxicated by the smell of his musk and the rainwater. He regarded me for a moment, and I worried about dripping all over the interior of his car. "I'm getting your seats wet."

He waved that away. "They'll dry. Are you cold? I can turn the heater on."

"I'm okay." I fastened my seat belt.

Mason pulled away from the curb. "I know this is last minute, but are you up for a drink?"

"What?" I thought I heard him ask me if I wanted a drink, but I was busy fondling the sleek curves of the armrest.

"It's been a long week. What do you say?"

I was too blindsided to know what to say. Of course I wanted to, but this would mean spending intimate time with Mason. No protection from his smiles, his heat, and holy shit, his innocent touch. I'd already fainted. An anxiety attack on top of that wouldn't do me any good.

Mason gave me a sideways glance. "Please?"

As if I could say no to that. "Sure."

Mason smiled. "Great! I know a bar down near Oak Street." We parked on a side street and jogged until we made it under the awning of the place. He opened the door for me, and I walked in, hitting a wall of people. Fuck.

To say the place was packed was an understatement. Men and women were everywhere, sitting at the bar, standing at tall tables, milling about in groups. My heart sped up, and my cheeks flushed. I felt a hand on my sleeve, and Mason drew me through the onslaught of patrons over to a spot at the bar where a couple had just left. I moved to keep the bar to my right since I always had to have a clear view of the front door; yet another charming addition to my anxiety. There were no more free stools, so we stood, unnervingly close. My chest felt tight as Mason leaned across the bar to catch the bartender's eye and order us drinks.

"What would you like?" Mason asked.

"Whatever you're having," I said, fussing with the knot on my tie. Damn, it was hot in here.

“Two scotches on the rocks, please.”

Shit. Talk about the hard stuff. I went for my wallet, and Mason grabbed my wrist.

“I’ve got this,” he said, quickly taking his hand away. My arm still tingled from the contact. I don’t think I could have gotten to my wallet anyway with the crush of people behind me.

He paid and turned back to me, while the bartender placed the drinks on the bar.

“Thanks.” I picked up my drink, wishing I could dump it down my shirt to cool off.

“Thanks for coming out with me.” We clinked our glasses together.

I found it hard to focus when Mason and I were basically face-to-face and I had to be careful not to touch him accidentally. My stress level ratcheted up as people kept bumping into me. Hell, I’d give anything to curl into Mason’s shoulder and block out the rest of the world.

We talked about superficial things, though it didn’t do much to help me forget the tight space, the constant influx of people, and the countless elbows, shoulders, and arms that kept knocking me as they passed. I wanted to scream. I took a swig of the scotch and coughed enough to make my eyes water.

Mason took my drink and put both of our drinks down on the bar. “You okay?” He patted my shoulder.

I nodded, with a hand to my chest. The world was spinning.

Someone bumped me hard from behind and pushed me right up against Mason. Shit, his body was solid... and warm. Mason’s breath ghosted over my neck, and I watched as his light eyes darkened. He put a hand on my upper arm to steady me, and I panicked. I pushed away from him, pinballing into everyone around me. “I’ve gotta... excuse me. Bathroom,” I said, angry words directed at me from the people I pissed off.

“Shane...” Mason reached out as if to grab me, but I quickly turned and rushed toward the “Restrooms” sign.

I barreled into the swinging door to the men’s facilities and nearly collided with another man. There were just too many people in this place! Sweat ran down my forehead and collar and my breathing came shallow and quick. I found a vacant sink and splashed cold water on my face, again and again, the shock of the water somehow taking me away from the stifling bar.

Someone jarred me from behind, and I was back in the moment, watching the bathroom fill up with more guys. I had to get out of here. I pushed through to the door and headed for the nearest exit, located down a hallway. Soon I stumbled outside into an alley. I leaned forward to catch my breath. I could hear street noise and people tossing their garbage into dumpsters down the way, but it felt glorious to stretch out in the empty space.

I moved back against the brick wall and closed my eyes. The rain had eased up to a fine mist, and it felt heavenly on my fevered skin. I wished I could take off this suit. I pulled at my tie until the knot loosened.

I can't believe I agreed to go out with Mason. What was I thinking? I can't take this kind of crowd. I'm not normal. I'm defective, and Mason is bound to find out how truly flawed I am, the more time I spend with him.

But how the hell am I supposed to say no to those blue eyes and that honeyed smile? I don't want to say no. I want to revel in him, breathe him in, kiss h—

Someone emerged from the exit. "There you are," Mason said, his eyes filled with concern. "You're not okay."

I shook my head, looking down at my feet as he came up beside me. "No, I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. These crowds can be a nuisance. If this is too much for you, we can leave."

"But I ruined your drink, and I barely touched mine."

Mason chuckled. "You didn't ruin anything. I chugged them both after you left."

"You chugged scotch?" I asked, blinking.

"I'm joking. Sorta." He winked at me, and my heart skipped a beat. "So, is it only crowds that make you anxious?"

"Crowds, new people, tight spaces. Depends on the situation." I should shut up now.

"I knew you were shy, but Frank never mentioned your anxiety." He turned to look out across the alleyway and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Of course not," I mumbled. Dad probably pretended it didn't exist. He wouldn't want anyone to know his son was so flawed.

"I missed that," Mason said, moving in closer.

My breath caught. "Nothing," I managed, as his eyes roved over me.

"You may not believe it, but you and I have a lot in common."

I highly doubted that. Mason was perfect in every way. You could fill a novel with my imperfections. Why hadn't he figured that out yet?

I could still feel his eyes on me. He chewed on his lip, and I wondered if he wanted to say something more. Or was he waiting for me to say something? I began to push away from the wall.

He took a deep breath. "Come on, I'll take you home."

When I adjusted my coat, he put a hand on my forearm. "Wait. What's the name of that cologne you're wearing? It's amazing."

I gulped. "I'm not wearing any."

"Oh." Mason furrowed his brow and shrugged. "Then it's you." He smiled, and I felt it in my groin. I knew I blushed.

We made it back to the car, and he drove me to my house.

"Can we try this again sometime?" Mason asked when I got out, swinging my bag over my shoulder. "We could have lunch in my office. You know, brown bag it to avoid the crowds. That way you might be more comfortable."

Why would he want to have lunch with me? And try to make me more comfortable? Maybe he wasn't as nice as I thought, toying with me like this. But again, like I could say no when he looked at me with those hopeful eyes. I nodded. "I think I can handle that."

"I'll be out of town for most of the week, but let's do Friday. I'll let Lara know."

Still stunned, I may have responded.

Friday. Lunch with Mason. Alone. Fuck.

"See you then, Shane," he said, waving. "Say hi to Frank for me."

"Good night." I waved back and turned to walk up the driveway. I noticed he hadn't pulled away yet. When I opened the door, I waved again, and he saluted me before taking off. What a gentleman.

I walked into the kitchen and rummaged through the refrigerator.

Dad was at the sink washing dishes. “Was that Mason?”

I hauled out some leftover potato salad and a bottle of water. I grabbed a banana from the countertop bowl and turned to go. “He says hi.”

I could tell by the way his left eyebrow rose that he wanted to ask more questions, but he let me go in peace.

That week Mr. Jensen gave Kelly and me a massive project to work on. It turned out to be a godsend, giving me something to focus on more than my upcoming lunch with Mason. It may have been a mistake to tell Kelly about the drink since she couldn't stop talking about it. I think she was more excited about Friday than I was. She knew how anxious I was over it, but it gave her such pleasure, I found it impossible to ruin her enjoyment. I'm sure the end result of this whole thing would do that anyway. Like Mason and I would ever be more than employer and employee, much less friends.

When Friday came around, I had my lunch in hand, which I agonized over that morning. I didn't want to eat something that would make me look like a slob, or that could stink up his office, so no marinara sauce, tuna fish, or anything that could ooze. I chose a simple avocado, tomato, and Swiss cheese sandwich on wheat bread with a side of hummus and chips, and an orange (which I had already peeled to be safe) for dessert. I packed it along with a bottle of Smart Water in an insulated lunch bag.

I got into the elevator, with a motivating pat from Kelly, and tried to breathe as I zoomed up to Mason's office.

Stepping onto the floor, Lara greeted me. “Welcome back, Shane.”

“Hi, Lara,” I whispered.

“I'm so glad you aren't looking like the walking dead today. I trust you've been keeping healthy?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

She laughed. “Good to hear. Go ahead in. I'm off to lunch myself.”

“Thank you,” I said, and waved as she grabbed her purse.

Mason's door was ajar, and I walked in. I had a smidgen of what could only be confidence... until I saw Mason sitting at his desk. He had the power to turn my insides to mush with one glance. He stood and waved me over. He wore a

starched, blue, Bengal-striped dress shirt, tailored immaculately to his trim body. A navy tie in silk matched the suspenders attached to slate gray slacks. How did he manage to make everything classy, sleek, and sexy? He smiled and walked to the couch where we had sat after I'd fainted, and pulled out one of the side tables for us to use. He grabbed a chair for himself and gestured to the couch. "Have a seat." He grabbed a salad from the small fridge near his desk and sat down across from me.

"I'm still a little off because of the jet lag," Mason said, yawning.

"Where did you go?" I asked, taking out my food.

He popped open his container and poured in the dressing. "Tokyo. We had clients who insisted we come out to a formal meeting."

I went to take a bite of my sandwich and stopped. "Wow. Tokyo. Did you get to do any sightseeing while you were there?"

"Not much. We went to the Imperial Palace, Hamarikyu Gardens, and the National Museum. It's an incredible place. And massive. I'd love to go back and explore."

I blinked. I would kill to go to Japan, but I'd spend most of my time in manga shops.

"I'd love to visit Japan."

"Really? You think crowds are bad here..." Mason grinned and went back to his salad.

"Yeah, that's what I hear."

"It's not too bad," Mason countered. "And there are open areas to get away."

His attempt to make me feel better about my anxiety while traveling made me smile.

"What intrigues you about Japan?" he asked.

I might as well get the geek out now. "I read manga."

"Manga?" Mason said slowly, furrowing his brow.

"Japanese graphic novels."

"Like comic books?"

I nodded. "Pretty much, but way more varied and complex."

Mason ate a cherry tomato out of his salad and cocked his head. "Are they in English?"

"You can get them translated. But I read them in Japanese."

Mason choked, and I got up, handing him a napkin. He took it and coughed a few more times, wiping his mouth. "Thanks. You... Did you just tell me you can read Japanese?"

I blushed. Was this a big deal? "I can speak it, too."

"What?"

I sat back down. I'd never seen Mason like this. "I taught myself. I wanted to read manga as it was originally meant to be read."

Mason stared at me.

He must think I'm a raging nerd. "I know how dorky that sounds."

Mason laughed. "Are you kidding? You're unbelievable! We could have totally used you on our trip this week." He sat back against his chair. "Say something in Japanese."

"No," I said, my cheeks on fire.

"Please," he begged, and I realized there was no use in pretending I had any willpower against him.

"*Me wa kuchi hodo ni mono o ii,*" I said, recalling the only proverb that came to mind.

"Holy shit. What did you say?"

"The eyes speak as much as the mouth." I took a drink of my water and tried not to gaze at him as he sat there gawking.

"You are a man with hidden talents," Mason said, raising his eyebrows. "Do you know how attractive that is?"

"Um..." I took a huge bite of my sandwich so I didn't have to reply. I was having a hard time processing that Mason was impressed.

He stared at me, shaking his head. "Tall and broad, with brooding eyes and an innocent smile. A man of mystery, revealing pleasant surprises at every turn."

Medic! My face burned so hot I think it might just melt off. I swallowed loudly.

"I'm embarrassing you, again. Sorry, Shane." He winked at me. Fuck.

I downed half my water.

He stabbed some lettuce then asked, "Do you think I could borrow one of your translated novels to read?"

He wanted to borrow manga? I smiled, my heart doing cartwheels. "Of course." I put my water down and heaved my bag onto my lap. I reached in and fished out three novels. "These are all the translated ones I have with me." I had hundreds at home.

Mason set aside his salad and picked them up one by one, inspecting the front and back. When he got to one, his eyes widened. "How about this one?" he said, showing me the cover.

Oh shit. I forgot I had *yaoi* in there. "No, you shouldn't read that one. It's not very good." I tried not to seem shaken when I went to take it from him, but he grinned and pulled it back out of my reach.

"Why? What's wrong with it?" He turned to the side and began reading the description. I'm sure he could tell by the two men in business suits on the cover that it had something to do with gay romance.

I jumped up and tried to swipe it from him. "It's trite and boring. You wouldn't like it."

He twisted away from me and laughed. "It doesn't look boring to me at all. *A dashing young heir to his father's company, working his way up the corporate ladder under an overbearing and completely frustrating boss.* I'm sold!"

I sat back down, my face, yet again, threatening to alight. "That's *yaoi*, it's a different genre than I usually read."

Mason grabbed another one of the books as well. "Can I try both of these then? So I can get a sense of more than one genre?"

I nodded.

He smiled. "It's been a while since I've read a good book. Now I can't wait." Mason laughed and patted me on the knee. "Thank you."

I sighed, wishing I could go hide under a rock.

Chapter Four

The following week Mason's name popped up on my work phone display, midafternoon. Here I thought it was tough to answer when I saw Lara's name there. It was damn near impossible to get my hand to grab the receiver now. I managed to make myself move by the fifth ring. Anything more and it would go to voicemail, and that would be rude.

"Hello?" I said, forcing a deeper voice than usual.

"Thank God you're there." Mason let go of a long breath. "I need you."

"What?" I squeaked.

"I need you up here immediately. Our translator went home ill, and we have Tonaka Systems videoconferencing to a packed conference room in ten minutes."

"I'm not following."

"You speak Japanese! You can translate for us."

What? "No way. I have no experience in translating. Sorry, Mason." Did he completely forget everything about me? Packed conference room? Speaking? In a foreign language?

"You can do this. I know you can."

"Mason," I pleaded, "you know how I am."

"Try. Try it for me. That's all I'm asking. Please, Shane."

No matter how much my stomach twisted itself into knots, I couldn't say no to him.

I sighed. "Fine, I'll try."

"Yes! Thank you, thank you. You're my fucking hero."

"Don't say that," I said. "What happens if I choke? Or faint?"

"You'll be great." Mason chuckled. "I have a good feeling about this."

How could he have so much confidence in me? When had I proved myself worthy of such support? The man was either nuts or the best friend a person could have. He had a way of reminding me not to sweat the small stuff and making me feel like I mattered. I was a goner. "Can you tell Mr. Jensen I'll be

up helping out with the meeting?" I wanted to make sure I was covered if I took down the ship.

"Will do!" I could hear him tapping on his desk through the phone. "Come directly to the conference room. Lara is busy keeping the crew refreshed."

I made it up to the twenty-fifth floor in record time. I didn't want to stop and think about any of it. But when I walked toward the glass walls of the conference room, I froze. Ten people I'd never seen before sat around a huge cherry wood table with an enormous screen above one end—and five more were in sectioned compartments on the screen. They all turned to look at me. I took a step back, and then another. Before I could go further, someone put a hand on my shoulder from behind. I jumped.

"Sorry," Mason said, "I didn't mean to startle you." He looked stunning in an elegant black suit and red silk tie. He must have read up on Japanese culture, where black represented sophistication and formality and red symbolized energy and power.

I glanced back at the conference room. "I can't do this. It's too much pressure. Ten colleagues *and* potential Japanese clients conferencing in. I've never translated before. I'll make a fool of myself. Can't you reschedule?" I was talking so fast I would be amazed if he understood me.

"Trying to get these clients in a meeting is like aligning the stars. You're our last hope. We must meet with them now."

"I... I..." I started, and Mason held out his arms as if I might faint. Not this time. At least not yet. "I need a drink."

Mason blinked and then smiled. "My office. Quick." He pulled me after him, and I caught a glimpse of Lara looking at us with frantic eyes.

Once inside Mason's office, he went to a cupboard against the wall and pulled out a bottle of whiskey and a glass. "This should do the trick," he said, pouring a healthy shot.

"Are you sure?" The boss was going to let me drink on the job?

"Will you do this without it?"

I looked at him, grabbed the glass, and downed it. I wanted to scream as the fiery sensations careened down my throat. My face contorted and I gulped, waiting for the burn to dissipate and the alcohol to spread through my veins. It began instantly, the heat creeping through me.

“Anything else can I do?” Mason asked, putting the bottle away. He put his hands on my shoulders and searched my eyes.

I’m not sure if it was the whiskey, his question, or my adrenaline, but I lifted my arms, curled my hands in his lapels and pulled him into a kiss. It only lasted a second, if that. But I’ll remember it for eternity—the give of his lips, the heat and moisture of his mouth, and the need for more.

That second of bliss turned to horror as I realized what I had done. Shit, I kissed my boss, Mason Richards, the VP of Royal Burch Investments! What the hell was I thinking?

I let go of Mason’s lapels as if they had burned my flesh. Should I apologize? Grovel? Or own it and walk out with dignity? I could barely think straight. Why hadn’t I fainted yet?

Mason didn’t help. He stood there, staring. He opened his mouth once or twice, but didn’t speak. He must be wondering how to say I was out of a job.

I waited for him to tell me, but instead he took a breath and straightened his coat.

“You ready?” he asked.

For what? Oh God, the meeting. Kissing Mason meant everything else fell by the wayside. I could leave right now and blow off the meeting, since he was going to fire me when it ended anyway. But I didn’t want to let him down. If he needed my help I’d give it to him, no matter what he thought of me.

I had to accept the inevitable. A strange calm came over me. “Let’s do this.”

Tonaka decided to invest with Royal Burch.

The meeting was rough at first, especially when I had trouble spitting out the words and at the same time trying to remember the proper terms of respect. The Japanese have a ton of nuanced customs that I knew could only help us win them over in the long run if I conveyed them accurately. Unfortunately, most of Tonaka’s team spoke rapidly despite Mason mentioning to them that this was my first time translating, and I had trouble keeping up.

But Mason was *my* hero that day, for he made a point to speak slowly and clearly and whenever I tripped up or started to panic, I would look at him, and he’d mouth “I believe in you.” It filled me with such a rush of self-confidence that, combined with the alcohol and Mason’s kiss, I got into the swing of things quickly.

I decided to enjoy it while it lasted, since I was going to be canned. A shame, really. I liked it here, and seeing Mason so pleased with the results of the meeting had me giddy. I may be out of a job, but did I ruin any type of friendly relationship we had? Would he refuse to even come over and see Dad? Would I never see him again? The consequences of my actions began to sink in.

Mason waited as the attendees of our meeting, including Lara, patted me on the back and told me how well I did. It felt good, even with the sense of foreboding hovering over me. When the group had finally dispersed, Mason came up to me. "You rocked it out of the park. Thank you for saving my ass."

I nodded, now thinking about his fine ass, and looked to the ground.

"Grab your things, and meet me in my office. We should talk."

I tried not to look too disappointed as I gathered up the materials from the meeting. Walking over to Mason's office, I could see Lara was gone, and most of the lights were off since it was after six. Mason's door stood wide open, and a soft glow filled the room. The clouds had dispersed enough so that all of the beautiful lights of downtown Portland twinkled brightly through the massive windows. Mason gazed out at the same landscape, his back to me.

"That view is spectacular," I said, loving how the city played backdrop to the shadowed lines of Mason's silhouette.

He turned and walked toward me, bringing him into the warm light. "It is, isn't it? Sometimes I can't believe how fortunate I am."

I nodded. Something strange hung in the air.

I didn't want to hear him say it, so I rushed to fill the silence. "I know you have to let me go. I crossed a line, and I'm sorry."

Mason looked at me with that confused, somewhat bewildered expression that was beginning to become familiar. I guess I had a knack for frustrating him. "You shouldn't make so many assumptions, Shane." He stepped closer to me and reached for the strap of my bag.

I let him remove it and place it on the floor, my thoughts pinballing around in my head. He took my hand in his, caressing the back of it with his thumb, sending chills up my arms and throughout my body. I was torn between staring at our hands and looking into his eyes. My breathing quickened at the quandary. What was happening?

Just when I felt the panic rear its ugly head, he captured my face in his hands and pressed his mouth to mine. I gasped at the unexpectedness of it then melted into the resounding pleasure. God, what a kiss. Soft lips and a warm tongue that slid over my bottom lip before delving into my mouth, forceful yet tender. I felt dizzy, and my heart raced.

After I thought I might pass out from lack of breath, he pulled back, his own breathing ragged. "I have no intention of firing you. I was surprised when you kissed me... but *pleasantly* surprised."

When that information sank in, I sighed with a mixture of relief and desire.

Mason wanted me.

I grasped at him, kissing him in a frenzy, not wanting to let this moment go. He moaned when my arms tightened around him, and it sent an electric jolt straight to my cock. Mason's hands were on my face and in my hair, pulling and stroking. My hips ground into his. We were both as hard as steel.

"Fuck," Mason groaned.

Hearing him turned on enough to cuss encouraged me even more. I reveled in the feel of the fine wool fabric of his suit and the promise of a firm, taut body underneath. I could take that suit off with my teeth, piece by piece.

As we kissed like madmen, I maneuvered him backward, lifting his tight ass enough to sit on his desk. I slid my hands under his coat to push it off and then kissed his jaw and earlobe as I worked on undoing his silk tie.

Mason grabbed my tie and tugged me back to his mouth, a moment of *déjà vu* tickling the deepest recesses of my mind. He pushed my jacket off, and I let it fall to the floor in a heap. As my fingers struggled with unbuttoning his crisp, white Charvet dress shirt, his hand seized my cock through my pants. I moaned. There was no time to get him undressed properly. All I wanted was to taste that hard bulge in his slacks. I dropped to my knees, my head up, watching him watch me.

"Shane! What are you—"

Unfastening his belt and fly, I slid my hand inside, wrapping the silk of his boxers over his rigid cock.

Mason squeezed my shoulder as a bestial sound tore from his throat.

I pulled out his beautiful dick. I swear I could come right now just knowing I held Mason's thickness in my bare hand. Before that could happen, I slid my mouth over him and trembled at the utter magnitude of what I was doing. I had

Mason inside my mouth. Fuck. He moaned my name, and his hands thrust into my hair, curling into my scalp. I groaned around his cock.

I sucked him deep and drew him out, letting my tongue taste every contour of flesh. I memorized the velvety feel and intoxicating flavor, not knowing how many more times I'd be able to do this.

Mason gasped, my name tumbling from his mouth with nearly every breath. When my tongue inched over his swollen tip, he grasped at my hair, his head falling back. My own orgasm teetered on the edge.

"God, Shane. I'm going to come," he yelled, and before I could answer he shot into my mouth. The combination of his words and the taste of Mason's cum had me climaxing along with him. I jerked as I sucked him down, my fingers digging into his thighs. My body and soul screamed in ecstasy.

Mason soon relaxed after the tremors ceased, removing his hands from my hair to rest back on his desk. I kissed his spent cock and Mason sighed. "Jesus. You are indeed a man of many hidden talents."

I blushed and got up, wiping my mouth. Mason grabbed my belt and pulled me forward, trying to untuck my shirt. "Let me return the favor."

Even though I loved hearing those words, I put my hands out to stop him. "I, um, already..."

It took him a moment to understand. "Oh, you mean—" He massaged my hips.

"Sorry, I..."

He cupped my face. "You apologize too much." Then he kissed me softly.

"Tasting you did me in."

"Shit, the things you say," he said, his crystal eyes sparkling as they caught the light. He shook his head and looked down. "See, you're making me hard again."

I glanced down to catch his exposed cock twitching and smiled.

He ran his thumbs over my cheeks. "Come home with me tonight?"

Yes, yes, yes. I nodded, transfixed by the length of his elegant eyelashes.

I couldn't resist another kiss, wrapping my arms around him tightly. I still couldn't believe this was happening.

My eyes popped open, greeted by the grayness of the morning. I stared straight ahead at the blur of the painting on the wall—some abstract thing with wide swaths of color I couldn't discern. When did Dad put that there?

Whatever. I wanted to get back to the most incredible dream I had last night.

In it Mason had taken me back to his classy downtown apartment, and we made love all night long. Our mouths and hands had explored each other in hot pursuit of some innate need. I could still feel him inside me, thrusting deep and slow, his clear blue eyes staring into mine until his head went back in ecstasy. I came with him, both of us quaking in each other's arms. I fell asleep sore and spent... and ever so happy. Fuck, it was magical.

I looked down at my cock. This wasn't just morning wood, it was petrified.

Someone groaned behind me.

What the?

But before I could jump out of the bed, a hand slid over my erection, coupled with a warm body against my back.

"You're definitely awake," Mason whispered against my ear. Chills ran through me as he licked my earlobe. I moaned, both in relief and desire. How did Mason get in my bed? Or...?

Mason pinned my leg back with his and caressed me expertly, coaxing out precum to slick over my sensitive head. I arched into the wonderful sensation, feeling his hard-on against my ass. "Somebody likes that," he said and kissed the back of my neck.

I could only pant in reply as he stroked me, my hips thrusting into his fist. My whole body shuddered when he opened his palm and dragged it over the tip, the action triggering my orgasm. I wanted to scream his name, but I came faster than I could form words. I managed an exasperated gasp as my seed splashed over his hand and into the sheets.

"Oh fuck, yes," he said, continuing to stroke me as I quaked in his arms.

I reached behind me to grab for Mason's naked ass. I found it and squeezed. This could not be real life, especially *my* life. Could I still be dreaming?

Please, I begged any god or being or entity that would listen. *Don't wake me up.*

A drizzle had begun as Mason and I got out of his car. He grabbed an umbrella from under the seat of the Bimmer and pulled me close to huddle underneath. He glanced around and then stole a kiss, though I would gladly give him as many as he wanted. My groin tingled, but that might have been the silk boxers I'd borrowed from Mason sliding against me. How the hell did he make it through the day with these on?

Entering the building, we moved apart. "Have a good day, Shane," he said and winked. He walked into the elevator with a wave.

I stood and stared after him for a moment, still in a daze.

"Good morning," came a voice from my right. Mr. Jensen.

He leaned on the opposite side of the security desk, clutching the keys to the mail room. How long had he been there? From his position he could have watched Mason and me walk up to the building. Mason had patted my ass when he didn't think anyone else was watching. Shit.

"Good morning, Mr. Jensen," I returned but got the sinking suspicion that it no longer was.

I took a detour into the restroom and checked my phone. Three long texts from Dad from last night. I had texted him to let him know I was with Mason and not coming home, but never checked the reply. I was slightly busy with *other* things.

I scrolled through the messages, most of them warning me about Mason in a rather vague manner. I really didn't know what he was getting at. He basically told me to be careful. Was Dad only worried that I'd mess this job up? Figured.

I stomped out of the bathroom and went to my desk. Kelly tried to get me to talk, but I wasn't in the mood. I promised I'd tell her everything later, but she still pouted next to me as I tried to figure out why my dad chose to caution me like he did about Mason. I wanted to focus on all the wonderful things that had so recently happened. But I couldn't help but feel like the dark clouds overhead had some deeper significance than a little rain.

Chapter Five

Nearing five o'clock, my anxiety had reached a pinnacle. I hadn't seen Mr. Jensen since that morning, and Mason hadn't texted or phoned. I kept telling myself he was just busy and that it was pointless to work myself up for nothing. I thought about texting him, but I didn't know what to say without sounding overly eager or insecure.

I tried to clear my mind with distractions, and bury myself in work or at lunch with a new manga series, but my thoughts kept wandering to Mason. I snapped at Kelly again, and she backed off, throwing me dirty looks every so often. Yet another relationship I'd ruined.

When my office phone rang at four forty-five, I jumped. Mason's direct number. Not Lara's. I answered with a sigh of relief.

"Hey." The dejected tone in Mason's voice sunk me in one second. "Can you come up?"

I nodded and then realized he couldn't see me. "Sure."

He hung up with a quick good-bye.

I tried to prepare my heart for the worst, but it was a lost cause. What could have happened in the course of eight hours that made Mason's spirits plummet?

Lara was gathering her things as I exited the elevator.

"Hi, Shane," she said, putting her purse over her shoulder. "How are you today?"

"Fine," I said, much too curtly for my even my own liking.

"You sure?" she asked, stopping momentarily.

I nodded.

She didn't seem to buy it, giving me a sideways look. "Both you and Mason look as if your dogs died. And yet Mason had come in this morning with a spring in his step."

I should have smiled at that, but it only made me more upset. "Must be something we ate for lunch," I offered weakly.

She threw her hands up. "If you don't want to tell me, that's your business. Good night." She turned to go.

"You, too," I said, as she walked toward to elevator. I seemed to be leaving a trail of angry people in my wake. But I feared the one I was about to see the most.

I gulped and knocked on Mason's door.

"Shane?" Mason said from inside. I would never get tired of hearing him say my name.

"Yes."

"Come in."

I opened the door to the same brilliant view as last night, but this time Mason was perched on the edge of his desk. The same desk where I had gone down on him until he came down my throat, moaning my name. A small shiver snaked down my spine. I wondered if he was thinking the same thing as his fingers played with the edges of the desk.

He looked up finally, his eyes bloodshot. It took everything I had not to run over and kiss the pain off his face. "What is it?"

He took a long breath. "Ty saw us this morning. He threatened to go to human resources and the president if we continue to see each other. It's a violation of company policy since you're my subordinate."

My heart stopped. I knew Mr. Jensen had something to do with this. "But why does he care?"

Mason shrugged. "He's never liked me, whatever his reasons. I've only been friendly to him. But I'm sure he was ecstatic to catch me on something."

How could anyone dislike Mason? He's perfect. Maybe too perfect. But why screw *me* over in the process? "He can't prove anything," I said, defiantly.

The corner of Mason's mouth turned up. "Even so, I'm sure he could get the proof eventually. I wouldn't be able to hide how I feel about you for long."

I gulped. Mason just said he had feelings for me.

"As much as it... pains me, we have to stop seeing each other."

This time my heart ripped nearly in half. Shit, that hurt. I must have winced, for Mason turned away quickly.

"I'll quit," I said. "This job isn't my life, like it is for you."

Mason turned back to look at me, his eyes as cloudy as the night sky. "You can't quit. This company can get you wherever you want to go, and you have

too much talent to waste that opportunity, Shane. Seriously, this place will help you realize your dreams.”

But my dreams are with you. I ran a hand through my hair. I wanted to crumple to the floor, curl into a ball, and cry. I didn't care if that wasn't the mature thing to do or the *manly* thing to do. I wanted to throw a fucking tantrum. How could this be happening to me? And so soon after everything was going my way? It wasn't fair! I had already been dealt a shitty hand. What else could I have possibly done to deserve more pain and heartache?

“Besides, Frank would kill me.” He laughed, but it came out like a sigh.

“This doesn't have anything to do with him, does it?” I asked, remembering Dad's texts about Mason from last night.

Mason looked confused. “Not at all.” He paused and swallowed. “If you think about it, where did we really think this would go anyway? I've never been with anyone for more than a few weeks. I work long hours and devote everything to my job. No one deserves to be second best, but that's what you get with me. And you're much too special to be second to anything or anyone, Shane.”

The compliment was lost on me because the last piece of my heart finally broke. After the initial shock, now the two halves lay there against the confines of my rib cage, bleeding out. I stared straight ahead, but I couldn't see Mason. I couldn't see anything.

“I'm sorry, Shane,” I heard him say, but it sounded as if he were a million miles away.

I nodded. I believe I said I had to go and left.

I was drenched by the time I got home from walking the five miles in the rain. I didn't care. I had gone numb once I left the office.

The thought of dinner turned me off. I doubt I could get anything down if I tried. I dropped my keys and went straight to my room, locking the door behind me. I stripped out of my clothes, laughing tragically at Mason's wet silk boxers now in a crumpled ball in my hamper. I towed off as best I could and pulled on a pair of sweat pants and a T-shirt and got in bed.

“Shane? You okay?” Dad asked at my door.

“Yes, leave me alone.”

“You’re not okay then.” He tried the door.

“I don’t want to talk about it, Dad.”

He hated when I locked him out. In more ways than one.

“One day I’m going to stop trying, Shane,” he whispered, and those words hit me deep in my guts.

“Fine. Stop. And go!” I said, trying to hold back the tears. I knew my voice cracked.

But Dad must have gone, for it was quiet except for my harsh breathing. When I knew he was gone, I let the tears flow.

I woke late the next morning, my eyes sore, and my throat raw. I dreamt of Mason and our time together, over and over, until the last moment I saw him yesterday. I wondered if there was anything I could have done differently to make him change his mind. Could I have pleaded? Begged? Cried? But no scenario I came up with could change it. He was right.

As much as I wanted him, I didn’t want to be second best. I knew how that went. I was always second best with Dad. Mom and I both were. I had been infatuated with Mason for so long, I never thought it would amount to anything. When it finally became real, it was too real, fraught with complications and problems that were never issues in my dreams.

A sound at my door startled me out of my thoughts. “Are you awake, Shane?”

“No,” I returned. I guess today was not the day Dad planned to stop trying.

“Are you going to let me in?”

“No, Dad. Did you not hear me yesterday?”

“That was last night. What’s wrong? You need to eat.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I’ll be fine. I have a stash of energy bars in here.”

Dad sighed. “You’ve left me no choice.”

Suddenly, something electric and loud buzzed against... metal? What the hell was he doing?

I put my hands over my ears at the maddening sound, watching the end of a drill bit come straight through the middle of the doorknob! The lock dropped to the floor, and he kicked the door open.

I sat on the bed, my eyes surely as wide as saucers. "Slightly dramatic, don't you think, Dad?"

He dropped the drill on my dresser and strode over to my bed. "Shut up and listen."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he was too quick as he sat next to me, wrapping me in his arms. I pushed and struggled. Despite being bigger than him, he was stronger, sturdier, and more determined.

"I love you, Shane. I love you," he said as he held me firmly.

I didn't want to hear this. I wanted to be alone. I kept fighting him. "Stop it, Dad. Leave me alone."

"No, I will not leave you alone. You need me. I need you. We need each other. We need to heal as a family. We can't do it alone."

I pushed against him one last time. Alone. No Mom. No Mason. Not even Dad. What would become of me? I finally gave in and let him hold me. Then the tears came. Before I knew it, I was hugging him back and the shaking told me he was crying, too.

"You're my son, Shane. I love you, and I always will," he said through the tears. "I lied; I will never stop trying to make up for what I wasn't before your mother died."

Then I cried harder because I knew then my dad was a much better person than I ever could be. "I don't deserve you or this."

He grabbed my face and forced me to look at him. "Don't you ever say that. I was a horrible father... and husband. You never should have felt the way I made you feel. I'm just glad your mother was there to make up for my faults."

I cast my eyes down, salty drops sliding down my cheeks.

"I want to be the father I should have been, but you need to let me in for that." He raised my chin.

I grimaced, another round of tears beginning. "You were right to warn me about Mason."

He grabbed my shoulders, concern in his voice. "What happened?"

I hiccupped and told him the gist of the story, maybe leaving out some of the more explicit elements.

He patted my back. "I didn't know how to tell you about Mason's past. I only warned you because I didn't want you to get hurt. Mason's had a difficult life, and he's still working through a lot of problems."

"But he has you," I said, and Dad teared up.

"He does, indeed, and so do you." He paused. "Mason's father left him to deal with an alcoholic mother alone when he was five years old. She verbally abused and neglected him until he was old enough to turn her in to Child Protective Services. He spent most of his time in state-run facilities. When he came to me for a job at the construction company, I could see that he was a good kid. I gave him an advance on his pay if he promised to use it for a down payment on an apartment and new clothes. And he did. He worked really hard. He got his GED then took night school classes while he worked for me to get the rest of his degrees. He's a remarkable man."

I was dumbfounded.

Dad put an arm around my shoulders, and for the first time, I felt like I belonged there. "Just like us, Mason has had trouble dealing with his feelings. He's talked to me about it."

I blinked my wet eyes at Dad. "Has he ever mentioned me?"

Dad smiled. "No, but now I know why Mason has been avoiding my calls. He probably didn't know how to tell me about how he felt about you. Kind of awkward, don't you think?"

I laughed, despite the pain in my heart. So work was how Mason dealt with his grief? Of course it came first. It was all he ever knew. "I've had a crush on Mason since you brought him here that first Sunday."

He squeezed my shoulders. "I know. It was pretty obvious to me."

I put my head in my hands. "Did Mason know?"

Dad laughed. "No, he's clueless to that sort of thing. I bragged about you every time I saw him, which is why I figured he thought of you when that job at his company came around."

"I offered to quit, you know. So we wouldn't be in violation of anything. But he wouldn't let me."

“He values his work ethic more than anything else in the world. And he would hate to see you damage your reputation for him.”

I nodded, the tears behind my eyes again. “I’m going to miss him, Dad.”

Dad hugged me. “Of course you will. But maybe in time you can be friends.”

I smiled, though I wasn’t sure I could ever handle seeing Mason without wanting more.

“Guess what I bought at the store yesterday?” Dad asked, wiping at his eyes.

I looked at him expectantly.

“Ben and Jerry’s S’mores ice cream.”

I grinned. “You remembered.”

“Your eyes lit up like crazy when you had it on your tenth birthday.”

I didn’t think he could know anything like that. If he had been at any of my birthdays, it had only been for a few minutes. I half laughed and half cried, throwing my arms around him. We held each other for what seemed like ages.

“Did you buy more than one pint?” I finally asked.

Dad chuckled. “Yep.”

“Good, ’cause I’m going to eat an entire container.”

We laughed.

Chapter Six

Dad and I had spent the weekend watching movies, eating ice cream, and talking about everything: Mom, Mason, and all the stuff we should have been talking about before and after Mom died. We cried a lot. And considering the last time I cried was at Mom's funeral when I saw her being lowered into the ground, it felt good to get it out. It brought Dad and me closer, taking a step toward getting over the grief that ate me up inside. Dad refused to let me apologize, despite how many times he did so himself. It would take time for me to completely forgive him and allow him to be the friend I needed, but we were on our way.

When I got to my desk on Monday morning, Kelly instantly rolled her chair over and pulled me down to speak in my ear. "Becky in operations said Mason was called up to the conference room by HR and the board of directors. Something's going down. They only do that if they're going to fire one of the big shots!"

Shit. Did Mr. Jensen tell HR and the president about Mason and me despite what he said? I took off for the elevator.

"Shane, where are you going?" Kelly yelled after me, but I didn't have time to respond.

On the twenty-fifth floor, I found Lara at her desk nervously tapping her fingers. "Shane?" She furrowed her brow as I ran up. "Do you know what this is about?"

I didn't speak, just stared in the direction of the conference room. I knew what I had to do. My heart rate skyrocketed.

Lara said my name again, but I ignored her. I had already begun psyching myself up as I walked toward the conference room. I could do this. I had to do this. For Mason.

The Directors inside the glass walls looked up and saw me as I stood there contemplating my fate. I opened the doors with sweaty hands, willing myself forward.

"Excuse me, sir. This is a private meeting. You need to leave," said a thin, elderly woman in a beige suit, off to the right.

I looked to the left and saw Mason, still fine in a navy blue suit and striped tie. But today his hair was mussed as if he'd been constantly running his hands through it. When his eyes landed on me, they softened. I hated that he had been dragged in here on account of me. Mason didn't deserve this.

"I'm Shane McCarthy. And I'll leave after I say my piece." I scanned the room, my body trembling, but I forced myself to speak in an authoritative voice.

"This is no longer your business, Mr. McCarthy," an older man at the far end of the table spoke up. I recognized him as the president of the company.

"With all due respect, Mr. Bingham, I need to say this before you make the biggest mistake of your career." Murmurs erupted around the room as their eyes focused on me. I continued quickly before I lost them, or they called security.

"Mason Richards works harder than anyone I know. He made the company what it is today with his determination, devotion, and charisma. He's nurtured relationships with clients all over the world and made the company millions. He's also created an amazing team of people who strive to do their best each day. But what's truly amazing about Mason is that his work ethic has nothing to do with money, prestige, or even glory. The man lives for this job. He works so hard because it's who he is.

"Removing him from the company would be like removing part of its brain. You'd be left with an entity forced to relearn how to compete in this market, never to regain the same kind of productivity and profitability it once had.

"And for what? Just because Mason thought for a moment that he'd like to have something that most of you have right now—a life outside your career and someone to share it with. Hell, he couldn't even entertain that thought for more than a few moments. He told me I'd always be second to his work and this company if I was with him. I believe it. He won't let go of the company he's bonded with as intimately as he would be to a spouse. Now that's dedication.

"So please, don't throw away the best thing that's ever happened to this company over me. I'll even make it easier for everyone involved. I quit."

"Shane, no!" Mason slammed a fist down on the table and then put his face in his hands.

"I'll be fine, Mason. I promise."

Mason wouldn't look at me, but I preferred it that way. I'm not sure how much longer I could hold it together. I turned and left the room. It made me a little weak.

But I didn't faint.

I can't say Dad was happy when I called him that morning to tell him what had happened. He still said he was proud of me, which I now appreciated much more than before, and he insisted on taking the day off work to be with me. He also said I could have the next position that opened up at his company if I wanted it. I felt lucky to have him.

The next two weeks I spent in and out of a miserable funk. I cried. I moped. I watched tons of TV and ate way too much ice cream. It hurt my heart to do anything. I thought about Mason every time I went to sleep, hoping he'd show up in my dreams. And he did, but it wasn't the same. It would never be the same.

Eventually the days weren't so long, and Dad coaxed me out into the daylight to take a walk when the sun broke through the clouds. Smiling got easier.

I scoured the want ads and prepped my resume. I wanted to make an effort to find something else before taking Dad's offer. I wasn't sure what I would say when employers asked me about my time at Royal Burch, but I'd think of something. I should have been more worried. But worry and anxiety seemed to be less of an issue these days. When did that happen?

Saturday night Dad and I had a pizza delivered from Mississippi Pizza Pub and we were two slices in when the doorbell rang.

"Probably a salesperson or Jehovah's Witness at this hour," I said, washing down my pizza with a bottle of beer.

Dad put down his food and wiped his hands. "I'll check."

I turned on the TV and flipped through the channels.

Dad came back into the living room with someone behind him. I looked up, and Mason stood before me, with red eyes.

He wore dark jeans and a lavender cashmere sweater, showing a hint of the white T-shirt underneath. I'd never seen Mason in casual dress and a bittersweet feeling came over me. I'd miss out on knowing his many facets. His

hair was disheveled, immediately reminding me of how it looked after we'd made love. He smiled hesitantly at me, and I wanted to jump into his arms.

"Mason wanted to talk to you. I'll just take a slice and my beer to the den." Dad grabbed his things and walked off quickly.

I sat up on the couch feeling underdressed in my Everclear concert T-shirt and ripped jeans. I wiped the grease from my mouth with a napkin as Mason sat down facing me.

A tear fell from his eye, and I couldn't help but reach for him, placing a hand on his cheek and brushing the drop away with my thumb. He put his hand over mine, nuzzling it then pulling it forward to kiss my palm. My breath caught. It was as if we'd never been apart.

"No one has ever sacrificed so much for me before. And you did it with such confidence and poise. I'm humbled." As he spoke, he brought my hand down to his lap where he could hold it in both of his.

"Did they fire you?" I asked, ignoring his compliments. My heart couldn't take it.

"No."

"Thank God." I breathed a huge sigh of relief. My speech worked. Something actually went my way.

"But I quit." Mason flinched as if he was afraid I might hit him over the head. Did he forget he was holding my hands?

"You *what*?" I half-shouted. "Why? They didn't fire you."

He scooted closer to me, his knees colliding with mine. I could feel the heat of his body as his eyes roved over my face. "Because I realized I don't want to be the person you described. I don't want my work to be everything. I want a life outside of my job. I want a life with you."

I blinked, still trying to piece together what I thought I heard.

"Your father told me he regrets letting his obsession with work keep him from participating in your life and in his relationship with your mother. I don't want to make the same mistakes."

I looked down at our hands, my head spinning. Nothing made sense. "What does this mean?"

He grabbed my face, his lips inches from mine. “It means I want you, Shane McCarthy. You’ve turned my world around and made me see what I’ve been missing. I want to put you first, before everything and everyone.”

I’m not sure who moved first, but we were kissing hot and fast as I tried to hold back the sob in my throat. A happy sob. Mason wanted me. My dreams had come true. I pulled back. “I’ve been dreaming about you since I was fifteen.”

He laughed. “But you’re the man of *my* dreams,” he said against my lips.

The irony made me chuckle. “Let’s not wake up...”

Epilogue

When Mason finally pulled into the parking lot, he was already ten minutes late. He'd left work with plenty of time to make it to the shop, but stopping for balloons and flowers had thrown him off schedule. It didn't matter, there was no way he'd show up empty-handed; this was a special day for Shane. A milestone.

Manic Manga, Shane's shop just outside of downtown Portland, had been open for one year. Shane had worked so hard to get it up and running once Mason and Frank convinced him to go for it. To Mason's surprise, it had been an immediate success. Who knew there would be such a high demand for manga in this city? Then again, Mason found he couldn't put down the books that he'd borrowed from Shane at their first lunch together. If Mason could get hooked that easily, he knew others could too.

He walked up to the glass storefront, empty except for Shane, Lara, Kelly, and Frank after closing. Shane unlocked the place to let him in. The man still made his heart race when he'd meet his dark eyes.

"You're late," Shane said, but smiled as Mason handed him the flowers and balloons.

Mason kissed him quickly on the lips. "Sorry, my love. I had to make a small detour."

Shane sighed. "Lucky you're in a three-piece suit. You know I can't stay mad when all I want to do is rip it off you."

Frank cleared his throat from behind. "Your father is in the room."

Mason laughed, going over to shake hands with Frank, and kiss the ladies hello.

"So where is this cake Lara keeps telling me about?" Kelly asked, rubbing her hands together. "I've been dreaming of it since this morning."

Lara smiled and caught Mason's eye. "I'll go get it," she said, walking back to the storeroom.

Shane arranged the flowers in a vase he grabbed from under the counter and put the balloons near the cash register. He looked right at home, relaxed and happy.

"These cherry blossoms are stunning," Shane said, his nose near one of the buds.

"They reminded me of you," Mason said, coming up behind Shane to wrap his arms around him.

"Please don't say because I'm delicate or dainty." Shane turned within Mason's embrace to face him.

"You're anything but dainty or delicate," Mason replied. He leaned in to breathe in Shane's ear, loving how the man's skin prickled. "But you're definitely delicious."

Again, Frank cleared his throat.

"Okay, Dad," Shane said, smirking, as Lara came out with the cake.

Kelly clapped, oohing and awing when it was placed on the counter.

Shane read the writing on the icing aloud. "*Omedetōgozaimasu*." He moved to Mason's side and looked toward the group. "Thank you guys. I couldn't have done this without you."

Mason squeezed his shoulder. "The cake shop looked at me like I was crazy when I asked them to write *congratulations* in Japanese. I had to borrow one of your dictionaries."

"You are amazing." Shane kissed Mason's forehead.

Mason gazed into Shane's eyes. "I also had to find out how to say: *Kekkon shite kudasai*?"

Shane began to laugh then stopped short. "What?" His voice was barely a whisper.

Mason slid down to one knee, taking the small box, which he'd hidden for a month, from his pocket. Even though he made sure Shane had the counter to lean up against, Mason wasn't all that confident in his own stability as he held Shane's hand.

"Did I say it, right?" Mason asked, looking up at him. He let go of Shane's hand to open the box and show him the silver band he had made for him. "Will you marry me, Shane McCarthy?"

He heard Lara and Kelly snifle, but he wanted to hear something from Shane—who stood there staring. Those tense moments were the longest of his life.

Shane brought a hand up and pinched himself on the arm. He flinched and grinned. “Yes. Yes. A thousand times yes!”

Mason jumped up and threw his arms around Shane. “I love you,” he said, holding him tight.

“I love you, Mason. I always have,” Shane replied, as Mason removed the ring from the box and slipped it on to Shane’s finger.

Frank clapped a palm on each of their backs. “Congrats, boys.”

They grabbed him in a three-way hug.

“What was the pinching about?” Frank asked his son.

Shane smiled as he moved back and held his hand out for the ladies to see to the band.

“Just making sure I wasn’t dreaming.”

The End

Author Bio

Hunter lost a bet at a blackjack table and begrudgingly traded temperate Southern California for the sweltering heat of Las Vegas. There she resides with an extremely tolerant boyfriend and two cats named after her favorite beverages, Latte and Java.

When she's not dreaming of returning to coastal living, Hunter works at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, from where she recently received her Master's in British history. In order to appease her muse, she writes the kind of fiction that keeps her sane. She adores romance in all forms, but prefers her stories with two heroes that find their happily-ever-after with each other.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Pinterest](#)