

A close-up photograph of a man with dark hair, wearing a dark, textured sweater, being kissed on the cheek by a woman. The woman's hand is visible, resting on the man's head. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting.

Adan  
DePiaz

GETTING US

*Right*

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## GETTING US RIGHT

**By Adan DePiaz**

### Introduction

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

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

### Words of Caution

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

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

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

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

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# GETTING US RIGHT

By Adan DePiaz

## Photo Description

The photo is black and white, two men wrapped around each other in what looks to be a bedroom; one man sitting in the other's lap, his legs wrapped around his lover's back.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I gave him my heart on a silver platter, and he ruthlessly threw it back in my face. I honestly don't know what he thinks I did that's so bad that he won't have anything to do with me, not even take my phone calls. I promise I didn't do anything!! He gave me everything, spoiled me, and told me I didn't need to worry about anything. Now, left alone, vulnerable, with no job, no money, no food, and nowhere to live, I am only a shell of a man that once was there.*

*Of course, with time, he figured out that whatever it is he thought I did was false. How do we get to that place in the picture of us being us together again? How could I forgive a man who was so quick and could easily delete me from his life? How do I forget all that I have gone through and begin to trust him again?*

Please give these two men the happily ever after they deserve.

*Sincerely,*

*CeeCee*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** in the closet, advertising exec., homeless, second chances, sex worker

**Content Warnings:** rape attempt

**Word Count:** 28,075

*Author's Note*

Thanks to Nikki, Bethany, Sherry, Karrie, Eloreen, Susanna, Maris, and Marc for brainstorming, beta reading, and supporting me on making Getting Us Right the best it could be. Thanks to Cecilia for the prompt. Also, thanks to the Goodreads M/M Romance group for running this event, and the volunteers who give their time so that stories like mine can be read.

# **GETTING US RIGHT**

**By Adan DePiaz**

## Chapter 1

*Ryan*

My friend Justin Thompson nudged me with his elbow. “What are you looking at?” he asked. I didn’t answer, still staring in surprise at the dark-haired man with piercing green eyes across the crowded room. He followed my gaze instead.

“Oh. Yes, he is good looking. His name is David. He’s Kiera’s cousin. Terminally straight, so you should definitely stop staring.”

I nearly choked on the rum and coke I ordered when he said the word straight. Justin patted me on the back. “Take it easy, Ryan.” At least my bout of coughing stopped me from staring at David. I wanted to tell Justin that David was not straight; that David was actually my partner. I had lived with him for the last year, but I couldn’t disclose that information.

David Brehmer was firmly in the closet but no, not straight. I was his dirty little secret, for lack of a better term. It usually didn’t bother me. When I was eighteen years old, I came out to my parents, who promptly disowned me. I crashed at Justin’s house afterward. His parents had no problem accepting his sexuality, and I think they sort of felt bad about the way my parents handled it. With very little experience, and unable to afford college, I was delivering pizzas at night when I met David. I had delivered a pepperoni pizza and left with his number.

When I called him, he’d let me know that he was not out and had no plans to be out. His family was very firm on their ideas of homosexuality. It was a sin, a disgusting perversion. Having just been kicked out for the same reason, I didn’t begrudge him his secrecy. He was only twenty-four years old and running the advertising agency his parents created years before out of their own home. He was successful, handsome, and charming. It was not hard to see how I, a naïve nineteen-year-old at the time, could be swept away by his attentions.

After a few months of “dating”—in reality, sneaking around, watching movies at his house at first and then spending most of our time in the bedroom—he asked me to move in. In my innocence, I had already fallen in love with the man. I jumped at the chance to spend every night with him. The agency was very successful and he made a lot of money, so he urged me to quit my dead-end delivery job, asked me to remain his secret lover while he

provided everything for me. I didn't even think of the risks of giving up my life for this. I would have no money of my own, no car either. The one I drove was provided by the pizza restaurant for deliveries only, but I loved him. For the first time since I came out to my parents, I had a sense of safety. I was wanted and I had a home.

David and I were such a secret that we traveled in different circles; our lives didn't mesh at all except when we were alone at home. So, imagine my surprise when I saw him across the bar chatting with a few men all similarly dressed as him, in tailored suits. My black button-down shirt and faded jeans were a stark contrast. It was so obvious that we didn't live in the same world. Knowing that I couldn't go over to him and say hello or kiss his cheek made me feel like being his kept man was a dirty thing. Even staring at him like I had been could have given us away, and my horror at having done it disappointed me.

"Hey, Ryan. Where is your head at, man?" Justin broke into my thoughts.

I startled and looked at him sheepishly. "Sorry. I was just thinking."

"Stop thinking and start looking, dude. There are many available gay men here. You can't be a secret boyfriend forever, you know. Find someone who isn't afraid to be seen in public with you."

Yeah, Justin knew I was living with someone, but not who. I had to explain why I moved out of his house and why I couldn't give him the address. He wasn't happy about it. His opinion was that I was being used and shamed. Part of me agreed, just not the part that loved David.

I rolled my eyes at his bluntness. "You don't understand, Justin." Like those words hadn't been uttered by many before me excusing the inequality of their relationships. Love didn't make everything okay, but I was determined we would be the exception.

"Hey guys," Justin's cousin, Bradley, said. Bradley had just proposed to his girlfriend, Kiera, and was throwing an engagement party at the bar down the street from his house. I wasn't close to him, but he was a cool guy. He used to buy beer for Justin and me when we were in high school. I had only met Kiera once, but she seemed nice enough. I was happy for them.

"Congratulations on your engagement, Bradley," I said, shaking his hand.

He clasped my shoulder. "Thanks, Taylor," he said. For some reason he had always called me by my last name. "You should meet Kiera's cousin, David. He mentioned that his company is looking for interns. It's advertising and your photography could come in handy. It's got to be better than delivering pizza."

I hadn't delivered a pizza in close to a year. Evidently, Justin hadn't told anyone that I was currently an unemployed boy toy.

"I'd love to meet him; I just have to hit the head first," I explained, desperate not to be introduced to David. I wasn't sure if he had seen me yet, but I knew running into each other in public would make him nervous.

Bradley slugged my shoulder lightly. "TMI, Taylor, TMI. Find me when you get done." He walked away, and I headed to the bathroom to wash my hands and stare at the walls, trying to figure out how to leave without Bradley or David seeing me.

I walked out of the bathroom, turned down the hallway away from the bar, and looked for a back exit. No such luck. I turned to head back to the party and crashed into David. I hadn't even heard him behind me. He grabbed my arm and pulled me into a little recess in the paneled hallway. "What are you doing here?" he growled.

"I came here with a friend. I've known Bradley for a few years," I told him in a calm voice.

"You are putting me at risk by being here."

"I haven't even said a word to you. You're the one who sought me out. It's not like I knew Kiera was your cousin. Family is off limits, right?" I reminded him of his refusal to talk about his family with me. I was quickly getting angry at his attitude with me.

"Right," he agreed, not noticing my sarcasm. "So do you want to make an excuse to leave, or should I?"

"Why does someone have to leave? I'm sure I can pretend I don't know you for a few hours."

"Fine, I'll go tell my cousin I have to leave her engagement party." There was no disguising his attempt at a guilt trip.

I pushed him away from me. "Whatever. I'll go tell my friend I'm leaving. Wouldn't want you to miss time with your family, who know so much about you..." I said sarcastically. Before I could take more than a step away, David wrapped a hand around my forearm and pulled me back. He roughly shoved me into the wall, and I felt my pulse accelerate at the manhandling.

"I'm sorry," he whispered in my ear, his lips teasing the sensitive area. "I know I seem unreasonable. I can't ignore you for a few hours, can't pretend I

don't know you. My heart rate speeds up, and my pants get uncomfortably tight just from looking at you. I can't help but want to do this." He looked in both directions and, seeing the coast was clear, pressed his lips against mine.

I instinctively closed my eyes as he opened his lips and his tongue traced mine. I opened my own mouth to deepen the kiss. He pushed closer to me, and I could feel his erection through his pants. My hands ran up and down his back. My fingers slipped underneath his pants seeking his hole. I was about to press inside when the door to the hallway squeaked open. My hand jerked out of his waistband, and we jumped apart as if burned from the contact. I looked in the direction of the door, but no one was there.

"That was close," he gasped. "I'm going to go home and wait for you. We can continue this there." He ran his hand over my light brown hair, not taking another chance by kissing me good-bye.

I waited for five minutes after David went back into the bar before rejoining Justin. "Hey, where were you?" he asked.

"In the bathroom."

"Eww. For that long?" I slapped his arm and he laughed loudly.

"Taylor, David had to leave, I'm sorry," Bradley said, joining us.

"That's too bad," I said, putting regret in my tone. "Maybe another time. I'm feeling a bit tired myself; I think I'm going to head home."

Justin gave me a strange look. "I thought we were going to head to Chuck's later," he reminded me, mentioning the gay bar we preferred. I felt a little bit guilty for breaking our plans, but I had a difficult time resisting the demands of my lover.

"Sorry, Justin. I'm not feeling all that well," I lied. I knew I'd have to make it up to him. I waved good-bye and congratulated Bradley and Keira once more before I left.

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## Chapter 2

*David*

I waited for half an hour before Ryan finally opened the door to our apartment. “What took you so long?” I queried, my expression showing my annoyance, my hands on my hips giving away my impatience. All I needed was to tap my foot, and I’d officially be acting like I was his mother instead of his lover.

The smile that was on his face dropped, and his eyes glared at me. “I rode to the party with my friend, and when I decided to leave early, I had to walk back.” He took his coat off and turned away from me to hang it in the closet. He avoided my gaze as he moved to push past me in the entrance hallway. I grabbed his arm.

“I’m sorry.” It seemed like I was saying that a lot lately. My possessiveness didn’t mesh well with the secrets I was forcing us to keep. “I know that I’ve been acting without thinking lately. I love you so much, but I have all these worries, and guilt. I know I’m not doing right by you, Ryan. Please forgive me.”

His face softened immediately. He lowered his head so that our foreheads touched. “I love you too, David.” I knew he must have in order to keep putting up with hiding our relationship, to forgive me for jumping to conclusions. It was still nice to hear it, though.

“Kiss me,” I pleaded breathlessly. His hands wrapped around my upper arms, and he backed me up against the wall, doing as I asked. His tongue snaked into my mouth, and his hands moved down my body until they reached my ass. He squeezed tight. I moaned into his mouth.

“Get in the bedroom,” he commanded. I did as I was told.

Many of the employees at the advertising agency have been there since I was a child. To earn their respect I always had to be in control and confident. In my relationship with Ryan, I had to be in control as well. I gave him anything he could possibly need, materially anyway. I set the rules, and forced us into the closet. When it came to the bedroom, however, Ryan was in control.

“Strip,” he said now. My fingers worked the buttons on my shirt loose, and then I removed the belt from the suit pants I was wearing. When I was left

standing in the bedroom in just my red boxer briefs, Ryan walked around me appraising my body. He leaned in close, his lips grazing my ear. "I love the red underwear." I shivered at his erotic tone.

"Take your clothes off too," I groaned. "Please."

"When I'm ready." He took his camera out of the bedroom closet and set it up on the dresser. I knew letting him film us was risky. What if someone found our videos and posted them online? It would be the end of me. After making love, we would often replay the videos for our viewing pleasure; they never failed to warm us up for round two. I couldn't bring myself to deny him the pleasure he found in filming our sexual encounters or taking nude photos of us. It was too hot.

With his camera set up, he slowly disrobed. A wet spot appeared on the front of my underwear. I was hard and precum leaked with the anticipation of my lover's weight pressing me into the mattress. His body was toned and tight, and I could get lost in his ocean-blue eyes. When he revealed his hard cock, mine jerked in response. "I could almost come just watching you get naked," I confessed.

"Get on the bed, on your hands and knees," he commanded. I crawled up on the bed, slowly and slinkily, hoping to drive him as crazy as he drove me. His hand landed on my ass with a loud smack for my trouble.

"Don't tease me," he said. *Tease him?* I was the one about to orgasm before he even penetrated me. I couldn't tell him that. All that left my mouth was a broken groan. Then his face was buried in my crack.

"Shit, Ryan!" I yelled, finally finding my voice. Then I lost it again as he licked a line from my balls to my hole. Again and again. His tongue pushed against the pucker, breaching me, and I collapsed forward unable to hold myself up. It was always this way with us. He weakened me in ways no one else ever had.

He thrust his tongue inside several times, then he pulled back from my body. "Don't stop," I pleaded, my voice gravelly with desire.

"I need you too much," he said. His hand fell on my ass again with a burning impact. "Turn over."

I flipped onto my back, and his eyes looked me over, my dick dribbling with precum. He swiped his tongue across the head and then he grabbed lube from the side table and slicked up his own cock. After three months of

exclusivity and tests, we had been forgoing condoms for months now. Pushing my knees up, he pushed his blunt head against me. The slippery conditions made it hard for him to push in right away, but finally he was inside me. “Yes, Ryan. Fuck me.”

“I love that you are so vocal,” he said, finally bottoming out so that his hips were flush with my backside. He stayed still for a moment allowing me to adjust to his girth and length. I didn’t need it, but I think he was probably making sure he didn’t come right away from my hot asshole clenching around him.

When he began to thrust slowly, I nearly lost my mind. “Faster,” I pleaded. He smirked above me, but kept the same pace. The long, drawn out plunges he made inside me felt wonderful in their torture. I enjoyed a slow fuck from time to time, but I needed hard and fast. Hooking my leg around the back of his, I turned us so that I was on top. “Faster,” I said this time, taking control of the tempo.

I moved up and down on top of him, creating a friction guaranteed to throw me over the edge. His hands roamed over my body, fingers pinching my nipples, then moving lower to squeeze my ass as I rode him. I leaned forward and kissed him, keeping up the same fast movements with my hips. His hands wrapped around my back, and he pulled himself up so he was sitting and I was on his lap. I wrapped my legs around his back and used his shoulders as leverage as I kept fucking myself on him. He grasped my hips hard and slowed me down. Looking intensely into my eyes, he thrust hard but not fast.

“Fuck,” I shouted, as he hit my prostate. He repeated the punishing move three more times before he lowered his head to my nipple. He bit down and thrust up once more. Jets of cum spouted from my dick, and the milky-white fluid hit both of our flat abdomens. Moments later, his eyes rolled back, and I felt his own release pulsing into my ass, slowly running down the channel. He pushed his face into my chest, kissing it and murmuring nonsense. I wrapped my arms around him tightly, feeling relief at the closeness after such a tense day between the two of us.

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## Chapter 3

*Ryan*

I could have stayed all night wrapped in David's arms, but he hated when cum dried on his skin.

I wouldn't call it comfortable myself, but I was willing to deal with the itchiness to bask in the afterglow of orgasm. For all that David gave me—a home, security, money, and his love—it wasn't too much to ask for me to clean us up after making love.

Once the cleanup duty was done and I turned off the camera, I joined my lover on the bed. David moved into my arms and rested his head on my hairless chest. He rubbed his cheek over my nipple a few times before falling still. I thought maybe he had gone to sleep and closed my own eyes. "Are you happy, Ryan?" he asked. His voice was clear and alert waiting for my answer. He didn't seem sleepy at all.

"Of course," I said, quick to respond to that question. "Why do you ask?"

"We fought twice in one day, which never happens." David's voice held a note of worry.

"We normally don't cross paths during the day. It was bound to throw us off," I told him, trying to ease his concerns.

"Maybe." He lay silent again. Minutes passed and then he lifted his head and propped himself up on his elbow to look me in the eyes. "Do you feel like I'm keeping you from something... more?" he asked, the wariness in his voice still present.

"I don't know what you mean," I said honestly.

"I'm practically keeping you in the closet. I haven't met your friends, you haven't met my colleagues." David didn't have anyone he called friend; something about hiding who he was made it hard to form close relationships. "You deserve more. You deserve to be open and honest, to go to a restaurant with your lover, to hold his hand, to have him hold yours. Instead, we live lives where we know almost nothing about each other except how we are together in bed."

I thought about his words for a moment. "I admit, sometimes it's hard to be in this relationship, but not often. I want to introduce you to my best friend,

Justin; he's practically my brother, but he doesn't even know you. However, we know more about each other than just fucking. I know how much you love the work you do; finding ways to make people interested in things. I know what movies you like, what books you read. You know my passion for photography and filming. You know what books I like to read too. Our shelf is full of them. Our lives outside of this apartment might be separate from each other's, but I know you. I love you."

"You still deserve more, Ryan," he murmured. "I wish I could give it all to you. I wish I could meet Justin and take you out on dates. I've told you how bigoted my parents are. They would never accept me being gay. They would never accept who I really am or you as my partner."

"See," I pointed out. "That's another thing I know about you. I know how your parents would react, and I know that losing the relationship you have with them would hurt you. Believe me, I understand exactly how it feels, and I wouldn't ask you to go through it." He was looking at me again, his eyes showing sympathy for what I had been through. I lifted my head up and kissed him.

"David, I do wish *we* could have more, but I would never force the issue. I don't think you realize how much you do give me, though. There was a time when I had nothing and almost made a bad decision that could have cost me so much."

That caught his interest, and he pulled himself up into a sitting position. "What do you mean?"

I sat up too, cleared my throat, nervous to tell him the next part, nervous that my life had almost done a one-eighty when I was kicked out of my house. "When my parents disowned me, I didn't move in with Justin right away. I was on the street for only a week, but it was long enough to tempt me to do bad things. I dug through garbage cans for food, and when it made me sick, I stole a pop and some chips from the store. Just once. One night, I was trying to sleep in an alleyway, and a man came through. He was looking for a trick to give him a blow job. I almost did it. I saw a knife pouch on his belt and got scared instead. I was getting desperate though, and if I hadn't seen that, I would have been prostituting in no time."

"Oh my God, Ryan!" he yelled, cutting into my story. His arms were around me then, hugging me fiercely.

"It's hard to admit how weak I was then, especially when it had only been a week on the street. I was in a convenience store the next day when Justin ran

into me. He caught me sticking some jerky in my jeans and asked me what the fuck I was doing. I burst into tears and told him about being kicked out. He brought me to his parents and they let me stay with them. His parents are really good people. They took me in, and I got the job delivering pizzas, but I always felt guilty for infringing on their space, on their privacy. I think I would have left there soon, but then I met you. Leaving them to live on the streets became a moot point, but I want you to know what you gave me. The most important was your love and trust, when I hadn't had that in a long time. But you gave me security when you took me in. I haven't wanted for a thing since. Yes, I'd like to be out publicly with you, but you gave me so much more... If anything, with my past, it's you who deserves something more."

David pulled his head away from my chest, revealing his face wet with tears. I brushed them off his cheek. "I'm sorry—"

"Shut up," he said cutting into my apology. "Don't you see that that makes me more proud of you for staying strong after all that? I love you so much. I wish I could give you everything, give it to myself too. I can't right now though. I'm going to give you my love and hope that it is enough." He pushed me down on the bed then and kissed me with a new intensity.

"It's more than enough," I told him, in between kisses. He reached over for the bottle of lube and poured some on his fingers, wetting both of our cocks with the sticky liquid. My prick hardened with David's touch. He wrapped his fingers around both of us and began thrusting. I arched into him, not breaking eye contact. There was something almost spiritual about this coming together. Our minds and bodies were on a whole other level than before, and it was only seconds before his eyes widened and then scrunched shut as he came over our hands. I followed him immediately, throwing my head back and shouting his name as I released.

David didn't move off my chest. I gently turned us over, so I could clean us up before we fell asleep. When I tried to move, David tightened his arms around my back and protested. "Don't leave."

"I'm just going to get a wet washcloth," I explained, kissing his forehead.

"No."

"But—"

"I just want to hold you. A little dried cum won't kill me," he said sleepily, cutting into my reminder.

I decided to let it go as well, and held on to him just as tightly. Wrapped around each other, we fell asleep in minutes.

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## Chapter 4

*David*

My phone rang on the bedside table, waking me. I reached for it, catching the time on the clock. It was obscenely early, with an hour still before I had to get up for work. I saw my mother's name flash across the screen as the phone chirped again. Moving out of the bedroom so I didn't wake Ryan up, I answered the phone. "Hey, Mom, is anything wrong?" It had to be serious if she was calling me at five in the morning.

"I need you to get to the office right away. There is something to discuss." The words were clipped, a cool reserve to her voice.

My mother had never been very warm or affectionate, but there was something about this call that seemed off to me. Perhaps it was the hour at which she called. I just knew something wasn't right. "What's wrong?" I asked for the second time.

There was a haughty sniff. "We'll talk about it when you get here."

"I have to shower. I just woke up."

"Make it quick, David." Then she hung up.

My stomach itched and I reached down to scratch it, feeling the dried residue from the night before flake off. Yes, definitely needed to shower.

Forty-five minutes later, I pulled up in front of the office building that housed Brehmer Advertising. My hair was still a little damp but combed neatly, and I was wearing a pressed navy-blue suit with a gray shirt. After the big discussion, I figured I would start work early. Then I could leave early and get home to the man that I left sleeping in bed. The lobby was empty, but I found my mother sitting in my office at my desk. She was going through some files on my desk.

"I'm here, as requested. What was so important you had to call at five o'clock, Jean?" At the office, my parents preferred to be addressed by their first names.

She looked up at me, her eyes hard and her mouth turned into a frown. Even her dour look couldn't take away from her beauty. At fifty years old, she was in great shape, thanks to a personal trainer and a chef. Her blonde hair might have come from a bottle now, but it was fashionably styled and she took care to look

good. She had once said she wouldn't be one of those wives whose husbands left them for a younger woman. My dad and I weren't close enough to know if he had remained faithful all these years. Given his lack of passion for everything outside of the company profits, he probably had.

"I received some interesting news last night. I could hardly believe it."

My throat grew dry, and I squirmed uncomfortably, trying to think of what news she would have heard. What would make her call me in to the office, and why was she sitting at *my* desk? "What—" I croaked out. I cleared my throat and asked again. "What news?"

"Oh, yes. You should be nervous," she said with a smirk. "When were you going to tell us that you were gay?"

"What?" It was all I could splutter out at my shock. No one knew I was gay, only Ryan and myself.

"I know that you are one of those... homosexuals. There's no point lying about it." Her words dripped with disdain.

"I don't know what you are talking about, Mother," I said, as if her accusation was preposterous. I forced a note of calm into my voice, so not to give myself away.

"So you aren't dating a... I believe his name is Ryan Taylor?" I nearly shit my pants. How did she know Ryan's name?

"Don't bother trying to protest. You're not married or even dating any women. It should have come to my attention before now."

"I'm not—"

"Save your excuses and lies, son. The thing is, your father and I aren't sure about your ability to run this company any longer. I am going to run the office until your father and I decide whether to keep you in your current position or to let Jeffrey run the company," she informed me, mentioning my cousin and Kiera's brother by name. She knew that we didn't get along, and I would never work under him.

"But—" I tried to convince her she was wrong once again.

"Go home, David."

Knowing I couldn't reason with her, I left the office. Instead of getting in the car, I began to walk around the city, trying to think of how she found out about Ryan. How she found out about me. I don't know how long I walked

along the streets, but I soon began to notice that businesses were opening their doors for the morning. The coffee shop called my name with the smell of bitter espresso being brewed. I walked past the door. The bakery smelled tempting as well. Finally, I stopped in front of a bar that opened early in the morning and walked in.

Three shots of whiskey later, I was staring at my bottle of beer with a dazed stupor. There was no way around it, the only person who could have revealed my secret was Ryan. I couldn't figure out why. The night before, he had told me he was content, even happy with our relationship. He revealed secrets to me and held me through the night. Was it all a lie? Did he try to play on my sympathies because he knew that my world was going to be blown apart? I downed the beer before stumbling off the stool. I put a fifty down on the bar and went outside where the sun blinded me after sitting in the darkened bar. I knew I couldn't drive home in my state, so I flagged down a taxi and gave him my address.

Opening the apartment door, I leaned against the wall. Hating what I was about to do, but knowing it was my only option now. Ryan's laptop was open on the coffee table. The background was a still shot of a video from his camera. Black and white, it was from last night. I was sitting on his lap, my arms and legs wrapped around him. He had his head buried in my chest, and my head was on his. It blew me away. He had great vision when picking moments to capture. I shook my head to clear it of any sentimental thoughts. He had told someone about us. At this point it didn't matter who, it just mattered that he betrayed me.

I walked down the hallway and found Ryan in the bedroom, changing the sheets. He looked up with surprise, and a smile lit up his face. I didn't return it. He noticed my somber mood, and his face went blank. He looked away and continued making the bed. "Why are you home so early?"

"Funny thing, that. I went into work today, and my mother told me she knew I was gay."

He jerked upright and moved over to me. "What? How did she find out?" I couldn't believe that he was pretending not to know. I stayed silent, trying not to push him or punch him for his culpability. He must have mistaken my anger for sadness, because his hands cupped my face and he gave me a sympathetic look. "I'm so sorry, David. How did you handle it?"

"Sorry? You're sorry? If you're so sorry about it, why did you open your mouth in the first place?" I spit out in a raised voice.

His face immediately showed confusion. “What do you mean?” He sniffed the air. “Are you drunk? It’s only nine o’clock.”

“When my mother told me she knew I was gay and that she wasn’t sure if I should run the company anymore, I needed a drink. Excuse me!” My voice was growing louder.

“I didn’t tell anyone that I was with you, if that’s what you’re implying,” he told me, removing his hands from my face. He backed up and sat on the bed.

“Bullshit! You must have said something. Maybe to your friend, Justin?” I looked at the dresser, where his camera still stood. “Maybe you showed him some pictures.”

“I would never do something like that. Those pictures are for us only.” He sounded taken aback.

“Sure. You only put it on your laptop so anyone can see it. Maybe you opened it when Justin was around?” I sneered.

“You’re being a dick, David. I’m not dealing with you when you are drunk.” He stood and walked out of the bedroom.

I grabbed the camera and an envelope I kept in my drawer in case Ryan had an emergency and stalked out after him. “You don’t have to deal with me at all anymore. You exposed me. You told my secrets to someone who couldn’t be trusted and now I can’t trust you. Take your fucking camera and leave.” I threw the offending object on the floor and watched as the lens broke and the screen cracked. He knelt down beside it, looking at it with horror.

“I know you don’t have any money, and it’s my fault. There’s a thousand dollars in this envelope. Take it. It should hold you for a while.” I threw the envelope on the floor next to him and that damned camera.

He stood up shakily. His eyes were flooded with tears. “You’re kicking me out? Breaking up with me? You told me you loved me,” he accused.

“I loved the guy I thought was honest and loyal. I have to go see my father now. I know I can’t get through to my mother and convince her she’s mistaken. I want you gone before I get back, or I won’t be so generous. After all, we wouldn’t want you becoming a prostitute or anything,” I leered, trying to hurt him as much as he hurt me. It might have been wrong, but I wasn’t in the most rational mood. With that last barb, I left the apartment.

## Chapter 5

*Ryan*

As soon as the door closed, I jumped to my feet and ran for the bathroom. I just made it to the toilet before I emptied my stomach. Dropping to my knees, I felt my heart racing and my breath laboring. I wasn't sure what caused the panic I was currently feeling. Was it the breakup itself or the fact that he threw something I told him last night in my face before leaving? It was the most honest thing I had ever told anyone. Even Justin didn't know about that moment in the alley. I heaved once again, but there was nothing left but bile.

I stood up after I finally got my breathing under control. I looked in the mirror, and my face was flaming red. My eyes were glassy, and there were tear tracks down my cheeks. I swiped them away. I hadn't even realized I was crying. Packing my bag was the last thing I wanted to do. I wanted to stay and fight for us, until he knew without a doubt that I would never have betrayed his trust. But the apartment was his, and his cruelty was so cutting, I didn't have it in me to feel its bite again.

Three pairs of jeans and three long sleeve shirts went into my duffle bag. I grabbed a few toiletries and threw them in with the clothes. In the bedroom I looked around making sure I wasn't missing anything that was important to me. Looking at my closet I decided to grab a pair of black slacks and a button down shirt with a matching tie. I rarely wore clothes like that, but it occurred to me, I might need them for a job interview. After packing those, I spotted a picture frame with a snapshot of the two of us. It went into the bag.

Leaving the bedroom that held so many memories, I saw my camera on the floor. It was wrecked. I would have liked to have had it fixed, but money was going to be an issue from here on out. Taking the SD card out and putting it in my pocket, I threw away the camera. Then my eyes fell on the envelope that David had tossed so carelessly at me.

David had accused me of betraying him. After throwing money at me to leave, or for services rendered, he turned me into the whore that I was afraid of becoming. He had turned what I thought was a loving relationship into nothing but a business transaction. The envelope brought out a new bout of nausea, but I controlled it as I picked it up and placed it on the table. I wanted him to see it when he got home, so he knew he couldn't reduce me to the lying, backstabbing, piece of ass he tried to turn me into.

I removed the apartment key from my keychain and placed it on the envelope before hoisting my computer bag and duffle over my shoulder. Looking around one last time, my stomach turned over. Just when I thought we were stronger than ever, David and I imploded in a spectacular fashion. When I exited the apartment, tears filled my eyes and I wondered what I would do now. What I could do?

There was only one person I could call. Unfortunately I had been a shitty friend to him lately. Blowing him off on plans we had made, keeping a part of my life secret from him. Even though he no longer lived with his parents, I couldn't ask him to let me crash at his house. I just needed someone to talk to. Maybe some place I could leave my laptop and clothes so they weren't stolen while I looked for work and a place to sleep at night.

On the ground floor, I said good-bye to the doorman. "Can I get you a taxi?" he asked.

I shook my head in response. I had no money to pay the fare. "It looks like a good day for a walk," I told him.

He looked at the gray clouds and gave me a strange look. "Okay... See you later, Mr. Taylor." I didn't correct him as I stepped outside. In truth, the clouds fit my mood very well. And if the sky opened up and I got soaked, it really couldn't make this day any worse than it already was.

I had three more weeks of service on my pay-as-you-go phone, so I dialed Justin. "Hello," he answered groggily.

"Hey Justin, you're not at work?"

"I called in sick," he replied.

"A case of hangover-itis?" I snorted.

"More like a case of well fucked-itis," he said, laughing. "You should have seen the dancer last night, Ryan. A total power bottom, his ass was—"

"Spare me the details," I pleaded. I wasn't in the mood to hear about Justin's exploits.

"Just because you prefer to live your life in secret, doesn't mean we all should," Justin chuckled lightly.

I ignored his jab at my former relationship. "Listen. The reason I'm calling is that I need a favor."

“What kind of favor?” he asked, sounding more alert all of a sudden. He knew my reluctance to ask for help firsthand.

“I need to leave some things at your house for a little while.”

He sighed heavily, and I knew he understood why I was asking for this favor. “Just come over to my place and we can talk.”

“Thanks.” His apartment was on the outskirts of the city and about a three mile walk. Even burdened by my bag of clothes and laptop, I felt a little bit lighter.

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## Chapter 6

### *David*

I couldn't sleep for shit. It had been two weeks since I had thrown Ryan out of my life and home. Regret buzzed through me, warred with my sense of betrayal, and left me restless night after night. There was no scent of him left on the pillows. I should have felt relief, but inside I damned him for changing the bedding that day. He even took the picture from the bedside table. It almost felt like he never existed, except for the gaping black hole that stood in place of my heart.

After I left him, I was able to talk to my father. I admitted that I had been experimenting, but I explained it was a phase, and that part of my life was over. It was hardly a lie, since I had just kicked my lover out and had no plans to be with another man. Even if I could trust someone again, my heart belonged to someone else. Someone unworthy? Perhaps. It wasn't like I could rid him from my system in such a short time. I didn't think I ever would, but I was resigned to live my life in loneliness.

It was midnight when my phone rang. I looked at the number that flashed across the screen. It was Ryan. Again. I had removed him from my contacts but was unable to forget the number. It was difficult when he called twice a day in the morning and the night. I refused to listen to his voice mails or answer his calls. He had made his bed and now needed to lie in it. Wherever that was. My stomach turned over, worried he was out on the street. The idiot didn't take the money I gave him. It was his own damned fault. Still I couldn't sleep with the guilt that I had rendered him homeless after I had asked him to give everything up to be with me.

I had succeeded in keeping my all-important job though. That was something. The trust from my family was a work in progress. Prior to being caught, my parents stayed out of the way of my leadership, preferring to vacation and take on pet causes. Now my mother made weekly visits to the office, always looking over my shoulder. I didn't know if she was hoping to catch me making a big mistake so she could give the job to her sister's son, Jeffrey. He was just as cold as she was, so maybe she preferred dealing with him rather than me. Maybe she was just peeking over my shoulder to make sure there wasn't a man servicing me under the desk. It really should have left me exhausted at night, but I had yet to manage to catch more than an hour or two of sleep since Ryan left.

The next day was truly a test of my sanity at work. For the second time that week, my mother turned up at the office. “The font you’re using is all wrong,” she corrected, criticizing the project I was working on for a well-known fast food restaurant. She slipped on her glasses and stood over me waiting for me to make the change.

“What do you suggest, Jean?” I sighed.

She reached over me and grabbed my mouse. I was irritated, but I moved out of the way. My work was erased, and she chose a more stylized font for the ad and saved it before backing away. I grunted. It was better, not that I would admit it. “I guess that will work.”

She gave me a knowing smirk. The business wouldn’t be where it was if she and my father didn’t know what they were doing. I had continued to bring the agency into the future, but it irked me to admit that she still had the vision to do my job. “So what brings you into the office twice in one week?” I inquired.

“Your father and I are having a benefit dinner this weekend,” she explained. “If you are serious about keeping your position in the company, you need to put in more public appearances.”

“I was under the impression that my job was secure. I gave up my experimentation, buckled down at work. I’ve done all you asked.”

“It might help if I knew you were serious about giving up your—” She paused to scrunch up her nose in distaste. “—dalliances. Lacey West is in town, and you know her parents are quite respectable and well-known in our circles. I’d really like to see you bring her to our dinner. You would make such a striking couple.”

I knew the girl in question. A total spoiled princess. One of those wealthy party girls in the news who never worked a day in her life. Even if I weren’t gay, she would never be my first choice as a dinner date. “Mother, I don’t need to be set up. I’ll come to your dinner party, but I don’t want to take Lacey as a date.”

“David, you know how I hate when you call me mother in the office. If you can’t be bothered to take Lacey, perhaps Jeffrey would be interested.” Suddenly I became very aware that Lacey had become the equivalent of the company. If I wanted to continue to run it, I needed to fall in line and be seen in public with Lacey West. There was no question of what I needed to do. I hadn’t come that far, denied my true self, and dumped my boyfriend, in order to give the company to Jeffrey.

“Well, Jean, you get your way. I’ll call Lacey and ask her to be my date. What time do I need to be at the event?”

“It’s Friday evening at seven. Be sure to wear a tux.”

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## Chapter 7

*Ryan*

Justin walked into the living room, dressed in black leather pants and a blue, skintight T-shirt. I was sitting on his couch looking through the want ads of the newspaper. “Going out?” I asked.

“I’m meeting up with Adam tonight,” he affirmed. Adam was a guy he met at some club the week before. Though they hadn’t hooked up yet, Justin had spent the week texting him. “You should join us.”

“Thanks, man, but I’m not ready to hit any clubs yet. Besides, I don’t want to be a third wheel.”

“You can’t mope forever, Ryan. It would do you good to get out. You know what they say, ‘the best way to get over a man...’”

“I know, ‘get under a new one,’” I finished. “Thanks for the advice but not yet.”

“He used you. He used you and stole your freedom, and still you protect him.” I winced at his blunt evaluation.

“Please, Justin, don’t start.”

“If you’d just tell me who he is, I’d kick his ass for what he did to you.” His protectiveness touched me but made me feel pathetic at the same time.

I was saved from having to respond by the ringing of Justin’s phone. He smiled as he answered, “Hi, Adam.” He stood up and walked from the room. I looked at my own phone. I picked it up to make my daily call to David. As angry and hurt as I was when he threw me out, I couldn’t give up on him. I knew he had to be going through hell whether he made up with his parents and had to deny who he was, or if he hadn’t and was possibly jobless and estranged from them.

Unfortunately when I dialed his number the call wouldn’t connect. Instead there was a series of beeps and a message that my service was disconnected. I ended the call in frustration. I had always used David’s money to pay for my cell phone, but my minutes had run out. It was a useless piece of plastic and electronics now. I didn’t have the money to pay for it. It had been three weeks since I showed up at Justin’s to ask him if he would store my clothes and

computer. He managed to get out of me that I had been broken up with and kicked out. He refused to let me keep my things there unless I stayed as well.

I had to admit that I spent the first two weeks on his couch in a funk. I barely got up, didn't eat much. I wallowed in my self-pity for all it was worth. I'd like to think I'd have quit moping on my own in short order, but Justin confronted me first. He was diplomatic, but he reminded me that life was going on and I needed to get mine together. Not wanting to be a slouch and a freeloader, I did snap to, and since then I'd been trying to find a job.

I started out trying to get my delivery job back, but the owner of the pizza place didn't really hold me in high regard when I quit on him with no notice. I could hardly explain that my boyfriend wanted me to live off him or that it took priority with me. I created a résumé and sent it off to several businesses looking for office help as well a few grocery stores but had no responses yet. Now it was going to be impossible to get one without a way for anyone to contact me.

Justin came back into the room looking bummed out himself. I could hardly burden him with my troubles. "What's wrong?" I asked him instead.

"I was planning on going to Adam's after the club, but his roommate's parents are visiting."

"You could always bring him back here," I suggested.

He blushed. "Ryan, man, I love you, but I don't want to sleep with the guy for the first time while you're out on the couch."

Great, now I had the guilt of being in his way. "I'm sure Kevin will let me stay at his house for the night." Kevin was a good friend of ours in high school. I'd only seen him two or three times since graduation, but we had the kind of friendship that didn't rely on constant contact in order to stay strong.

"Are you sure? I feel bad having you leave just so I can get laid," he fretted.

"It's not a problem, Justin. This is the first time you have seemed so into a guy. I don't want to stand in the way of that."

"If you're sure?"

"Jeez. Just call the guy back and give him the good news." I smiled at Justin so he could see I had absolutely no qualms about staying away for the night.

"Thanks, Ryan." His face lit up and he dialed a number on his phone and left the room again. Minutes later he was back, wearing his jacket and grabbing his keys from the table. "I'll see you tomorrow."

“I’ll come back late in the afternoon so he doesn’t have to rush out,” I told him as he left. It felt good to have solved his problem at least. Since Justin didn’t have a landline, and I no longer had a cell phone, I decided to head over to Kevin’s to ask him for the favor. I grabbed the newspaper before leaving, so I could keep looking through job postings while I was out.

Of course, as my luck would have it, Kevin wasn’t home. I didn’t know if he was going to be back. I sat on his stoop for a bit, reading the paper before the sun went down, hoping he might be home soon. If he didn’t, I would have to search for a place to sleep for the night. I had promised Justin a night alone with Adam, and I didn’t want to let him down. A picture caught my eye on the social page, and I froze.

David had his arm around some blonde socialite. He was wearing a tuxedo, and he could have taken my breath away if not for the woman in the picture. She was hanging on him. Both of them had smiles pasted on their faces. One strap of her dress hung off her shoulder and her hair was a bit tousled as if his hands had just been running through it. Hello nausea, my old friend. David was going above and beyond to convince his parents he wasn’t gay, unless he had lied to me about his orientation the whole time we were together.

Instinctively, I pulled out my phone and tried calling David but got the same no service message. I threw the phone into the street in my frustration, watching it break into several pieces. Oh yeah, that was effective. I was on my feet and on the way to David’s apartment before I even realized where I was going. I hardly noticed the cold air or the time it took to walk there. I was so in my head, needing to know if David was really interested in the blonde; if he had really replaced me that easily. The hour walk felt like minutes when I found myself in front of the door. It was late but I knew the doorman working.

“Hello, Cam,” I greeted him. “I’d like to see David.”

He looked abashed, his eyes not meeting mine. “I’m sorry, Mr. Taylor. I’ve been given instructions not to let you enter the building.”

“I’m not going to make a scene,” I tried explaining.

“I’m sorry, sir. It’s my job.”

As one of the currently unemployed, I didn’t want him to get fired, but the frustration at not being able to talk to David overrode that. “Can’t you just call up to him?”

“He’s not here.” I had no idea if the doorman spoke the truth, but I could see he wasn’t going to budge. “Perhaps you should try calling him.”

“Right.” There was nothing else to say. I would only look like a stalker if I told him of my twice daily calls before my phone was disconnected.

I turned and walked away, finally feeling resigned that it was over. It would be my last attempt to contact David. A limo pulled up to the apartment building. I was at the next major intersection, but I could see David get out of the car and hold his hand out for someone inside. A blonde head appeared, and I saw the girl from the picture stumble out. Her silver dress barely covered her ass and her heels were so high, I had no idea how she managed to walk in them, even though it appeared she barely did. She tripped and landed in David’s arms. He looked up, and I knew even from a distance he had seen me. He looked stunned. The girl in his arms righted herself and kissed him aggressively. He closed his eyes and I took off at a run. I had seen enough.

I ran until I came to the city park. There was a park bench in front of the fountain that could be seen from the street. I made my way to it and sat down. I didn’t have the energy to walk anywhere else, and though I didn’t actually plan to get any sleep on it, it seemed a safe enough place to park myself for the night. The streets were full of people walking from bar to bar, and I hoped the proximity to the revelers would discourage any muggers from trying to harass me. Not that they would get anything from me. My wallet was empty, and I had just broken my phone.

I stared at the fountain, lost. I could only keep replaying seeing David in person with his lips pressed against a woman’s. I didn’t notice when the wind grew colder, I didn’t even see that the fountain shut off after midnight. Still I sat, looking ahead at nothing. Only when the park light above went out, did I notice my surroundings. The streets were a little emptier, but there were still some groups entering the different bars and dance clubs across from the park. I pulled my feet up on to the bench and wrapped my arms around my legs in an effort to keep out the chill. I wished I had put on warmer clothing before I left the house. Putting my head on my knees, I attempted to rest and block out the images in my head.

It was working until a hand landed on my shoulder. I jumped off the park bench, springing like a jack-in-the-box. A low chuckle met my ears, and I looked at the bench to see a well-dressed man sitting on the bench next to where I was huddling. He wore a wool coat over his black suit, and his hair was black in the night with lighter patches of gray at the temple. He looked like he was in his early forties, very handsome, and relatively harmless. Not that something like that could be judged by looks. “I’m sorry for scaring you,” he apologized.

“How long have you been sitting there?” I asked, surprised that I hadn’t heard him approach or take a seat next to me.

“A minute or two. I saw you from the street and wanted to make sure you were okay. It’s a little chilly to be sitting outside without a jacket.”

“No shit,” I agreed. “I’m f-f-fine.” A jet of wind blew as I spoke, and I couldn’t keep the shiver from running through my body as I stuttered out the words.

“Sure you are,” he acquiesced. “I’m not going to lie. I noticed you sitting here because of your striking looks. Care to tell me what a handsome young man like you is doing out on a park bench after midnight, alone?”

“What are you, a cop? I’m not selling myself if that’s what you are asking,” I said defensively. Another cold breeze swept past, and I tucked my hands in my shirt, trying to cover as much exposed skin as possible.

His deep, melodic laughter rang out again. “I’m definitely not a cop, and if you were selling yourself, you’re not going to get many customers sitting so far from where people can see you.”

“So you’re not looking for a blow job?”

“I wouldn’t turn one down from a beautiful man like yourself, but no, I’m not looking for a trick. When I need company, I use an escort service.” I was shocked by his admission.

“Why w-w-would you need to use an escort service? You look like you could find someone you didn’t have to pay for that kind of thing.” Now that I was no longer numb with the pain of seeing David with someone else, the chilled air was really getting to me.

“It’s better as a business transaction. I’m not looking for a relationship,” he said without blinking an eye. His views on relationships and sex sounded all too familiar. “You never answered my question, what are you doing out here? Girl trouble? Maybe guy trouble?”

“Maybe,” I replied, vaguely. I shivered again. “But that’s just the tip of the iceberg.”

“Can I buy you a cup of coffee? We could get out of the cold for a bit,” he suggested, standing up abruptly.

I looked at him warily. A coffee shop should be safe enough, and he seemed harmless. But I was reluctant to take anything from any man. “You’re sure

you're not just looking to get laid or get a blow job and trying to soften me up?"

"You're so cynical," he smiled. "You look like you could use a friend, and I don't have anywhere to be. It would be nicer to converse without you shivering every ten seconds."

I stood up and nodded. "I don't think I'm great company right now, but thank you. I should have dressed warmer tonight." As I followed him to the diner down the street, I added, "My roommate has someone over tonight and I thought I could stay with another friend but he wasn't home."

He held the door open for me, and we sat down at one of the tables inside. A waitress greeted us right away, and we both ordered cups of coffee. He asked for a couple of pastries as well. We sat silently for a little while. Part of me yearned to get some of what happened off my chest, but I was hesitant to unburden myself to a total stranger. When the waitress brought a plate of sweets, he offered me one. I took an apple Danish and thanked him. "I feel sort of weird talking to you, when I don't even know your name," I admitted, finally breaking the silence.

He chewed his croissant and swallowed before responding. "Wow, I can't believe it slipped my mind to introduce myself in the park. My name is Christian."

"I'm Ryan." I held out my hand and he shook it. It made me feel much more comfortable just having a name for my rescuer. "What do you do, Christian?"

He proceeded to tell me about himself. He owned a few restaurants downtown and split his time between them, making sure everything ran smoothly. He talked about his interest in plays and musicals. I mostly just nodded and listened. I wasn't ready to share that I was jobless and sort of homeless after hearing about his success. "What about you, Ryan?" he asked after he finished telling me about his dabbling with playing guitar and his love of golf.

I blushed at the conversation being turned on me. I didn't really have much I was passionate about. "Photography. I love taking pictures and videos. There is something about capturing life as it happens, being able to show the beauty of it all, especially in places you don't expect to find it."

"A photo can say a lot," he agreed. "I'd love to take a look at your work."

"I haven't done much lately." Unless you counted taping myself have sex, but I didn't say that. "It was mostly a hobby in high school, but my camera

broke so I can't pursue it right now." I looked down at the table to avoid his gaze. I didn't want him to see the pain in my eyes as I thought about my broken camera and the broken relationship that I tied it to.

His big, warm hand covered mine, and I looked up. He wasn't looking at me with pity or with passion. Instead I could only see kindness in his blue eyes. Suddenly everything poured out of my mouth. I told him about being kicked out of my parents' house and, without naming names, spoke of my secret relationship and being kicked out of my lover's house in the end, explaining how it was I came to be crashing on a friend's couch.

He squeezed my hand. "Relationships can be very complicated. I've been with my partner for fifteen years, and I love him very much. He thinks having an open relationship is good for us, so we don't get bored with each other. Every other week he goes out and hooks up. If I had my way, I'd like us to be monogamous, but his happiness means too much to me. I could stay home and be faithful even while he's not, but I am too proud to be alone while he fucks another man. So I hire someone to keep me company."

"Wow," was all I could say.

"I was actually on my way home from one of those nights when I saw you." He looked at his watch. I looked at the clock on the wall behind him. It was four in the morning. I couldn't believe how long we had been sitting there talking. Thank goodness it was an all-night diner.

"Listen," he said. "I've got to get home. I'd bring you with me, but the one thing my partner and I agreed on is never bringing other men to our home. I'd offer to help you, but I don't think you'd take any money from me either." I shook my head in response. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable, but if you are having trouble finding work, I know that they are looking for someone at the agency I use. They pay well. You can throw away the card if it's not something you want, but I just want to leave you with an option." He handed me a business card for Gay Dates. The writing underneath the name said it was an LGBT escort agency.

I stared at the card. My instincts told me to throw it away, or to tear it up and throw it in Christian's face. But the part of me that was more concerned with self-preservation had me putting it in my pocket. I was hoping that I wouldn't have to go down that road, but I wasn't going to shut it down in case it was necessary. We stood up and walked outside. Christian hailed a taxi cab and turned to look at me. "It was nice meeting you, Ryan. Maybe I will see you

in the future, but if not, I wish you the best.” He took off his wool coat and put it around my shoulders before seating himself inside the yellow car.

“Thank you,” I told him and waved as the cab drove away. I slipped my arms inside his coat and walked back to the bench. Getting everything off my chest had been cathartic. I told Christian more than I could even admit to Justin. It was easier to let it all go when the listener wasn’t someone close. He listened to me without judgment or recrimination.

I was woken up by a police officer as the sun was rising. It surprised me that I had been able to fall asleep at all. I spent the day walking through the city to give Justin more time with his date. When I got back to his house in the early evening, he was freaking out. “Where were you? I tried calling you and got a message your phone was disconnected, and when I called Kevin three hours ago to let you know you could come home, he said he was out of town and hadn’t spoken to you.”

“I’m sorry man, I didn’t mean to worry you,” I explained. “My phone service is up, and well, my phone is broken now.” I hoped he wouldn’t ask how it came to be that way.

“We’re going out now to get you a phone,” he dictated. I couldn’t let him buy me a phone; he was doing too much for me already.

“Don’t worry about it, Justin. I got a job lead last night.” I put my hand in my pocket and felt for the business card. “I’m sure I’ll be able to get one next week, and I’ll be able to start helping out with bills.”

I surprised myself with the realization that I was okay with getting a job at the escort agency. It seemed less shameful to be working as an escort than to have Justin provide for me any more than he already had.

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## Chapter 8

*David*

I was sitting on the couch in my living room. The television was off, and no music was playing. Finally, I had found peace and quiet in the turmoil that had become my life. Since the evening of my parents' dinner party, I had seen Lacey several times. She was a constant presence at the trendiest clubs, which meant I was now too. I'd had my picture taken by the paparazzi more times than I could count. I despised being in the public eye; my privacy had always been the most important thing to me. I just hoped my mother was happy.

There were enough pictures of Lacey draped over me in the tabloids and society pages to make everyone believe I was straight as an arrow. Satisfying my mother's concerns was the only reason I didn't punch the photographers getting in my face. While I hated the photos being published, it hadn't occurred to me that Ryan would see them. I couldn't concentrate on what he might be thinking while I was trying to deal with the pressures of dating a socialite and pleasing Jean. Until I saw Ryan on the same street as the apartment.

It had been a week since I had arrived home with Lacey. She had been falling down drunk. The paparazzi was following us, and in what I thought was a stroke of genius I had taken her to my apartment to let her sleep it off. I figured the image of us entering my place would spread like wildfire and it would be assumed I was sleeping with her. We hadn't actually been intimate, and I thanked the booze for that. When I saw Ryan, I also saw a guy with a camera across the street. I wanted to go to my ex-lover and take him into my arms despite his loose lips. But I couldn't, not while being watched. Then Lacey decided to kiss me and the point was moot. There were pictures of us on the net the next morning, but all I could see was the hurt on Ryan's face before I closed my eyes and heard the echo of his feet as he ran away.

Now, even in the quiet calm, I had trouble really relaxing. I was miserable because I still missed Ryan, and miserable looking at a future of horrendous dates with Lacey or another affluent woman of my mother's choosing. If she had her way, I'd end up married soon, and if that happened, I didn't know what I would do. Could I trap myself in a loveless marriage with a woman when I yearned to be with a man? It would take a little blue pill in order for me to attempt to consummate that union, for sure.

My thoughts were interrupted by the ring of the door buzzer. Immediately, my body and mind thought it was Ryan. I got hard at the same time as I wondered if he had snuck into the building after I had the management ban him from entering. I couldn't decide whether to be excited or furious. When I threw open the door and found Jeffrey standing in the hall, a wave of disappointment crashed over me. My hard-on shriveled and my chest hurt.

I blocked the entrance to my apartment, not allowing my cousin in. "What do you want, Jeffrey?" I didn't disguise the contempt from my voice.

"Is that any way to greet your flesh and blood?" he asked. His neck craned as he tried peering over my shoulder into my living room.

"I treat people with the respect they deserve. And what the hell are you looking for?" I asked him.

He smirked at me and licked his lips. "I was just trying to see if you had Miss West inside."

"She's not here."

"That's a shame. I sure would have liked my chance at her. I didn't expect you to fold under your mother's ultimatum the way you did." He shook his head as if he was disappointed. Disappointed he didn't get my job, maybe.

"You're wasting my time, Jeffrey. If you came here looking for Lacey, you can scurry on out of here." My cousin began looking over my shoulder again, raising himself on his toes due to his diminished height.

"Maybe your little boy toy is here then, hmm?" he asked.

"Excuse me?" Had my mother told him about that? That was very out of character for her. Any issues that might affect her standing in society were swept under the rug, never to be found out. A homosexual son would have been one of those issues. "I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Come on, cuz. I saw you at the bar during Kiera's engagement party. I was quite shocked when I came out of the bathroom to see you kissing a man. Though he was kind of cute, if you're a queer. I can't blame you for hitting that," he sneered.

"I didn't see you," I croaked out.

"Of course. You never notice me, do you, David? You've always been too good for your cousin Jeffrey. Well, I showed you. You're nothing but a fag, and wasn't your mother surprised when I told her."

“You told my mother?”

“She needed to know what her son really was. She needed to know you were nothing but a—” I punched Jeffrey before whatever homophobic slur he was going to say could escape his lips.

“You’re nothing but a selfish asshole. Even when we were kids, you were always trying to take what was mine. Is it any wonder why I chose to ignore you? Get out of my apartment, and don’t ever come back.” I hit him once more, in the gut, for my own satisfaction and slammed the door on a doubled-over Jeffrey.

Inside the apartment, my hands began to shake. My cousin had ruined all that was good in my life. I had been at peace, even if I hadn’t been honest with myself or any of my family. I had a job I loved and a loving relationship. Jeffrey took that all away, leaving me escorting a spoiled heiress around town and my mother watching over me at the office. *Jeffrey wasn’t the only one at fault. You played your own part in destroying things with Ryan*, an inner voice chastised.

Shit! Ryan. I wanted to blame my sniveling cousin, but I was the one who accused Ryan of heinous things. I was the one who threw him out. My stomach revolted and I wanted to throw up. I was the one who chose to keep my secret, and I was the one who kicked my lover out of my house. Ryan had never been anything but good to me, and he had the patience of a saint. Instead of believing him when he promised he had never told anyone, I called him a liar. I threw his camera on the ground and threw money at him like he was a streetwalker. I had lived with myself after the breakup, thinking I was righteous in my anger. Now I knew I was just an asshole like my cousin, if not worse.

I grabbed my phone and had to scroll far back in my call log. Ryan’s daily calls had stopped after seeing me on the street the week before. I had been relieved that he wasn’t tempting me to answer the phone any longer but saddened by the finality of it all. When I finally found his number, I pressed the dial button, just to receive a message that his line had been disconnected. I refused to believe this was happening to me. I had to at least be able to call him and tell him how wrong I was. Even if he didn’t want to speak to me, and we couldn’t repair what we had, I needed to apologize. I wasn’t sure if I could live with myself knowing that I had destroyed the only person I ever loved.

I tried calling several more times before giving up. I stalked over to my liquor cabinet and grabbed a bottle of Scotch. I poured myself glass after glass

until the decanter was empty. With no way to appease my frustration, I threw the glass bottle against the wall. The rock glass followed it, but the crash of shattered glass did nothing to stop my aching heart. I slid down the opposite wall, taking in the mess I made. Just now, and before with my relationship. I had no way of contacting Ryan now. I knew the reason his phone was shut off was because I took all independence away from him and then cut him loose. I held him at such a distance, I didn't know who his friends were. I couldn't check with them to see if he was safe, if he had a place to stay.

Ryan was nothing but a ghost to me now. I had as good as killed him for all intents and purposes. I had always prided myself on being a strong person, sometimes to the point of being a cold bastard. I rarely allowed emotions to affect me. Now though, the alcohol mixed together with the stress from work and the self-hatred. My mind took a much needed break, and the world went black on me, delivering me from the hell that was my life.

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## Chapter 9

*Ryan*

I had been on two “dates” already and was getting ready for my third. The first date was for a work luncheon. The man I met, Pete, had to return to work after the event, so there were no plans for intimacy. He did kiss me good-bye and mentioned that he would call soon and request me again. He was good looking, and I wouldn’t mind spending time with him again, but for me, there was no attraction. He hadn’t called yet, so I’d put those worries behind me.

The second date, a few days later, was with a man named Andrew. He invited me to his home for dinner and company. I had been nervous that he would expect more. I didn’t know if I could go through with it or not. As we ate dinner, we made our way through two bottles of merlot. Andrew became very emotional and admitted that he was married and had a young child. He loved his daughter and cared for his wife, but he was a homosexual man trying to live a heterosexual life. He called the agency for the first time, unable to hold off his desire for men any longer. I didn’t sleep with him. He had obviously overindulged in the wine, but it wasn’t that I just didn’t want to take advantage of his drunkenness. I thought of David and how he hid his true self. I wondered if he would marry the woman I saw him with. Would he call an escort agency to satisfy his true desires? I couldn’t take part in another man’s ruse of being straight. I apologized that I couldn’t help him and took a taxi home. I only hoped he could come clean with himself and his family. I couldn’t imagine the pain of hiding who you were, unable to be truly happy. I promised myself that I would never again hide my sexuality or any relationship I might have in the future.

The third date was going to be with Christian. Two weeks had passed since I met him, and he requested me. I was nervous and excited to see him again. Talking to him that night had probably saved my life, or at least my sanity. I had been truly depressed, though not enough to take my life. My mind was spiraling into some dark places, and Christian had shown me there were some good people out there. Not that I didn’t already know it; Justin had been proving that since I saw him in that convenience store. I planned to bring Christian his jacket back and wanted to thank him. So far, the job had been going well. It wasn’t like there was much out there for someone with so little schooling or work experience. I was nervous however, because I remembered

Christian saying that he used the service for sex while his partner played. It wasn't a total surprise that he asked for me though, since he had been the one to call the agency and recommend me.

After telling Justin about the job possibility that weekend, I regained my apprehension about the escort service. Before calling them the following Monday I went through the five stages of grief about my decision. I was in denial. "I'm not going to call them," I said aloud to my image in the mirror. Next was anger. I was angry with David for throwing me out and leaving me no options. I was angry with Christian for giving me the card, and I was angry with Justin for being too damn nice. Most of all, I was angry with myself for considering this option in the first place.

Bargaining was the third step. I told myself that I would be an escort but it would never go beyond accompanying the men to social functions. I told myself it would only be for a little while. I told myself that attending social and work events with my "dates" might allow me to make connections I could turn into a real job. I was running through the steps really fast but depression was not a new occurrence. I had been battling the melancholy since leaving David's. Depression didn't start with the decision to call Gay Dates and it didn't end when I finally came to acceptance.

The more I thought about going on these dates, about being with them after, the more I realized that my situation was no worse than it was while living with David. It might be better, even. At least these men would take me out first and not hide me in their apartments. Not counting the delivery job, all I had ever been was a kept man, bought and paid for. Maybe that was still the depression talking. However, at least when these men paid me, I would know where I stood. There would be no false talk of feelings or love. Realization dawned on me that working for Gay Dates might be the most honest moment in my life.

That hadn't stopped my knees from shaking when I showed up to the office for my interview. My feet wanted to turn around and carry me far from the plain unmarked building. Inside, it was quite innocuous looking, just a simple desk at the front with a receptionist. After getting my name, she mentioned the referral by Christian and let me know, as long as I was up for a physical and blood test for any STDs, that I could have the job, provided the tests all came back negative, of course.

"What name would you like to use for your profile?" Jolynn, the receptionist, asked me when I proved to be disease free.

I hadn't thought about that. I had assumed I would use my real name, but that might not be the best thing to give out to these strangers, even if they did pass a background check to become clients. "I don't know," I answered honestly.

She looked down at my paperwork in front of her in concentration. "Okay... we could use your last name for your first. Taylor what though? Do you have a favorite actor or musician? We could borrow their last name. Porn stars do it all the time."

"I'm not going to be a porn star," I clarified.

"Of course not, but it doesn't mean you can't use their methods for choosing an alias."

I had to think about it for a few minutes, but finally I came up with a possible last name. I enjoyed music, but there were no groups or artists that stood out as an inspiration or icon for me. I didn't watch all that much television or movies, either. Books were my favorite medium of entertainment. As a child I was on the geeky side with plastic framed glasses, and I surrounded myself with classic sci-fi novels like *The Time Machine* and *War of the Worlds*. "Taylor Wells," I said, supplying the name I wanted to use as a professional escort.

Jolynn looked confused as if trying to place the last name among the stars she knew. She shrugged and said, "Okay." She gave me a cell phone to be used for work and a stipend to purchase appropriate clothes for my dates.

So that brought me to where I was, standing outside room 220 at the Hyatt. I knocked on the door, and it was opened by a shirtless Christian. "Come in, Ryan. I mean, Taylor," he purred.

"You can call me Ryan," I told him. With Christian, I didn't want to pretend. Despite whatever might or might not happen that evening, I thought of the slightly older man as my friend.

He led me to a table where several room service dishes sat. "I ordered us dinner," he told me.

"Thank you. I brought your jacket," I said, holding out his wool coat.

"Thank you, Ryan. I gave that to you, though. I have other coats."

I blushed. "I'm sort of sensitive about taking things from people now."

"Ah. Well, would you like to have some dinner? I ordered steak and chicken; you can choose what you prefer. There's dessert and wine as well."

“I’m not twenty-one yet,” I admitted.

“Are you driving?”

I shook my head in response. “I’m going to take a taxi.”

“Then I’m not going to tell anyone. I’m not pressuring you to drink, but if you want a glass to relax, you’re welcome to have some.”

I let him pour some wine in my glass once I was seated. We ate in an awkward silence. I drained my glass, and he refilled it once more. “It wasn’t this difficult to talk to each other the first time we met,” he said, interrupting the stillness.

I gave a hesitant laugh. “I’m sorry. I guess I’m a bit nervous.”

“Why is that?” Christian asked.

“I don’t know. I guess I’m not sure what your intentions are for the night,” I supplied as an excuse.

“You make the decisions tonight,” he told me. “You have the control.”

I swallowed down another bite of chicken. It was moist but felt like cardboard in my throat. I put my fork down.

“I’ve only ever kissed two men other than the man I lived with. It’s been a while.”

“Are you done eating?”

I nodded, unable to eat or speak any longer with the butterflies in my stomach.

“Then come here. We can take things very slowly,” Christian offered.

I did as he asked and sat on his lap when he patted it in suggestion. His hands caressed my face before moving to my shoulders. There was comfort in his touch. When his thumbs grazed my nipples under my shirt, I shivered with pleasure. “Can I kiss you?” he asked, leaving the choice to me, confirming his earlier reassurance.

I nodded, and his lips grazed mine gently. I opened my lips, and he invaded my mouth with his tongue. Moments later, we were pawing at each other and breathing heavily through our wild kisses. “Top or bottom?” he asked.

I pulled back from his embrace, not sure if I was ready to have sex with the guy after just a few kisses. He seemed to notice my hesitation. “We don’t have to do anything. No pressure.”

I thought about it for a moment. I could hold off being intimate, but how long would it be before I did take things further with one of the clients? Wouldn't I rather it be with a man who I really liked, who I knew respected me and would treat me well? "Top," I said with resolve. One thing I knew I wouldn't do was bottom for a client. Not even David had penetrated me in the year we were together. I would save that for someone who I knew would commit to me, someone I loved.

"That works for me." Christian stood up and led me to the bedroom of the hotel suite. He reached into his duffel bag and produced a condom and lube packet. Kissing me once more, he placed the items in my hand.

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## Chapter 10

*David*

Another month had passed since I mistakenly threw Ryan out, making it a little over two months since I had spoken to him last. I hadn't forgiven myself yet, nor Jeffrey. I barely spoke to my parents either, after the way they manipulated me into being what they deemed a fitting figurehead for the advertising agency. Luckily for me, Lacey had hit the tabloids with a sex tape scandal, though it had happened to so many celebrities they were hardly that scandalous anymore. It was enough bad press for my mother, and I was let off the hook from taking the "wild girl" out again. Those were my mother's words.

All I did now was work and sleep. And drink. Yeah, I ate too. Just enough not to starve so I could keep doing my job. Sometimes I hated the job that I used to love so much. I hated it for being more important to me than Ryan. At times, I wanted to quit. Give my parents the middle finger, tell them I was gay, and quit. Seeing that it was the only thing giving me a purpose, though, I kept working. At night I would down a bottle of whichever hard alcohol was in the front of my liquor cabinet, just so I could get a little shut eye.

It wasn't until I got a visit from my cousin Kiera that things began to change in my routine. She came to my house on a Saturday morning. I had only just passed out; I couldn't even pretend I fell asleep normally. When I answered the door, red-eyed, unshaven, and swaying on my feet, she had been brutally honest. "You look like shit, cuz."

I opened the door and waved her in. I didn't close it behind her but made my way to the couch to hopefully pass out again. She wasn't having it. "I don't think so, David. Get up, it's time for some coffee." I groaned in response, but she dragged me by my arm to the small table in the kitchen.

On the way there she spotted the open liquor cabinet and the empty bottles lying in front of it. "Does this thing have a key?" she asked.

I nodded but regretted it immediately. The bobbing motion made my stomach recoil. I put my hands over my mouth until I was confident enough that I wouldn't throw up. When I looked up, Kiera was sitting across from me with two mugs of freshly brewed coffee from the Keurig. She handed me one of the mugs and held her hand out, palm up. "Give me the key."

I dug into the pocket of my robe, to see if I had placed it there during my binge. Luckily it was inside, otherwise I wouldn't have had any idea where to find it. I certainly didn't feel like looking for it. I handed her the key, and she locked the liquor cabinet, and then stuck the key in her bra. "You can have that back later, once I know you are responsible enough to handle it," she informed me, picking up the empty bottles. I groaned again.

"You deserve this, you know. This is what you get for drinking—" she paused as she looked at the bottles before she threw them in the trash, "—vodka, rum, and whiskey. Good God, you're probably toxic right now."

"I didn't drink them all last night," I whined. It was true, it was just the vodka and rum.

"He speaks!" She laughed. "Did you even eat anything?"

"No," I whimpered at her loud chuckle. My head was killing me.

Kiera peered in my refrigerator and then looked at me. "I can make you some eggs, maybe some bacon. You don't have much in here." She went back to looking inside the fridge.

The thought of flabby bacon and runny eggs, Kiera was a horrible cook, had my stomach protesting once again. This time I couldn't rein it in, and I ran for the bathroom. I skidded on the tiles and fell down right in front of the toilet in time to purge whatever liquor was in my stomach. Mostly I just dry heaved. My cousin came in behind me and wet a washcloth in the sink. She rubbed it over my face and my neck in a comforting motion. "Poor David, what's made you do this to yourself?"

I shook my head, and I felt wetness on my cheeks as I gave in to tears. Kiera held me while I cried, and once I was done she turned on the water in my shower. "I love you, cousin, but you stink. Do you think you can shower by yourself, or do you want to keep your underwear on and I can help?"

"I can do it," I replied. She left and I stood under the warm spray until it turned cold. I quickly washed myself then, rubbing the bar of soap over my body. My dick stayed limp as I lathered it up. In my drunkenness, I wondered if it was broken. Other than the brief erection I had when I thought Jeffrey might have been Ryan visiting, my cock hadn't perked up even a little bit. The water hit ice cold temperatures, and it shriveled up even more, hoping to escape the icy sting by crawling up into my body. It wasn't worth worrying about. I didn't want anybody anyway. Not for sex. Only my ex-lover would do. I did need a friend though, and it looked like my cousin was there for the job.

After drying myself and throwing on a pair of sweatpants and T-shirt, I wandered back out to the kitchen. Kiera was playing a game on her tablet, and the apartment was cleaned up. She looked up when I entered. “How are you feeling?”

I grunted and considered that a win. It had to be a step up from the moaning and groaning I was doing earlier. Kiera patted the chair next to her, and I took a seat. “We were making wedding plans, and my brother mentioned that I might not want to invite the gay cousin to the party. I have to say I was confused, because I wasn’t aware of any cousins who had come out to the family. The jerk proceeded to tell me about what he saw at my engagement party and how he told your mother. He actually bragged about it. He’s got to be adopted.”

“Who did he tell this to?” I choked out.

“My mom was there, and Bradley, but they weren’t in the room when Jeffrey told me about what he saw. Is it true?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to deny it. It was instinctual at that point to lie about my sexuality. But Kiera’s eyes were full of support and love. She had shown me how much she cared for me when she stormed into my house and refused to let me drink my troubles away, to let me create a whole new set of problems for myself. “I am gay,” I said simply.

A tear escaped my eye and ran down my cheek when she wrapped her arms around me. “I love you exactly how you are, David.”

After she released me, the whole story poured from my mouth. How I met Ryan, how I let him go, and the realization that I had done him truly wrong came out. “We all make mistakes, David. God knows I have. Did I ever tell you how I almost broke up with Bradley for a stupid reason?”

“What reason?” I was curious.

“I thought my mom wouldn’t approve of him because he didn’t go to college.”

“But he’s a very successful mechanic, owns his own shop,” I said surprised.

“You know how my mom was, so adamant that Jeffrey and I go to college. I was sure she would consider anybody who didn’t further their education as less than. I was ready to break up with him, and when I told my mom about him, I discovered she didn’t care at all. She had wanted it for us, but she wasn’t going to judge anyone else. Her main concern was that he made me happy. She doesn’t even care that his cousin, and best man, is gay. I’m sure she would support you, David. You don’t have to worry about her finding out.”

“Your mom isn’t the one I worry about, it’s mine. You have to keep this to yourself for as long as you can, Kiera. My job depends on it,” I told her.

“Relax, I won’t say a word. This is your secret to keep or let out,” Kiera responded.

“So, Bradley has a gay cousin?” I asked out of pure curiosity.

I realized that I asked the wrong thing immediately. Kiera’s eyes lit up with excitement. I knew what was going through her head, wondering if she should play matchmaker, even before she opened her mouth to talk. “Yes, his name is Justin and he’s really cute. He was at the engagement party with his best friend, Ryan.” She paused then and looked confused. “Wait.”

We had both had the same thought. “Ryan?” I asked.

“No shit! Justin’s best friend is your Ryan?”

“I don’t know for sure without seeing him, but it seems like it. He did say he knew Bradley for years,” I said, remembering our argument in the hall.

“This is fate, David. You have a way to find out where Ryan is now, and how to get in touch with him.”

I was suddenly nervous. I had given up on finding Ryan. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to know where he was living. What if he was with someone else; what if he didn’t forgive me? Then I wondered whether he was safe, if he had a place to live. I nodded when Kiera asked me if I wanted her to call Bradley to get information on Ryan.

She put her phone on speaker as it began to ring. “Hey, babe,” Bradley answered. “Where’d you take off to?”

“I needed to talk to David about something. He’s sitting next to me right now, and you’re on speaker,” she informed him.

“Okay. Hey David, what’s up?” he asked.

“We were wondering if you had Ryan’s number. You know, Justin’s friend?” Kiera asked in response.

“I’m looking for a photographer for a project,” I added. Even if Bradley had a gay cousin and would be okay with me being gay, I wanted to keep the people who knew to a minimum. I didn’t think he would tell anyone to be malicious, but things slipped sometimes.

“Justin told me Ryan had some problems a few months ago and had to get a new phone. I don’t have his new number, but I can ask him for it.”

“What kind of troubles? Is he okay?” I couldn’t help asking.

“Some sort of love troubles, I think. I didn’t ask for details, but Justin did mention that Ryan was crashing on his couch,” Bradley replied.

“Is he still living with Justin?” Kiera asked.

“I’m not sure,” her fiancé replied. “I haven’t talked to him in a few weeks.”

“Okay, when you get a chance, call your cousin, and see if he can give you Ryan’s number. I’ll probably be home in a few hours,” Kiera told him.

“Sounds good. Love you, babe.”

“Love you too,” she cooed.

I made a gagging motion to tease Kiera, and she rolled her eyes. I felt lighter than I had in months. “Do you want to take a drive over there?” my cousin asked after she disconnected the call. “I know where Justin lives.”

“No,” I immediately responded. “I can’t see him yet. If I talk to him and he doesn’t hate me, then maybe we can meet up. If I see him and he tells me to go away, I just couldn’t handle it. Not yet.”

“If that’s what you think is best.”

“I do.”

Kiera left not long after that conversation, and three days later I was still waiting to hear back from either her or Bradley about Ryan’s number. I was walking down the street from the advertising agency to meet a client for dinner. The restaurant was attached to a hotel. A taxi pulled up in front of the hotel entrance and two men exited the back. They were laughing, and the larger one put his arm around the smaller one affectionately. Though I was only feet away, they didn’t even notice me standing there. They were in the moment with each other. It would have made me sad, thinking of the closeness I shared with Ryan but one of the men was Ryan.

I felt the tearing as my heart was ripped from my body. Grabbing my phone from my pocket, I called Kiera. When she answered, I only uttered a few words. “Don’t worry about getting Ryan’s number.”

“Why? What’s wrong?” I hung up on her questions, knowing for sure it was over. Ryan was with someone else.

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## Chapter 11

*Ryan*

I was lying on my back staring at the ceiling. Christian was on his side running his hand over my smooth chest. Both of us were covered in a light sheen of sweat. Months had passed, and I had several repeat dates besides my twice monthly meetings with the man who had set this into motion. There were more than a few that I had been intimate with but not so many that I had lost my self-respect. I'd stuck to my guns and always topped in the instances where sex was involved, keeping something special for when I settled down with one person again.

“What are you thinking about?” Christian inquired.

I sighed loudly. “An argument with my best friend,” I replied in all honesty.

Earlier in the day, I had given Justin a check for rent. I had been doing pretty well as an escort. The work was not something I was ready to brag about though, so when he questioned how I earned my money, I asked him not to worry about it. Angrily, he refused to let the matter go. I told him I could move out if he had problems with how I made my money. It had been a disaster that only got worse when he told me he had spoken to Bradley that morning.

“We were discussing seating charts at the wedding, and he wanted to know if you were going to be there.”

I hesitated, knowing full well that David would be there because he was Kiera's cousin. “I'm not sure,” I explained. “I might have to work.”

He grunted in disapproval. “I thought you might say that. He mentioned something else, you know. He said Kiera's cousin, David, was asking for your number a few months ago. He thought of you for a job, but then changed his mind. It slipped Bradley's mind, but it got me to thinking.”

I knew that the expression on my face probably gave away everything. Justin's own expression let me know that he had already had his suspicions. When I paled and my breathing faltered, Justin only shouted, “Oh my God!”

I shook my head to deter his line of thought.

“David was your mystery man, wasn't he? When I told you he was straight at the engagement party, you must have been laughing at me.”

“No, Justin. I swear I would never laugh at you. I was frustrated that I couldn’t tell you, the one person who ever cared about what happened to me.” I pleaded with him to understand that I would never do that to him.

“You should have told me. I would have let Kiera know just how lousy her cousin was when he turned you loose with nowhere to go!” Justin’s voice had been filled with anger beyond any I had felt toward the man.

“He tried to offer me money, Justin. I couldn’t take it. I wanted to believe what we had was more than a business transaction. I don’t know if it was or wasn’t, or why he wanted to get ahold of me, but I would never throw him under the bus to make myself feel better. How would his family shunning him make me feel any better?” Tears had been rolling down my face at that point, and Justin took me into his arms.

“You’re a much better person than I am, Ryan.”

I shook my head, which he held pressed to his chest. “You’ve taken me in twice without question. You’ve been like a brother to me since we were in grade school. I would be on the streets tricking right now if it weren’t for you. Or worse, I could be dead. I had contemplated both at one time.”

“I love you, Ryan. As a brother, like you said. I would do anything for my family. I wouldn’t say it was without question, though. I’d still like to know how you are earning so much money when you still seem to be home most of the time, though.”

“Another time, Justin. Can we just move past it and be brothers for now?”

Our argument had ended then, but knowing David had been trying to reach me still had me wondering. Why had he changed his mind? When I had reached orgasm with Christian, it was the only moment my thoughts had strayed away from Justin and David.

The naked man took my hand in his and kissed it. “I have a surprise for you, Ryan. I thought we would go out to dinner at my restaurant, *Richard*.” Christian said the name with a French accent, but I recognized the name of his long-time partner. He had talked about him enough.

The restaurant, *Richard*, was as pretentious as the way he pronounced it, but Christian introduced me to the maître d’ and the manager. He ordered several dinners and we shared them all. “I want to give you a job in this restaurant,” he announced. “You’d start as a waiter for training purposes and try out all the positions, but I want you to eventually be in charge of the wait staff. You’d make schedules and handle any conflicts.”

“I don’t have any experience with that,” I said nervously.

“That’s why you would be training in all their jobs so you know how to treat them fairly.”

“Why would you do this for me?” I was shocked.

“You are so much better than an escort, Ryan. I didn’t have anything open until now. I’d like to see you succeed in life.”

I knew my eyes sparkled with unshed tears. From the moment I met Christian, he had been nothing but generous. He had referred me to the escort agency, and maybe that wasn’t a career, but he had thought of me and wanted me to be safe and taken care of even when he barely knew me.

“Don’t look at me like that, Ryan. You know I care about you, but I love my partner, Richard.”

I shook my head, knowing that without him having to clarify. I couldn’t help the stars in my eyes at his generosity. I didn’t want to take him away from his true love. After my earlier conversation with Justin, I knew I wasn’t over David either. I’d never be able to go back to him, things would never be the same for us, but it seemed that I had truly given away my heart to the man. Even if he had rejected it, it remained in his care. “I know,” I choked out to Christian.

“Are you interested?”

“Of course!” I practically shouted. I realized that I was still in the fancy-as-hell restaurant and composed myself.

“You can fill out the paperwork on Monday. Let’s pay the bill and get out of here,” Christian said. His hand caressed my knee under the white tablecloth. “Tonight will be our last night together.”

“What?” I asked him. “Do I need to quit the agency to work here?”

“Ideally, I’d like you to get to the point where you would quit, but I’m not a hypocrite. If you need to work there until you’re more financially stable, I’d still want you to work in my restaurant,” he answered. “But I won’t sleep with my employees. I can’t help but want one more night with you before you start.”

We left *Richard*, and Christian began to kiss me as soon as we were in the cab. It was one last night of no-holds-barred passion. I was no more in love with the man than he was with me, but we enjoyed each other sexually, and we

had a good friendship. Despite the fact he would be my boss soon, and we had the complication of having known each other intimately, I was positive that we would remain friends for a very long time.

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## Chapter 12

*David*

I trudged along in my daily existence, but thankfully, never went back to drinking. I let Kiera keep the key though. No need to tempt myself. Months had passed, and I hadn't seen Ryan again, but my heart still missed him. I couldn't be angry that he had found someone else; I had blown my chance with the man. I just couldn't move on and date any other man, not even on the sly.

Though I never had to see Lacey West again, my mother had no problems finding society dates for me. I usually put the women off, not intentionally, but they were looking for a guy to go clubbing with, not the hoity-toity charity events and dinners I was constantly forced to take them to. I refused to let myself get dragged back into that paparazzi-filled existence. I didn't even like to dance, unless it was in the privacy of my own home, slow dancing with Ryan. Still, I hadn't given my mother any reason to think I wasn't good enough to keep running the company. Kiera had given Jeffrey a dressing down, and he had moved out of state to pursue a job elsewhere. He was no longer held over my head, either.

I had just arrived at a restaurant to wine and dine some possible clients in the athletic shoe industry. Getting the deal would be a big coup for the advertising agency and should solidify my position. My parents couldn't possibly threaten to remove me if I brought in such a large account. The maître d' welcomed me and pronounced the restaurant as "Ree-shard," but the name on the building looked like Richard to me. I rolled my eyes at the affected pronunciation and took a seat along with several other men and women representing the client. We were given a menu without pricing, and I knew that the restaurant was about as upscale as you could get.

"Hello, my name is Christian, and I'm the owner of the restaurant," a man said. I looked up and my gaydar pinged. He was very masculine, but somehow I knew we had the same taste, romantically. "I just wanted to see if there was anything I could do to make your visit pleasant." He must have been able to feel the wealth and power the group of executives at the table had and hurried over.

I looked down at my menu as the others assured him that everything was fine so far. A new voice joined us, a very familiar voice. "Hello, my name is

Ryan and I will be your server tonight. Can I start you off with drinks?" My mouth dried, and I looked up at my ex-lover. The owner had a hand clasped on his shoulder, and I flashed back to when I saw them getting out of the taxi. This was the man Ryan was dating. His boss? Maybe I had read the situation wrong. My heart raced at that possibility as my clients started ordering drinks.

When Ryan looked down at the end of the table where I sat, he froze. His face turned red and he looked down. The manager whispered in his ear, and Ryan nodded, before the man left. When Ryan raised his head again, I saw a flash of pain and longing in his eyes before they shuttered with coolness. "Can I start you off with an aperitif before your meal?" he asked me.

My mouth couldn't form words. I wanted to say yes. I wanted to tell him he knew what I liked. "We have a nice Bordeaux. 1982," Ryan supplied. He remembered my favorite wine.

"A sparkling water," I decided. I hadn't had a drink since Kiera helped me get my act together. Not to mention the last time Ryan had seen me, I was a drunken, angry mess. The last thing I needed was an alcoholic beverage. Not if I wanted to have a reasonable conversation with him at some point. "I don't drink." He gave me a strange look but moved on.

When he left to get the drinks, I did manage to calm and organize my frantic mind enough to order my food and begin discussing what Brehmer Advertising could do for their shoe company. When Ryan set my food in front of me, I moved back to avoid him touching me in any way. Not that I didn't want to touch him. I wanted it too much, and I would never be able to make it through the rest of the dinner if I came into contact with him. I backed away from him so quickly that I knocked my silverware to the floor.

"I'll get that," he said. I detected sarcasm, as if he thought I did it on purpose. He bent over, and it brought his neck close to my face. The smell of cologne was disconcerting at first. Ryan had never worn it when we were together. The feeling ended quickly when I realized the fragrance complemented his own natural scent.

I inhaled deeply and my nose brushed his neck. I hadn't even realized I leaned in so closely. He pulled back and gave me a withering glare. "I'm sorry," I apologized.

"I'll be back with a new set of silverware," he said.

Before he could leave, I reached for his wrist and closed my hand around it. "Can we talk?"

“I’m working. So are you, I think,” he said, nodding his head toward the others at the table. In my moment of insanity, I forgot they were there. For one moment, Ryan and I were the only two people in the world. I looked at the clients I was supposed to be wooing, worried they had seen my lapse, but they were concentrating on their food, and I thought maybe I was safe. I nodded at Ryan and devoted myself to finishing off the business dinner with the goal of selling my advertising agency to the executives.

When the meeting was over, handshakes were exchanged, and I was told, “We’ll be in touch.” I waited for the check as they went back to their hotel.

Ryan didn’t bring the black folder containing the bill to my table though. Instead, it was Christian. “How was your visit this evening?” he asked.

“Everything was great, thank you.”

“I do hope you come back another time,” he added very politely, and then he walked away from the table. I placed the credit card into the wallet and paid the bill. When I stood to leave, I happened to catch Ryan’s eye. He rushed away from me as if he feared I would try to approach him.

Of course, I wanted to speak to him. There was so much I needed to know. If he was in a relationship with his boss or anyone else for that matter. I needed to know if he had any feelings left for me after I stupidly and cruelly threw him out of his home. I followed him to a door with a sign that said Employees Only, and waited for him to come back out. And waited. I began to think the restaurant would close before he appeared. I started to fear he slipped out a back door in the kitchen, but finally I saw him.

“Ryan,” I called to him. “I need to talk to you.”

“I’m working, David.”

“I know. I’m sorry to bother you at work. I don’t have your phone number though. I have no way of getting in touch with you.”

“I think the time for talking has passed, David. I called you every day. Twice. You didn’t want to talk then. I don’t think there is anything to say now.” His voice was full of hurt. I felt a lump form in my throat. I had been so awful to him.

I did the only thing I thought would grab his attention. I backed him into the hallway, away from any watchful eyes. My hand caressed his cheek, and for a moment, he leaned into it. I grabbed my chance then, and pressed my lips to his. He whimpered and I felt a surge of relief at having connected with him again.

“I was stupid, Ryan,” I explained as I pulled back. “I never should have let you go, and I never should have ignored your phone calls. I know it’s a bit trite to apologize so long after the fact, but it’s all I have. I love you. I never stopped loving you.” I took a deep breath. “Please tell me if there is any possibility of us going back to the way we were. Please let me know if there are any feelings for me inside you still...”

A tear slipped down his cheek, and I knew he wasn’t unaffected at least. Was it a tear of joy at the possibility of getting together? Was it a tear of sadness because there was no hope?

“David,” he started. “There are feelings. I think I will probably always love you. But I will always remember the way you tossed money at me and tossed out my heart.”

I moved my hands over his arms and grabbed his sleeves in desperation. “I can’t apologize enough. I know it doesn’t make up for anything. I thought you betrayed me, and my hurt came out in a nasty way. I hardly believe that I spoke to you like that. I know I was wrong, and I know that I behaved badly. All I need to know is if there is any hope for us to get back what we had.”

Ryan looked at me very deliberately, holding eye contact with me. “I’m sorry, David. We can’t get back what we had. I can’t go back to the way we were before you threw me out, regardless of how mistaken it was. I can forgive you, but I can’t go back. I don’t want to.”

I made to kiss him again, thinking it would convince him. I would kiss him until he agreed if I needed to, but as I moved forward and licked my lower lip, Christian appeared in the hallway. “Is there a problem?”

Ryan looked nervous and jumped at his words. “No problem, sir. David is just leaving.”

It appeared that there was nothing to argue any further. Ryan had made up his mind, and I had to go. I wouldn’t mess up his chance with this job. Lord knew, I had put my job above him. Why should I expect him to risk his for me? Why should I have expected him to forgive me and take me back? I went home and threw myself in the new bed I had bought in my effort to make my apartment memory free.

The next day Kiera came by my house; I had called to tell her I ran into Ryan. When the doorbell rang at seven in the morning, I wondered what I had been thinking. I barely slept the night before and would have rather sulked all

alone. *Pity. Party of one, please.* When I told her the story so she might leave right away, she opened my eyes to my mistakes.

“You said you wanted to go back to where you were?” Kiera scoffed.

“What’s wrong with that? We were happy.”

“You were happy. He might have accepted what you gave him, but did you really ask him to go back to a life of secrecy and dependence on you?”

I slapped my palm against my forehead. A strange mix of hysterical laughter and tears brewed in my chest. “It doesn’t matter now; I still have no way of contacting him. I think I need to be alone now.” I really didn’t want to break down in front of my cousin. Again.

“I don’t know if you should be alone,” she said.

“Kiera, you have the key to my liquor cabinet still. I’m not going to hurt myself, I promise. I just need to wallow right now. Besides don’t you have last-minute wedding plans to take care of?” Only two weeks remained until her wedding day.

Kiera sighed, and it looked as if she was debating on which was more important: getting ready for the big day or staying with me. “Today is my final fitting. Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

“I’ll be fine. Thanks for coming by.”

“You know I can still ask Justin for Ryan’s number...”

“Thanks, cousin, but I’ll wait on it. I don’t think he will be happy to hear from me after last night. I can always ask Justin at your wedding, if I change my mind.”

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## Chapter 13

*Ryan*

I wouldn't have said I was blissfully happy. No happier than I was with David. However, I had reached an acceptance with my lot in life. A contentment even. I worked both jobs at the escort agency and the restaurant and was pulling in enough cash to put money down on my own apartment. I'm not going to lie, it was a pretty shitty apartment, but it was mine. No more sponging off Justin even if he was adamant that it was not what I was doing. It gave me a sense of relief though. At almost twenty-one years old, I was getting my first taste of independence. I felt accomplished for the first time. Even if my accomplishments were only escorting lonely men on dates and serving food at a four-star restaurant. I had thought things were going pretty well, though.

Then a night comes along to let you know just how little you are in the universe and how things are never as good as you hoped. It was a date with a new client, Loren. He seemed very nice at first. He invited me back to his room after I accompanied him to his brother's wedding. "I just broke up with my boyfriend of two years, and I don't want to go alone," he explained. I felt he was easygoing and nice enough at the wedding, so I agreed. I could always use the extra money for my new apartment, I reasoned to myself.

Once in his room, Loren was a different person. I had been so suckered in by his calm and cheery attitude that he took me completely off guard. The door clicked shut, and I was pressed against the wall face-first. He didn't attempt to kiss me, seduce me into an interlude. Instead I got a rough grab of my ass, while the other held me in place by my upper back. It didn't feel sexy to me at all, and for the first time in my life, I felt real fear. My week on the street, and David kicking me out had nothing on the danger I felt at that moment.

"I want your ass," he said roughly, his breath hot in my ear. I tried pushing back from the wall, but he was larger and more determined. He hit my forehead into the wall and I saw stars.

Though I was pressed closely to the wall still, I managed to get my hand into my pocket. The cell phones provided by the agency had an emergency alert feature. I didn't have to worry about dialing a number which was good because I couldn't see it and bringing it into view would have caught Loren's attention. I pressed a little side button which would alert the office or the on-call security department with my GPS location.

“I don’t bottom,” I told the man pinning me.

“You will for me. You’ll like it too.” He was yanking on my slacks, trying to draw them down without unbuttoning them. For a moment I considered how he seemed intent on doing this without kissing or touching me even. I was just something to use for his own pleasure. I wanted to throw up when I heard the sound of my pants tearing. It added a whole new feeling of violation for my clothes to be torn right from my body.

Air hit my cheeks, and I doubled my efforts on struggling against having my will stripped away. I brought my foot down on his instep, and he hopped back enough for me to turn around. I spun to face my attacker in time for his fist to meet my cheekbone. Pain exploded in my face, but I wasn’t going to surrender. I rushed him and my head met his stomach. He hit me in the back and I fell down, but inertia kept him falling toward the glass coffee table in the center of the hotel suite. Glass shards flew into the air as he fell through it.

I pushed myself up, slicing my fingers on slivers of glass. He was lying inside the metal rectangle frame, trying to pull himself up. My shirt was barely long enough to cover the torn back of my pants, but I pulled it down over my backside and ran from the hotel room. I wanted to spit on him, kick him for the terror he made me feel, but I would rather have lived to fight another day. Not being raped or hurt further was more important.

I reached the lobby at the same time the security team employed by the escort agency arrived. A few men went to the room to detain my date. The others stayed with me while they spoke to hotel employees and called the police. I had to stay a few hours to answer the questions asked by the police officers who showed up to drag Loren away in cuffs. I felt relieved that he was being taken away, but there was no satisfaction in the night. I wouldn’t ever be able to trust another client again; my very makeup was changed by what I had gone through.

I called Justin for a ride home, and he sat with me while I talked to the police, without saying a word. He didn’t say anything when we got into the car, but his jaw was clenched and his fists were gripping the wheel hard enough his knuckles turned white. “I’m going to quit,” I told him, hoping that would ease things. He nodded and drove home silently. I rested my head on the window, exhausted from the fight. My body wanted to shut down.

I was so emotionally wrung out, I didn’t even realize that we pulled up to Justin’s. The sound of his car door slamming shook me out of my stupor. Justin

was stalking to the front door, and I had a moment of confusion. Was he mad at me? I got out, hitting the lock button on the door, and followed my friend into his house. When I got to the door, I heard a loud smacking noise, and I came in to see Justin cradling his hand. His knuckles were bleeding, and there was a hole in the wall he stood before.

“Justin!”

“You could have been raped, Ryan. You could have been killed.”

It felt strange to be the one comforting him, but I placed my hand on his shoulder. “I’m okay. He didn’t hurt me.”

Justin turned to me and raised his uninjured hand and touched the bruise on my cheek. I winced a little. “That’s superficial,” I said.

He wrapped his arms around me then and began to cry on my shoulder. My own emotions combined with my friend’s, and I began to weep too. He pulled me to his room, and we both lay on the bed together talking. All night. I felt like a teenage girl at a sleepover party, but we both got a lot off our chests. He was going to ask his boyfriend Adam to move in with him. I told him about running into David at the restaurant.

“You can’t go back to him,” Justin stated.

“I could,” I said quietly.

“What? After what he did to you, you’d go back for more?”

“It couldn’t be the same relationship as it was then. I won’t hide who I am or who I love again. But I really loved him, Justin. We connected on a soul-deep level.”

“I don’t know him,” Justin admitted. “But, he hurt you. I can’t say I’m happy you would consider going back to him, but if you think you can be happy with him, I support you. If you need any help getting back with him, I’ll do whatever I can to help. I’m here for you, bro.”

“Can you see if it’s too late for me to go to the wedding?”

“I’ll call Bradley in the morning,” he answered. His voice sounded sleepy at that point. We both passed out as the sun was rising. He held me, and his arms comforted me in a completely platonic way. If I had my way, I wouldn’t spend a night in anyone else’s arms in the future except for David’s.

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## Chapter 14

*David*

The reception was underway, and I was sitting down with the latest victim of my mother's machinations. Her name was Nikki, and other than the fact that she was female, she was a perfectly nice companion. She was talking about attending her last year of medical school. I responded politely when needed but didn't encourage further conversation. Finally, she put her hand on my thigh. When I looked at it in distaste, she let out a giggle.

"You're gay, aren't you?" Nikki said, smiling.

"What? No! No way!" I stammered out.

"Relax," she whispered, moving close to me. "I won't tell your secret if you don't want me to. I have lots of gay friends so I'm not going to judge you either."

Excuses and lies ran through my mind ready to deny my truth. In the end, I decided to be honest. "I am. No one knows except my cousin Kiera."

Her hand on my thigh patted me gently. "It's got to be hard pretending to be something you're not."

"We all do that to some degree, don't we?"

"I guess. I'm always dressing up and getting my hair done for one event or another. Going on one diet or another to stay fit. If I could be who I wanted, I'd be at a football game in jeans and a T-shirt, eating three hot dogs, my hair in a ponytail, and no makeup on."

"Three hot dogs?" I shuddered at the thought.

"You're missing the point." Nikki rolled her eyes.

From that moment, we formed an entirely different connection than the one my mother was hoping for, but the forced date became one I really enjoyed. Nikki and I talked about books and movies, laughing and leaning into each other. It probably looked like a perfect match to my mother. When I caught glimpses of her, she had a satisfied smile on her face.

I hadn't been paying attention to anyone as the dancing began. Tables were clearing as everyone began line dancing. Only a few people remained sitting. I

glanced around and saw a face that I hadn't expected to see. Of course, he knew Bradley, but why would Ryan show up when he knew I would be here? I thought after our last meeting, I'd be the last person he'd want to see.

He looked up from the table, and his gaze met mine. His lips curved into a very slight smile. A first move on his part to create a friendliness between us? I met his challenge and gave him a full smile. "Hi," he mouthed. My mouth formed a "hello" back.

Nikki put a hand on my shoulder. "Your secret might not be a secret for much longer. I'm going to go dance and give you two a moment." She smiled at me and walked to the dance floor to join the guests dancing to "YMCA."

Her seat didn't stay empty for more than a moment. My mother made her presence known as she glowered at me when I glanced at her. When I returned my gaze to Ryan, he was turned away from me looking at the dancers.

"What is he doing here?" my mother snarled.

"Who?" I played dumb.

"Ryan Taylor. Did you think I didn't look into him when I thought you were together?"

I looked back where he sat, and he still avoided my gaze. The few moments of relief when I thought we might be able to communicate were fading away. My stomach fell, but I called on all my strength to do what was right. I didn't do it before, but it was time to make amends. I ignored my mother's protests as I stood and walked to the table across the room. When I made it to Ryan's side, he didn't look at me but said, "You're going to get in trouble."

"I'm a grown man, Ryan. It's time I acted like one and not a scared kid. I'm sorry it took me so long."

"Are you serious?" He looked up at me in shock.

"Very." I held my hand out to him. "Will you dance with me?" Luckily, a slow song just started.

"What about your job?" he asked.

"It's a job. You are my heart, Ryan. Please dance with me?"

He took my hand but looked at me as if he thought what was happening would end any minute. I pulled him in close, but he placed his hands on my chest, keeping a little bit of distance between our bodies. We moved across the

floor, shuffling like the two talentless dancers we were. “I need you back,” I admitted after a minute. “I still love you.”

“I still love you too, David. But we can’t go back to where we used to be,” Ryan answered.

“Can we start over, then?”

His hands fell away from my chest, and he leaned in. His cheek brushed my own. “I don’t know. A lot has happened. I’d like to, though.”

“That’s a start. We could at least try,” I suggested.

His head rested on my shoulder in answer. When the song ended, I took Ryan’s hand and led him off the dance floor. I wanted to be alone with him. I needed to touch him, but more than that, we needed to talk. Communication about our expectations and hopes for this relationship would be the only way it would last.

Kiera stopped us first. “You guys better not screw it up this time.” She hugged us both.

A man stopped us with one hand held out in front of him like a traffic cop. “Justin,” Ryan sighed.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Ryan. You,” he said, pointing at me. “You better take care of him.”

“If Ryan agrees to work things out between us, I promise to treat him like he deserves.” Justin nodded at my response and stepped away with a pat on Ryan’s shoulder.

My mother was the last to halt us in our attempt to leave the hotel ballroom. “What are you doing, David?”

“Mother, I’m gay. This is Ryan, and I love him.”

“You disgust me.” Her voice was venom-laced. I halfway expected her to spit on us, except her manners were too pristine.

Ryan attempted to disengage from me, but I held his hand tightly. “I’m sorry to hear that. However, your opinion doesn’t really matter to me. I’ve done him wrong once, I won’t do it again.”

“You’re fired!” She hissed out, not wanting to raise her voice.

“Remember who brought in the multimillion-dollar shoe account, Jean,” I countered. “They bought my idea. If I leave, maybe they’ll go with me.”

My mother's eyes glittered with hatred. "I'll be talking to your father."

"You do that. Now, if you'll excuse us, we have somewhere else to be."

Nikki winked our way as we left the ballroom, and I led Ryan to the elevator. I pressed the floor number of my hotel room when the doors closed in front of us. I suddenly realized I hadn't asked him to come with me before dragging him around like a caveman. "We're going to my room, is that okay?"

His mouth hung open a little and he nodded. "You stood up to your mother for me," he said in disbelief.

I nodded and took his face in the palms of my hands. "I'm sorry it took me so long, baby." I leaned in and gave him a chaste kiss.

Ryan turned into an animal on me. He jumped into my arms and wrapped his legs around my waist. I turned us around and leaned him back against the wall as his mouth devoured mine. The elevator didn't stop until we reached my floor, to my relief. I put him down when the doors opened, and we practically ran down the hall, hand in hand.

Yeah, I had all the best intentions of a heart-to-heart conversation, but when we got into the room, I threw them out the window. I had to finish what we started in the elevator.

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## Chapter 15

*Ryan*

One moment we were kissing, and the next I was having a mild panic attack. Our lips were locked together, our hips grinding, and then he turned me around. It shouldn't have upset me. It wasn't like he was even rough. He pushed my pants down gently and groped my cock, sliding his hand over my length. He knelt behind me to lick me but pushed me ever so slightly forward until I was facing the wall, and then it began.

It felt like that night all over again. I was being violated. Fear and adrenaline coursed through my body. I pushed away from the wall, knocking David to the floor in my wake. My breathing was ragged, and David looked up at me in confusion. "What's wrong, Ryan?"

I pulled my pants up without answering him, shaking my head. I couldn't speak with my throat closing up. I made a move to open the door and leave, but David put his hand on the door keeping it shut. I could have pulled hard enough and opened it. I wasn't a lightweight. However, I realized I needed to come to terms with the panic I just faced. I needed to be honest with David about what happened while we were apart. It was my intention to explain everything before we started kissing, but being with him was like finding water after weeks in the desert. I was thirsting for him. Starved for his touch.

I took one deep breath of air after another until I willed myself calm. David was still looking at me with curiosity, waiting for an explanation. "We should talk," I said.

"We should clear a few things up," David agreed.

"I didn't mean to attack you in the elevator," I said, blushing. "I just couldn't believe you stood up to your mother for me."

"I should have done it a long time ago."

He wouldn't get any argument from me. I imagined how much different everything might have turned out if he had admitted the truth when his mother first confronted him. I shrugged. "You did what you thought you had to at the time."

"Please don't defend me, Ryan. Not even to me. I treated you like shit and I didn't have to do that. I blamed you for my mother finding out about us, but my

cousin Jeffrey saw me kiss you at the engagement party. It was all my fault, but I refused to believe that I could have outed myself.”

“He told on you? Is he, like, five years old?”

David laughed at that. “Twenty-five, going on six.”

I shook my head at the debacle. His expression grew somber. “I held on to my precious belief until I couldn’t contact you anymore. I had no idea if you were okay, if you were on the streets, and all because I didn’t answer your calls. I don’t know how you could possibly forgive me, because I can’t forgive myself.”

“Can I ask you about the girl I saw you with?”

“You can ask anything. There isn’t much to tell. I’ve been dating these women because my mother was holding my job over my head.”

“I didn’t realize there was more than one. Though, I did see you talking to a woman at the table tonight.”

“Tonight I brought Nikki at Jean’s request. She’s actually a really nice girl, but nothing happened with her. Nothing happened with any of the girls I was forced to take out,” he explained.

“I can’t say that I was as innocent while we were apart,” I admitted.

David looked down at his fidgeting hands. “I saw you once. You were walking into a hotel with the man who looked like your boss. Were you dating him?”

I cringed at his words, knowing what I was going to admit was a hell of a lot more complicated than just dating my boss. “Not exactly,” I started. “I met Christian one night when Justin had his boyfriend over. I wanted to give them space and thought I could stay with another friend, who turned out not to be at home. Christian bought me coffee and kept me company in order to keep me off the street for the night. When he left, he gave me a business card for an escort agency that he used.”

“Why would he do that?” Icicles could have formed on the bitter-cold voice David used.

“We sat and talked a long time that night. I think he figured out I wouldn’t have taken money without earning it. He also knew I was at my wit’s end trying to find work. My phone had just run out of minutes and I didn’t want to keep living off Justin. Even if he would have let me.”

“Why didn’t you take the money I left for you?” Hurt replaced the chill in David’s voice. “You could have gotten an apartment and lived off it for a little while. You didn’t even take your clothes.”

“How is it that Christian figured out more about me in in one night than you did after a year? I wasn’t going to take money from you. For what? Leaving? Was it hush money? Was I nothing more than a prostitute to you? It was bad enough I took your money while we were together, but I thought it was given with love and respect.” I became the angry one.

“It was. I did love you and respect you. I still love you and respect you, more than I ever have anyone else.”

“Even if I tell you that I took a job as an escort? I slept with other men, David. I got paid for it too, but I earned it. We can’t go back to where we were. I can’t go back to being dependent on you. You understand that right?”

David’s shoulders shook as he took in a deep breath. “It’s my fault, isn’t it? I left you no choice. How could I hate you for it? If I could go back and change it, I would.”

“Maybe we had to go through this, David. I went through a few things that scared me. One of the clients I escorted to a wedding thought he could take something from me that I wasn’t willing to give,” I explained.

I was going to continue on to why we had to go through this, but my admission had David on his feet pacing. “Were you ra—” His voice gave out, and he coughed to clear his throat. “Were you attacked?” He stopped in front of me. “Is that what your panic attack was about?”

“He tried to rape me, but he didn’t succeed.” I hoped the strength in my voice would translate to my body. The last thing I wanted to go through again was the flashback and the following heart palpitations and hyperventilating. Especially when I was nowhere near being assaulted. I imagined David’s tongue sweeping up my crack like he surely intended, and I shivered. “I’m okay.”

“I still don’t understand how you think this is something we needed to go through,” David said, sounding miffed.

“I’m a stronger person now, David. I dealt with some real-life problems, and I made it through to the other side. I have a job in a successful restaurant with a boss who is also a good friend. I’m going to make some man a better partner for having gone through what I did. As long as they are willing to take

an equal partner. Someone who contributes as much as he takes; someone who will take care of the one he loves as much as he will let them take care of him. Do you know anyone looking for someone like that?" I asked, a shy smile forming on my lips.

"I think I might. I guess I've learned something as well. Not to take for granted even one moment spent with the person I love, and not to be ashamed of that love at the risk of losing it. I still wish I could take it back and have come out to my family with you, without you being hurt. I love you Ryan, and if you can forgive me for my actions, I'd really like to try us again."

I took David's hand and the contact became a chain reaction. He was in my lap seconds later, our mouths exploring one another's. Our bodies writhed and squirmed against each other looking for the contact to grant us release. "I don't think it will be that hard, you know? Getting us right," I said, in between kisses and thrusts.

My nerve endings began that all too familiar tingle, and my balls drew up. "It'll only be hard for about another two seconds," David said with a breathless laugh. Then he was arching in my lap, calling my name. I felt warmth at my stomach from the front of his trousers. It set off my own reaction and my own slacks filled with hot spunk.

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## Epilogue

*David*

A lot had happened in the six months Ryan and I spent apart, and even more occurred in the year since we reunited. It took two blood tests and three months for us to go back to making love with nothing between us. “You always used protection,” I had whined at the time.

“I am not taking chances with your safety.” Ryan took his promise to take care of me very seriously.

We moved back in together three months after that. Not into my place, but into his significantly smaller and cheaper apartment. “When are we going to move back in together?” I had asked him one night while we were in my bed.

“I don’t know,” was all Ryan had to say.

“I hate you leaving at night, Ryan. I want to wake up with you every morning.”

“You can stay the night at my place if you want,” he suggested.

I wrinkled my nose at the thought. I liked the comfort of my own apartment: the five hundred thread-count sheets, the thick walls with proper insulation. His place was old, small, and drafty, and you could hear the neighbors. “Not my fault you’re a snob, David,” Ryan snorted.

“What if we moved into your place?” I asked, wondering if there was some reason he was against my apartment.

He lay on his back, looking as if he was pondering the idea. Then he smiled, “I guess that could work,” he said looking at me.

“Can I ask what you have against my apartment?” I had to know.

Ryan rolled away, and I knew the happy expression had left his face even though I couldn’t see it. “There’s too many memories here. Most good, but it’s the bad ones I can’t forget.” Ryan sat up and picked his clothes up off the floor, putting them on. When he was dressed, he looked at me. “It’s also too expensive. I can’t afford my share.”

As he made his way to the door, I snapped to attention. I had been distracted by the thought that I hurt him enough to make my apartment unlivable to him. I

ran to the door after him. “I was only curious, Ryan. I’m sorry that you feel that way, but I’d rather be with you in your apartment, than to sleep in separate beds ever again.”

After that, I moved in. It turned out to be a better choice for us anyway. I only stayed at Brehmer Advertising a month after I moved in. With money I had saved and more from my investments, I was able to open my own advertising agency. Soon it would be Ryan’s as well. He was taking photography and business management courses at the local college. His tuition was being reimbursed by Christian as part of his job benefits.

Christian had offered Ryan a management position, but after many discussions he decided to be a part of the business with me. Christian accepted his decision easily, as he continued to look after Ryan’s well-being. At first, it was hard for me to accept the older man’s presence in my lover’s life. I knew what they had been for each other for a short time. Not to mention the fact that he had introduced Ryan into the escort business. Nevertheless, Ryan and I dined with Christian and his partner several times, and they had signed on to be my first client.

We ended up having a party to celebrate our first ad campaign and our first anniversary as a committed and out couple. That’s how we ended up at *Richard* with Kiera, Bradley, Justin, Christian, Richard, and another of Ryan’s friends, Kevin with his girlfriend Nikki. Ryan had set them up with each other shortly after the wedding. With all our friends together in one place, I set a secret plan into motion.

After dinner, one of the waiters, a theatre major, came out and started to sing. Members of his theater group dressed like waiters joined into the song, one by one. They drew Ryan out of his chair and into the middle of the restaurant. He gave me a curious look, and I shrugged as if I had no idea what was happening. I slipped away from the table as they danced and sang around him to get the ring and a dozen roses from the kitchen. I hopped on a dessert cart and two real waiters rolled me out there just as the song ended.

My smile matched Ryan’s as I jumped down and strode up to him with the roses. “I knew you had something to do with this,” he said, reaching to pull me into his arms.

“I might have had a little bit to do with it,” I said, refusing to be pulled in. I lowered myself to one knee in front of him instead. His eyes glistened as he watched me, and I started to propose. “Ryan, my life in the last year has been

more than I ever dreamed possible. I am not the repressed, secretive man I once was. I have learned the true joy of living life with my true love by my side always. Would you do the honor of being my equal partner in all life gives us, for as long as we live?" I presented a ring box with a simple silver band inside, knowing he wouldn't want anything elaborate.

Ryan knelt before me in response. A tear ran down his cheek, but his face radiated joy. He reached his hand into his suit coat pocket and pulled out his own box. "I didn't plan for any singing or dancing, but I would be happy to be your equal partner if you agree to be mine."

"You were going to propose?"

"I wanted to take our love and commitment to a new level," Ryan answered. He took his ring from my box and put it on his finger and took mine out of the box he held. He slipped the gold band on my finger and kissed me gently and chastely. It was wise because passionate kisses usually led to one or both of us coming shortly thereafter.

We spent the rest of the evening joined at the hands as the party wound down. Kiera and Bradley and Nikki and Kevin left first. "Congrats, Taylor," Bradley had said. "About time," said Kiera. Hugs were passed around and the two happy couples left.

Justin came to say good-bye next. "I know I had my reservations at first, but I'm really glad Ryan didn't listen to me. I've never seen him as happy as he is with you. Congratulations to both of you." He gave us both a kiss on our cheeks.

"Thank you, Justin. Tell Adam we're sorry he couldn't make it tonight," I replied.

"Adam left me," Justin admitted.

"What happened?" Ryan asked with concern.

"Don't worry about it tonight, Ryan. You just got engaged and I want you to enjoy it. You can listen to me whine about it tomorrow." He gave us a bittersweet smile and walked away. I noticed Richard approaching him and touching him in a flirtatious manner. It made my stomach turn for Christian's sake. Even if he had allowed the open relationship, I couldn't reconcile myself with the idea.

Ryan pulled me toward Christian. "I'm used to it, David," he said, noticing my discomfort.

Ryan put his arm around the man with easy affection. “It still doesn’t make it easier for you, though.”

Christian nodded once in agreement. “Congratulations to you both. I’m surprised you’re still here and not privately celebrating.” He was smiling as he elbowed Ryan.

“We’re leaving now, and I’ll spare you the details of how I plan to celebrate,” Ryan laughed. “Seriously, I hope Richard realizes what a good man he has and changes his mind about being with other people.”

“Thanks, Ryan. I’m not holding my breath, but we’ll make it through this.” He looked at his partner flirting with Justin, and I could see his eyes warm with the love he had for him. “Now get out of here,” Christian said, jerking his head toward the door. We didn’t hesitate to leave. I wanted to get home with my fiancé as soon as possible.

At home, I found battery-operated candle lights lining a pathway to the bedroom and rose petals strewn between the lights. I turned back to Ryan who followed me inside. “How did you do this?”

“I had Justin do it before the party, that’s the reason for the faux candles. This is how I planned to propose to you, but I’m glad we did it earlier. Now we can concentrate on making love,” he explained.

I took Ryan’s hand and walked him back to the bedroom. I opened the door revealing more of the candle lights and rose petals. The bed was covered in the petals, and Ryan walked over to the stereo and hit the power button. “Bed of Roses” by Bon Jovi came out of the speakers. “It’s a playlist of our favorite cheesy romance songs,” Ryan told me.

He put his hand out, palm up. “Would you like to dance?” I wrapped myself around him as we swayed back and forth. My head rested on his shoulder, and his hands ran over my back until the song ended. The beginning notes of “Iris” by The Goo-Goo Dolls played as we stopped.

Ryan led me to the bed, and we sat side by side as he took my hand. “I have a favor to ask you, David.”

“Anything,” I offered. Truly there wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do for him at that point.

“In all the time we were together or apart, I have never let anyone penetrate me,” Ryan said.

“It’s always worked for us; I love having you move inside me. You taking control of our lovemaking has always been a pleasure to me.”

“I love moving inside you, but tonight I want you to make love to me. Please, David, take this final step toward a truly equal partnership. Tonight give me this gift and take my ass. Own me; take care of me,” Ryan pleaded.

In the face of such complete trust, I couldn’t deny him his request. “I’ve never done this before, but I am going to do my best to make this good for you,” I promised.

“Thank you, love,” Ryan whispered with worship in his voice. “Give me one moment.”

He walked over to his dresser and opened a drawer. I knew what he was going for, and my heart rejoiced at the last step toward recovering the relationship we had before. After we reconciled, I surprised Ryan with his old camera that I had fixed while we were apart. Months later, he bought a better version for his classes and our future business. He had yet to use either of them to film any of our encounters. While he set it up on the dresser, I nearly cried in relief.

He returned to the bed with a wicked smile, and his pants were tented with his obvious arousal. I took his mouth first, putting all the passion I had into it. I removed his clothing slowly as I kissed his neck and over his chest when I unbuttoned his shirt. When his pants were removed, I wrapped my lips around his beautiful cock until he pulled my head away. “Not yet, David. I don’t want to come yet.”

I released his cock with a popping noise when it fell from my mouth. “I’m in charge, remember.” I smiled at him wickedly.

“I need more, please...”

I turned Ryan over and began to tongue his crack. The first few times we tried this after his attack he would freeze and begin to panic, but he had become quite used to my ministrations since then. He groaned as I inserted the tip of my tongue inside his puckered hole.

I kept up with the action until he was begging me mindlessly to enter him. “Please, David, please, please, please. I need you. God, how I need you. Fuck me, please.” The pleas poured from him.

I decided to grant him mercy and grabbed the lube, slicking my dick. I poured a small stream over his crack, and his hole clenched at the cool liquid.

My lover shivered and I kissed his back. Stretching him quickly, I inserted one and then two fingers, crooking them to stimulate his prostate. “Now, David, now!” Ryan screamed hoarsely, and I removed my digits. I pressed the head of my cock against his hot channel. All my preparations paid off and I slipped right in.

“Oh my God, David!” he cried out. I moved slowly, trying not to shoot my load at the first feeling of sinking into someone else’s body. Even though I took my time, it turned out that I wasn’t meant to last long at the sensation. Rocking my hips into his sweet cheeks, I reached around him and began to stroke his hard shaft.

Moments later, he arched back into me, his body stiffening with release. I captured his lips and came inside his ass. His name left my mouth like a prayer, and we collapsed onto the bed afterward. “Now I know why you like it so much,” Ryan groaned as my limp cock fell out of him.

“Ditto,” I replied. “I think we should do this again, for sure. Though most of the time, I think I prefer you to be in charge.”

“Okay,” he answered. “Whatever you want, whenever,” he muttered as a light snore sounded from his throat. I kissed his back once more as I joined him in slumber. I couldn’t believe how much had happened since I figured myself out and learned what was truly important to me.

My eyes were closing, and it could have been a dream, but I swore that I heard Ryan say something else. “One day, I’d like to tell our story to our kids.” My heart melted, and I fell asleep with a smile on my face. The future was looking like a beautiful thing.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Adan DePiaz lives in Illinois and loves to read books about love and human perseverance, and loves a happy ending for the main characters. Writing wasn't Adan's dream, but after dabbling in fan-fiction, it has become a passion. Adan is currently working on an m/m romance novel.*

*Adan loves variety puzzles, playing cards, and guilty pleasure reality shows like *Dancing With The Stars* and *The Voice*.*

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