



Embracing James

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance

Description: The right cut, the right style and a dash of love.

James Mason has everything he could ever want—his salon is the most famous in town, and he's got his health and his best bud, his dog Doob. But he's lonely. James has a knack for pairing everyone up, except himself. He's been interested in Paul, the sweet man who helps at the salon, but will Paul be interested in him, too? Then there's the elusive JP Henderson, the owner of the salon building. James has created an image in his mind that this man could be the one. Jonathan Paul Henderson has lusted after James since the moment he met him. James acts unaffected by wealth and seems drawn to character. He's adorable, funny and welcoming, too. He also doesn't seem to mind that Paul wears makeup. Paul feels the connection and knows he wants this man, but will James still accept him after he finds out the truth—that Paul's his landlord? Two men, one truth and so much attraction they burn up the sheets. Is theirs a love for now or one meant to last?

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Chapter One

“Looks like it’s you and me tonight, Doob.” James Mason petted the dog and settled on the floor with him. Dye Hard Style had closed for the evening and he’d locked the doors, but he wasn’t ready to head home—not yet. He’d rather give the dog attention and listen to the silence.

Christ, he was worn out. He spent most of his days packed with appointments for his styling services. Opening to closing, he had someone wanting his attention. He’d worked hard for his reputation for excellence in hair styling, but that didn’t help when he wanted a break.

Other than his job, he had little else to show for his work. He had no social life outside of the salon. No boyfriend and few actual friends. He didn’t even have the energy to try to pair himself with anyone, not like he did with the guys who came in wanting dates.

The one thing he did have was Doob, his black mutt with a heart of gold. From the moment Doob had shown up at the salon, he’d become James’ constant companion. He’d been more loyal than most everyone else in his life. His ex-boyfriends certainly weren’t loyal.

But he wanted a date. James supposed he could leave Doob at home and call a friend to go out, but he wasn’t in the mood for drama. He’d have plenty of drama tomorrow when he met with Jonathan Paul Henderson, the owner of the salon building and the Annex next door. He’d never actually seen Mr. Henderson. When Lester McCann had sold the building and the one next door, he hadn’t asked James his opinion—not

that he'd had to—and never bothered to introduce James to the new owner.

But that was Lester. If he could get away with doing nothing, he'd do even less.

At least James didn't have far to go in his commute home. Having his apartment in the Annex next door meant all he had to do was walk through the door joining the two buildings. Sometimes living next to the salon did have some perks.

He left the floor and checked he'd locked the front doors, then turned off the main lights. The security ones came on, bathing the space in dim yellow glow. Once satisfied, he patted his hip for Doob, then collected the cash from the register.

The dog had been a lumpy, furry godsend. Doob stuck by him when his depression hit and knew how to make him feel better. The dog was the sweetest thing, too. Whoever had been his family had been lucky to have him.

Part of James wondered why no one had ever claimed Doob. He'd put out what seemed like a thousand fliers, letting the public know he'd found the lost dog. Surely, Doob was missed. He had his name on a metal plate on his collar—wouldn't a family or someone who cared about the dog do something like put his name on an engraved plate on the collar? If Doob had run away, then why hadn't anyone come looking for him?

What if they hadn't wanted Doob? The dog was a good boy and so loyal. How could someone not want him?

If they didn't want him, James did. He checked that the rear doors to the former theater building were indeed locked and secured, then returned to the salon portion of the building.

He clicked the leash onto Doob's collar. "It's been almost a year. If you haven't been

claimed by now, then finders keepers. You're officially my dog." He'd already bought Doob's tags and had him to the vet for his shots. Unfortunately there hadn't been a microchip in Doob then, but there was now.

Doob circled around James' legs, catching him up in the leash.

"You'll trip and kill me, you know. If I'm dead, then you won't get puppy food." James slipped the memory card from the register into the cash bag, then zipped it shut. He tucked the bag under his arm and allowed Doob to lead him to the door out of the salon. He appreciated being able to go straight from the salon to his apartment building without having to go outside with a cash bag.

He carried the money to his third-floor apartment, then locked the bag in the safe in his bedroom. He'd worry about the numbers later. Right now, he needed to feed Doob. He unfastened the leash, then added kibble to Doob's bowl. When the dog settled for his evening nap, that was when James would wrangle the numbers on the ledger.

Doob greedily munched on his dog food and James admired his gusto. Doob never seemed lonely. Just happy to be loved. James wanted to be loved by the dog, sure, but a boyfriend would be nice, too.

"We'll find someone, Doob. Someone we both like and who will like us as a package deal. Think we can manage as a threesome?" Saying it like that sounded odd, but whatever. Doob was good as a companion, but James needed someone human to warm his bed.

Once Doob finished his dinner and got a drink, half of which he seemed to leave on the mat around his water bowl, James clicked the leash on him again. He and Doob left the apartment for their evening walk.

Doob seemed to love the four laps they usually took around Norville town square and James liked the exercise. Some days he and Doob ventured away from the center of town to the park by the school. Although James liked the excitement of the salon, right now, he wanted peace and quiet.

Doob walked proudly in front of him and sniffed at whatever he found. Once he and James encountered other dogs, Doob fell in line beside James, but seemed to pay no attention to the canines. James wondered if he should socialize the dog more. What if he and Doob were becoming too solitary for their own good?

James stopped to let Doob do his business. As he waited, he considered his life. He loved doing hair and making people beautiful. Helping someone find their inner glam made him happy. But he didn't want to be single forever.

Maybe he could visit Club Jester. He'd helped enough other guys find true love there. Why not try for himself?

He cleaned up after Doob and tossed the baggie into the receptacle for dog waste, then sanitized his hands.

His thoughts turned back to clubbing. Who would he meet at Club Jester? The same old-same old most likely. Those guys were good, but they were either in a relationship or never going to settle down.

He spotted a jogger coming toward them and stepped off the path to give the athlete space. As soon as the man grew closer, James recognized him. Pauly. He'd chatted more than a few times with Pauly at the salon when the man stopped for haircuts or just to hang out. He liked Pauly, but never got the feeling Pauly wanted a boyfriend. He seemed like too much of a free spirit. He was a whiz with makeup and always managed to make himself handsomely beautiful. James wished he had the same skills with foundation and eyeshadow.

Pauly jogged up to him and stopped. He mopped his brow with his shirtsleeve and grinned. How could one man, jogging no less, look so on-point all the time? Even now, he had makeup on, without smearing it much, and a slight beard. Unreal, but gorgeous.

“Hi, you.” Pauly took a swig from a small water bottle he had wrapped around his hand. “How are you?”

“Hi, yourself. You look fantastic.” He held on to Doob’s leash. “I haven’t seen you at Dye Hard Style in forever. Have you been working out to make yourself chiseled and handsome without telling me?”

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“That’s partly true. I’ve always jogged, but I’ve been out of town.” Pauly smiled. “I missed seeing you.”

“Likewise.” A tingle ran the length of his spine and James wondered if the glint in Pauly’s dark eyes was because of him. He stared at the man’s lips and wondered what he tasted like...and when did he get such kissable lips?

“Are you planning on going to the Jester tonight?” Pauly asked. “I hear it’s singles night.”

Singles night could be good, but it could also be awful. “Oh?”

“They brought in a new DJ and are having games to get the singles to mingle.” Pauly rolled his eyes. “If you want to go, want to go together? Then we don’t have to play the singles games.”

He hadn’t wanted to go, but he also hadn’t considered going with Pauly until now. “I should take Doob home and change, but I wasn’t planning on going out.”

“No big deal. I need to finish my jog and would have to shower,” Pauly said. “If you want, I can pick you up. It was my idea, so I can drive. You’re in the Annex, aren’t you?”

James blanched. He didn’t tend to tell people where he lived and only a few people referred to the building as the Annex. “Yeah, I am. I didn’t think you knew that.”

“Oh, I’d heard it.” Pauly blushed. “Sorry.”

He wanted to go out tonight and with Pauly, but something about the situation made him want to hold back. “Why don’t we exchange numbers and I’ll text you when I’m free. We can plan a date for another day.”

“I’d like that.” Pauly offered up his phone. “Do you have yours?”

He patted his thigh. Shit. He’d left his phone at home. “I don’t, but I’ll give you my number.” When Pauly handed him the device, he inputted his work number, then offered the phone back to him. “See you around at the salon?”

“Sure.” Pauly slid the phone back into his armband holder. “I’m sorry if I came off too pushy.”

“Don’t take it personally. I get kind of funny when I go out. I don’t do it often. I’m not a clubbing kind of guy.” He wasn’t any longer. He had been when he was younger, but now that he’d been around...clubbing had lost its luster.

“I get it. You’re more of a stay-home-and-chill kind of guy.” Pauly nodded. “Can’t blame me for trying.”

“Nope.” And maybe one day he’d go out with Pauly. Just not today. “See you?”

“I’ll be around the salon here and there. Maybe next week we could try going for coffee.” Pauly tapped his phone and an album cover filled the screen. “See you.”

James waved and headed with Doob back to his apartment. Maybe he should’ve gone with his instincts and gone out. He’d just inwardly complained he spent too much time alone and the chance to be with someone arose, but he’d chickened out. Or maybe he needed to know Pauly a bit better.

Oh well.

Once in the apartment building, he checked that his car was still safe in the warehouse space, then went upstairs.

He herded Doob to their apartment and unleashed him. “I spent too much time with just you, but you’ve never cheated on me.”

Doob sneezed, then trotted off to his dog bed.

“You can ignore me like a champ, though.” Silly dog.

James removed his makeup and showered, then dressed in a pair of sleep shorts. He made himself a snack of yogurt and granola before turning on the radio. Almost everyone he knew listened to playlists. They curated the hell out of those lists, making the selections of music perfect.

Not him. He loved dance radio and the oldies channel. Why not let the spontaneity of the channel come through? He liked not knowing what would be playing next.

He sat on the window seat and watched the evening traffic below while eating and listening to music.

Tomorrow, he’d meet with JP Henderson finally. He’d explain why Doob needed to stay and probably accept his fate when reminded of the no dogs rule. The rule wasn’t subject to change, the landlord would probably say.

James didn’t like the idea of starting a new salon at another location, but he loved Doob. If he had to leave the old theater, then he’d do it for his dog. He loved the publicity Doob brought, too. People recognized the dog, the salon and his unique style.

Maybe the infamous JP Henderson would be willing to work with him. He had to

give it a shot if he wanted to keep Doob.

He'd never met JP Henderson and finally learned his last name three weeks ago. Would the man be amiable? Curt? All business or friendly? Would he be an older gentleman or a sexy younger one? Maybe a sexy silver fox. What if he wasn't gay, though? What if he was? What if he wasn't interested in James? James' imagination kicked into overdrive. What if JP Henderson secretly wanted to have a wild, torrid affair with him and was looking for the right moment to make a move?

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Nah.

Romances like that didn't happen in Norville and they didn't happen to him. He was a simple guy with simple tastes. Men of mystery didn't fall for him.

He held on to his yogurt cup and let the Donna Summer song wash over him. Tonight, he had no cares. No worries, either.

Tomorrow was another matter, but first he'd enjoy tonight.

Chapter Two

Paul finished his jog, then headed home to the shower. He liked his condo, but the place was too big for just one person. He'd bought the dwelling expecting to have a partner living with him by now.

Of course life didn't agree with his plan. He stayed single while his brothers were both married and had children.

He could hear his mother now. "You let me down," she'd say. "No grandkids. Not even a grand-puppy to play with and you're still wearing makeup."

He snorted. She wanted grandkids, but how would he manage to give her any if he stayed single?

Sometimes he wished she'd ask him about his makeup so they could bond. Why not? He loved giving makeovers.

Hell, he loved makeovers more than most of his business dealings and land acquisitions. What he really wanted was to be accepted. Then again, he'd like to be with James, too. How would James react when he found out Paul was his landlord and the guy who sometimes hung out at the salon?

Probably not well.

Most people expected him to look like a businessman all the time and few men in his position sported makeup. But he felt more like himself that way. More authentic.

One day he'd find a guy who accepted all the different sides of him.

Hopefully soon.

* * * *

The next evening, Paul waited in his office in the Annex. He hated the look of the office in this building. Too plain. He'd rather have hardwood floors, a few nice Persian rugs and a sturdy hand-carved wooden desk, not this reject from a defunct office building. The lamps didn't match and the wood paneling on the wall was so outdated it wasn't funny. But he hadn't been interested in fixing up his office until now. If he decided to keep his headquarters in the building, he'd certainly change the office décor. Maybe he'd even start tomorrow—if he had to take his mind off his other problems.

Right now, he had bigger things to worry about...like the meeting with James. He'd washed his face clean and looked the part of a businessman right down to his Italian leather shoes and tailored suit. He'd planned for this meeting with James and expected some issues.

He'd have to admit he was the infamous JP. He'd have to come clean about being at

the salon and not admitting his true identity to James. First, the meeting had to happen.

He waited for James and felt a little like a mafia don sitting behind his desk in the dimly lit office expecting his tenant to grovel.

James wouldn't have to do much groveling. He could keep the dog. Could let the dog be in the salon. Hell, he could have reduced rent, too, if he wanted it.

Just don't let him reject me. He sighed. Asking James to the club had been risky. Sure, he'd let James see him plenty of times sporting his true face and he'd been accepted at the salon, but he hadn't given his real identity. What if he and James had gone out last night and had gotten along? What if they hadn't hit it off? They were friends at the salon, but what if that didn't translate to outside the salon?

He groaned. Business he understood. Relationships? Not so much.

He'd dated guys plenty of times, but the men he'd been with either liked the makeup and not his business dealings or the business dealings and hated the makeup. How would James react? Was he even attracted to him?

Christ. He was overthinking this too much.

A knock at the door brought Paul out of his thoughts. "Come in."

The door opened and James ventured solo into the room. "Hi."

"Hi." He stood, but remained behind the desk.

"Mr. Henderson?" James inched closer. "You're JP Henderson?"

“I am. It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Mason.” He held out his hand. “I’m glad you’re one of my tenants. You don’t complain, don’t leave the hallway trashed and you pay on time.”

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“Wait.” James shook hands with him. “You’re the JP Henderson?”

“Yes.” He remained behind his desk. He needed to project an air of power. “Is that a problem?”

“No.” James frowned.

There must be an issue. “You’re upset. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong aside from the fact I want to keep my dog and let him stay with me in the salon as the mascot,” James said. “Unless you want to tell me something I don’t know.”

“I have no problem with you keeping your dog at the salon with you or in your apartment.”

“You mentioned in the new lease agreement that you didn’t want any pets.”

“I’ve changed my mind. Doob can stay. I like him.” He’d never had problems with dogs. The people who owned them could be jackasses, but the dogs were fine.

James’ perfectly sculpted brows rose as his eyes widened. “You knew his name...my dog? How?”

Fuck. “I’ve heard it a few times.” He’d outed himself again and wholly by accident. But he couldn’t keep his poise around James. Something about James made him want to be better and also fumble with what he wanted to say.

“Where?”

Christ on a crutch. He needed to be honest. James deserved nothing less. Besides, he needed to be authentic with someone and James was the perfect person. “I’m Pauly.”

“Wait.” James sank onto the closest chair. “So I did recognize you. I knew it.”

“You did.”

“And that’s how you knew where I live.” James narrowed his eyes. “Isn’t it?”

“Guilty as charged.” He hated lying, even though he’d done it for most of his life. “I knew you’d figure me out, so this is me coming clean.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before now?”

What a loaded question. His defenses rose and he fought the urge to totally shut down. “Would you have accepted me?” Most people didn’t and he’d assumed James might not be any different.

“Why wouldn’t I have?”

That wasn’t what he’d expected James to say. So many others had denigrated him for his needs and proclivities. They’d tell him to be more masculine. Why couldn’t he be a regular guy? Be normal. What was normal and regular?

“Seriously. Why do you think I wouldn’t have accepted you?” James leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “Because you wear makeup? Um, have you looked at me? I feel more like myself with a little shadow, some liner and mascara. Oh, and by the way, you do your makeup well. I’m jealous. That aside, I don’t care what you look like as long as you’re fair to me.”

“And you think I wasn’t?”

“It would’ve been nice to know you came into the salon.” James stood, then paced before Paul’s desk. “Okay, first, who are you?” He stopped pacing. “Huh?”

Fair enough. “I’m Jonathan Paul Henderson. I’m forty-five, been in the real estate business since I was seventeen, and I’ve been out since I was twenty. I like makeup and looking pretty, but I love my fine suits—there’s something sexy about virgin wool and silk. My nicknames are JP and Pauly. I’ve never been married and I’d like to find someone who accepts me. Is that enough?” He’d never given anyone so much information at one time. Hell, he’d never told his own mother about his love of silk and eyeliner.

“And you bought my salon building?”

“I did. I own three apartment buildings in Norville, five in Shaker, plus fifteen rental homes and a strip mall in Corden—it’s all public knowledge. I have enough people under me who I trust and who run my properties so all I have to do is the paperwork.” He folded his hands on his desk. “I don’t plan on selling the theater building any time soon.”

“No?” James sighed. “That’s good. It’s a relief, actually.”

“I bet it is. You have quite the showpiece of Norville. Everyone knows the salon.” The minute he’d heard about the beautiful old building, he’d had to own it.

“Do you hate dogs?”

“No. I’ve been burned by tenants who don’t know how to take care of their animals, but I’ve always wanted a dog of my own.” He wanted to settle down, too.

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James sat down again. “You asked me out.”

“I did.” There was no denying it now.

“You’re interested in me?”

“Is that bad?” He hoped not, but he was making a mess of this whole situation.

“No.”

“But you’re not interested in me. I got the hint last night.” Loud and clear.

“I didn’t say that.”

He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from replying. Normally, the guy realized about now that Paul had money. Guys who wanted in on the dough tended to get really nice and cozy starting now. He hated making friends—fake though they might be—this way. “Then what?”

“I’m having a hard time rectifying in my mind that the guy I’ve chatted with for the last month and been jealous of his work with foundation is my landlord. It’s hard to conceive that a guy like you would want me.”

“Why?”

“I’m not a fancy guy.”

“So says the man with blue hair and smoky eye.” A damn good application if he did say so himself.

James blushed. “It’s not smoky eye. I smudged it at the shop. It’s been a day.”

“The look works for you.”

James’ blush deepened. “Thank you.”

“Why is it so terrible that I would want to go out with you?”

“It’s not.” James held up his hand. “I didn’t think you’d want me.”

“You’d be wrong.”

James shook his head. “I need time to process this.”

He hadn’t asked him for another date, but he’d given him permission to keep the dog. “Sure.” He wasn’t sure why he’d said that, but he wanted to make James happy.

“Thank you for letting me keep my dog. Thanks for allowing me to keep the salon, too.” James left the chair. “I’ll see you around.”

“Sure.” The meeting hadn’t gone the way he’d wanted. He thought James would appreciate his kindness and that the connection between them was real. Maybe he’d pushed James too hard.

He sat down as the door slammed shut. The last time someone had walked out on him, he’d cut them from his life and business dealings. He should just walk away from James. He’d messed up and needed to lick his wounds. Except he liked James and wanted to see if they could have something together.

He sighed. If he pushed now, he'd never get James to talk to him. Just like with business, he had to bide his time and show James he wasn't a flake. They just might be able to be more than friends.

He hoped.

Chapter Three

James left the office and fumed. How could someone be so duplicitous? So infuriating? He'd thought Pauly was his friend. He'd been attracted to him. He'd even considered going out with him. But as was his luck, Pauly wasn't just the cute guy who visited the salon. No, he was multifaceted and pretty...and a little sad.

James paused in his hallway. Shit. The guy had really put himself out there by asking him out and how had James reacted? He'd run away.

Okay, yes Paul had sort of given himself away as he'd revealed little details of James' life. At the time, it felt odd and didn't feel much better now, but knowing the truth, that they'd already known each other, it made more sense.

No wonder Paul had been so hesitant when he'd asked James for the date. He must've been worried James would reject him.

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But if the big concern was Paul's looks and flamboyance, then why did he think James wouldn't understand? In that respect, they were a lot alike.

Oh well. James had gotten his way, right? He could keep his dog and his salon.

Score two for him.

Except the victories felt hollow.

James hurried to his door to take Doob for a walk. He had to work off his nervous and frustrated energy. Had to.

Sure, he could think of a few other ways to do it, but that wasn't going to happen at the moment.

He leashed Doob, then left the apartment. As he walked down to the main doors, his phone buzzed. If it was Paul, he'd scream. Part of him wanted to kiss Paul, but the rest of him wanted to clobber him for being so dense.

He checked the screen. Not Paul. Instead, Duke was on the other end of the line. He sighed with relief. Good. He needed a true friend. "Hi."

"Hi. You sound tense," Duke said. "Is this a bad time?"

"No, not really. What's up?" He left the building and walked toward the square with Doob.

“Maybe I should ask you that. Where are you?” Duke asked.

“Walking the dog along the square. Why? Are you back in town? I thought you were on tour.” The last he knew, Duke was in California or somewhere.

“We’re all at the gazebo. Winston and Harmon just got engaged and I thought you should know,” Duke said. “I see you. Hang on and I’ll be right over.”

James hung up and spotted his friend coming toward him. As much as he didn’t want to think about Paul, he should get his problem talked over with a disinterested third party. “Hi.”

“Hey.” Duke strode up to him, then petted Doob. “Hi, guy. You both look good, despite sounding like the world is ending. What’s wrong? Can’t be that they got engaged. You just found out, right? I mean, you set them up, so you should be happy.”

“I’m thrilled they’re together and even more so that they’re engaged. And yes, you’re the first to tell me.” He held on to Doob’s leash. “Mind walking with us? He’s been cooped up today and wants to go.”

“Sure.” Duke fell in step with him. “What’s wrong? You’re prickly and you’re never prickly.”

“Do you remember Pauly? He’s the sexy guy who hangs out at the salon sometimes and wears more makeup than I do. He wears it well, too. He sweeps up for me sometimes and is a nice guy—he was a nice guy.”

“Was? What happened?” Duke shoved his hands into his pockets. “What did you do?”

James rubbed his forehead. Things were a mess and he didn't know how to fix them. Besides, he didn't like hearing the truth, that he'd helped to create the mess. "Last night we were out for a walk—Doob and I—and we ran into Pauly. He mentions singles night at the Jester, then suggests we go together so we won't have to play the singles games."

"So he flirted. Sounds awful." Duke snorted. "Truly."

"In the moment, it was nice, but I didn't accept."

"Jesus, James. He flirted with you. He likes you. Why in the name of fuck didn't you go?"

"I couldn't."

"Why?"

He stepped around a smashed can on the sidewalk. "He said he knew where I lived and it struck me as odd."

"People can't know where you live?"

"Not when I thought it was private." Maybe not so private after all. Shit. Did lots of people know his address? He shook his head. "He knew Doob's name and about the Annex. It creeped me out."

"Um, if he swept up after you, then he heard you call the dog's name. That's not strange." Duke frowned. "The dog is your mascot and it's common knowledge where you live. Do an internet search. It's out there."

"You're shitting me."

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“Nope.”

Well, that sucked. His exes could find him and so could Craig. Great.

“It’s true,” Duke said. “Now about Pauly. You turned him down because you thought he was odd, but you’ll give him a chance tonight?”

“No.”

“James.” Duke groaned. “Come on.”

“He’s my landlord.” Let him chew on that.

“What? That’s crazy.” Duke laughed, then sobered. “You’re serious.”

“I am.”

“The jogger with the sparkle owns the theater?”

“He’s not just a jogger who’s great with concealer. He’s a businessman with all kinds of rental properties. He’s JP Henderson.”

Duke removed his sunglasses from the top of his head and tucked them on his collar. “You do realize he’s worth a couple million dollars.”

“So?” What does that matter?

“Would I lie about this?”

“I never said you would.” He shrugged. “Money isn’t important to me.”

“James, he’s been featured on television and the internet. He’s well-known,” Duke said. “And he asked you out. You must’ve really made an impression.”

“Maybe.” He wasn’t sure. Nothing made sense.

“You should do what feels right.”

“Ugh.” James stopped to let Doob pee and sniff the hydrant. He couldn’t believe he’d been too overly cautious and callous. Still, a man’s financial status didn’t matter to him.

“What?” Duke asked. “Are you second-guessing yourself?”

“Yes.” Duke knew him too well and there was no need to fib.

“Hold up.” Duke hooked his fingers in the front pockets of his jeans. “Think about it this way. He’s just as scared and cautious as you, but I bet he’d give you a second chance if you asked.”

“What if I don’t deserve it?”

“Oh God.”

“What?”

“I knew you’d talk yourself out of this,” Duke said. “Why don’t you think you deserve it?”

“I dismissed him.”

“Try being more lenient with yourself. You should be happy and loved as much as anyone else.” Duke tipped his head. “Don’t let Craig live rent-free in your mind. He’s trash and I bet my best drums that Pauly isn’t like him.”

“Paul.”

Duke rolled his eyes. “Whatever.”

“I don’t know.” He wasn’t sure what to think.

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“Stop being so dramatic.” Duke held both hands up. “I see Roy coming, so I’ll be quick.”

“He won’t let you talk?” The nerve! He and Duke had been friends since school and if Roy didn’t like that, then tough shit.

“No, I’d rather be getting sweaty with him than you,” Duke said. “Plus, the paparazzi will show up if we hang out here for too long. Winston...er...Michael is still a huge draw and now that he’s engaged, it’ll make his value shoot up.”

“Oh.” That made sense, but still. He hated being rushed.

“You want to be loved. You need it, but you’re afraid and I get that. The thing is you use your attitude and face as a shield. Once you’re glammed up, you’re untouchable. What if you went without it? I don’t mean don’t make up your face, but what if you left the shield behind? What if you give in and admit you want love? Give him a chance and he just might be what you want.”

“He’s forty-five.” Why in the name of fuck did I say that?

“Christ.”

“What?”

“You’ll do anything to talk yourself out of this.” Duke shook his head. “Do what you want, but don’t whine when he moves on.”

“Duke.” He’d been wounded by Duke’s words. How could his friend be so right and so curt?

“He will. Guys don’t wait forever.” Duke strolled away with Roy, leaving James with Doob again.

“Well...” He wanted to be irritated and outraged. Wanted to complain. But Duke had a point. Ever since James had come out, he’d used his face as a shield. The façade was good for keeping people away and terrible at drawing them in.

He patted his hip. “Come on. Let’s go home.”

Doob trotted ahead of him. James wished he’d trained Doob to walk beside him, but the dog loved to lead the way.

James wondered what he should do next. Duke had given him a lot to think about. Guys didn’t wait forever. If they were truly good ones, they didn’t, because they were snapped up and in relationships.

Fuck. He’d assumed and made a big deal of something small.

But how would he put this right?

Hell if I know.

* * * *

The next day, James ventured out to do his shopping. He drove to the supermarket at the edge of town to buy dog food and essentials, then stopped at the Beanstro. He wasn’t much for coffee, but with enough cream, it was palatable.

He parked, then went inside. It was a nice day and the patio wasn't full. Why not enjoy the silence and sunshine?

He ordered a regular coffee with four pumps of cream, then paid. As he waited, he glanced around the room. He spotted Paul there with another man and his heart squeezed. Jesus. Duke hadn't been kidding. Paul had moved on already. Why shouldn't he? He was a handsome man and looked so sexy with his face on. He certainly got James' motor running.

But he wasn't available.

Fine.

James accepted his coffee, then ducked out to the patio. So much for enjoying the sunshine. He wanted to leave, but he'd already made up his mind to take a break.

He chose a bench and propped his cup on his thigh, then watched the traffic. He didn't have many moments to just sit and enjoy not having something to do.

Nick, one of his clients, strolled up to him. "Hey, you. You're alone. No doggo?"

"He's at home. I had to get dog food and it's hard to wrangle him and the bag." Not entirely a lie. Doob always wanted to rip into the bag the second James brought it home.

"Ah." Nick sat beside him. "You're alone."

"You said that." He sipped the coffee and burned the roof of his mouth. Fuck. He gritted his teeth to keep from showing his discomfort.

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“Why aren’t you with someone?” Nick asked. “I thought you had a boyfriend. Craig?”

“Craig wasn’t my boyfriend.” He was more like a mistake. Craig didn’t understand the concept of a one-night stand or being too clingy. Craig wanted everything all the time, but he couldn’t have it. James hadn’t wanted a relationship and hadn’t wanted someone so pushy.

“Craig told me he was and you got upset when he had your name inked into his arm.” Nick folded his hands on his lap.

“He carved my name into his arm.” It wasn’t a tattoo. Seeing his name on Craig’s body had freaked him out. A tattoo was one thing, but this was more and scary.

“He had it inked over.”

His stomach churned. “Good for him.” He didn’t want to talk about the ink or whatever or his ex.

“He’s trying to find you,” Nick said. “He misses you.”

I’m not hard to find.Christ.He had a freaking movie theater for his salon, drove an antique roadster, and he stuck out in town. “We split.” More like he’d run the hell away from Craig, but he wasn’t going to argue with Nick. He’d also have to move Nick to another stylist.

“I know and I told him to move on, but he thinks there’s still a chance.” Nick

shrugged. “You’re single. He’s single. Why not give it a second go?”

“He carved my name onto his arm and he stalked me. I’m not into dating guys who don’t understand no means no.” James left the bench. “I need to get moving. The dog needs me.” Fuck. What would Craig do? If he hurt Doob, James would lose his damn mind.

“Sorry.” Nick shot to his feet. “I just wanted to warn you he’s looking for you.”

“Thanks.” A warning. Jesus Christ. He surged across the patio and collided with a solid wall of man. He tossed his coffee out of reflex and grunted. “Sorry.”

“Whoa.”

He knew that voice. He looked up into the eyes of Paul. Motherfucker. Could his visit to the Beanstro get any worse? “Did I spill coffee on you?”

“No.” Paul herded him off to the side by the juniper bushes. “Are you okay?”

“No.” He massaged his temples. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to crash into you. That was rude.”

“It’s fine.” Paul tipped his head. “You’re shaking.”

“I am.” He’d be okay when he got back to his apartment and could check on Doob. His possessions didn’t matter, but Doob did. “I should go.”

“Wait.” Paul slid his arm around him. “You’re still shaking and I won’t leave you like this. Let me help you.”

“I need to go home.”

“Do you need a ride? I’m heading there, too.” Paul rubbed James’ back. “I can give you a lift.”

“I drove.” He sighed. He did want someone to talk to. He wanted someone to confide in and for them to understand. “I would like some company. You’re heading to the apartments?” He kept his wording loose in case Nick was listening. For all he knew, Nick would let it slip where he lived.

“I am. I’ll follow you,” Paul said. “Let’s go.”

“What about your date?” Where was that guy? Paul shouldn’t be worrying about James when he had his boyfriend or companion or whatever.

“That was a business meeting. He runs one of my apartment buildings.” Paul shrugged. “Let’s go to the apartments. I’ll explain there.”

He didn’t feel like arguing. “Sure.”

“Good. I’ll follow you.” Paul kept up with him as he went to the parking lot.

James climbed behind the wheel of his roadster and left the coffee shop. He debated taking a different route home, but instead he drove straight to the Annex. Fuck it. He wanted to be where he felt safe. He thought he’d distanced himself from the problems with Craig, but they kept coming back like a bad penny.

He pulled into the warehouse and parked in his usual spot, then turned the car off. He sat behind the wheel and his emotions got the better of him. He hated crying and hated losing control, but the incident with Nick had broken him for the moment.

Paul pulled in beside him and parked, then left the car. He rounded the hood and opened the passenger door of the roadster. He moved the bag of dog food onto the

floor of the warehouse, then sat beside him.

Without saying a word, Paul offered him a pristine laundered handkerchief.

James accepted the hankie and blotted his eyes. "Sorry."

"Whatever happened, you're shaken. You don't have to tell me, but I'm listening. I'm here for you," Paul said. "I am."

He wanted to argue, but he remembered what Duke had said. If he kept preventing himself from being loved and having someone in his life, he'd never have what he wanted.

"I know what you want to say. You want to ask me why. Don't you?" Paul asked.

"I do." He sighed to regain his composure. "I was a jerk yesterday."

"So?" Paul shrugged. "Everyone has their moments and it was a tough one for us."

Us. Why did that sound so reassuring? Because he wanted to be part of a couple.

"Want to talk here or upstairs? I can help you take your groceries to your apartment," Paul said. "I can explain the situation with Chip Torkelson."

"Sure." He wasn't in the mood to fight. "Thanks." He left the car and gathered his things from the trunk, then realized he'd forgotten to retrieve his keys from the ignition. "Shit."

"Keys?" Paul grinned. "I'll get them." He hefted the bag of dog food against his

shoulder, then reached into the car and snagged the keys. “I forget mine sometimes, too.”

“Thanks.” He fell in step with Paul. “We should start over.”

“We should.” Paul opened the door for him. “We can use the elevator.”

He hadn’t used the elevator in so long that he’d forgotten all about it. He joined Paul in the enclosed space. He kept glancing over at Paul and wondered why he hadn’t noticed his smile was so bright. Why hadn’t he seen the sparkle in his eyes before now? He’d observed it before, but hadn’t realized how warm it made him feel.

The bell dinged and shook him from his thoughts. Paul gestured for James to leave first. He followed James to the apartment.

“Which key?” Paul asked. “I didn’t issue them, so I don’t know which one.”

“The silver one with the blue head.” He flexed his fingers around the bags. He loved using the cloth ones, but the handles bit into his flesh.

Paul unlocked the door and Doob rushed up to them. He jumped on Paul, wanting the dog food.

“I forgot to tell you he’s pushy when there’s a new pack of dog food around.” He carried his bags to the counter as Paul nudged the door shut.

Doob barked and twisted around Paul’s feet, wanting the food in the bag.

“He’s incorrigible.” James pushed the groceries to the back of the counter. “Doob. Let him put the bag down.”

“He’s fine.” Paul set the pack on the kitchen floor then knelt by the dog. “Come here, Doob.” He ruffled the dog’s fur and petted him.

James mused at how well Doob took to Paul. “He likes you. Normally, he wants to love on people, but he’s hesitant in the apartment.” He’d been able to gauge the acceptability of his last two dates by his dog’s reaction. They hadn’t liked Doob and he didn’t like them, either.

“He’s a nice dog.” Paul sat on the floor while Doob practically crawled into his lap. “He’s a lover.”

“He is.” He put the groceries away, then packed the bags into one to be put back into the roadster. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Paul smiled. “Want to talk?”

When Paul looked at him, a big piece of his defenses melted. He didn’t want to just talk. He wanted to start over. “Yeah, I do.”

Chapter Four

Paul held his concern in check, but not by much. He’d seen James harried before, but not like this. He wanted to comfort him and at least be a friend.

“I’ve got coffee in my office and it’s two floors above your apartment, so you’re welcome to bring Doob if you want to come. I can brew us coffee,” Paul said and continued to pet the dog.

“I don’t even like coffee.”

“I’m not much for it, either, but I like the jolt.” Paul laughed to lighten the mood.

“You’re more of a tea guy?”

“Yeah.” James finally smiled a little. “If I might ask first, what is the story with Chip?”

“Torkelson?” Paul snorted. He understood what James was trying to do—start with an easy topic before working up to something heavier. Fine. He could go with this. He had a few questions of his own and needed to work up to those, too.

“When I started buying properties, I got smart. I put in the work to improve the properties, but I realized I didn’t have to do everything myself. So, I built up the business enough that I could hire help. Once I could get others who were more able and suited to do the work, meaning they were trained electricians or plumbers or whatever. That helped. I knew what I was doing and could do it, but I’d rather have someone who is licensed and bonded. Their work is better anyway. So I worked with them and worked my ass off to build my business up enough that I was able to have others handling the day-to-day. I even have bookkeepers who are in charge of the books, too. I check their work meticulously and I know exactly what’s going on, but I don’t have to be on the property to know what’s happening. They get paid, have jobs, and I get the benefits.”

“You really are a powerhouse.”

He shrugged. “I just know how to find places people want and folks to do the work. I

treat them well and do checks every day to keep them honest, but I've only had a few issues. I like being in charge and knowing I don't have to worry about where the next check comes from. What about you? Is that what you like about being a business owner?"

"I have great stylists at the salon, but I can't seem to keep people in the more menial jobs and end up doing them myself."

He'd noticed that. James seemed to be swimming in clients and his stylists were always busy, but there was never anyone long-term at the reception desk. "I know it's irksome to lose people, but what if you worked with the vocational school?"

"What do you mean?" James sat with him. "I'm all ears."

"What if you worked with the vocational school and had the cosmetology students come to the salon to fill part-time jobs like the reception desk or clean-up, but with the provision that they could earn slots as stylists if they prove themselves? That way, you'd have someone at the desk and would still have turnover, but you'd be helping the kids who want to be there. They want to learn how to have their own salons or run businesses. Plus, it's a great community service."

James cocked his head and crinkled his bottom lip. "That's an idea."

"You'd get more loyalty, plus it'd be good and free advertising for you."

James nodded. "I'd pay the kids something, unless the school wanted them working for experience, but you're right. It's a good thought."

"And I could keep sweeping up every so often." He didn't want to leave James. The man needed help.

“You still want to?” James shook his head. “You’re worth millions. You shouldn’t be sweeping my floor.”

Ah. He’d wondered how long it would be before money was brought into the equation. “Oh?”

“You said you have people to do the jobs you’re willing to take on for me.” James rubbed his eyes, smearing his makeup a bit more. “It’s not right.”

“Honey, there’s a difference. I like hanging around the salon and being with you. You’ve accepted me in the way I want to be seen. I can be myself with you.” Here he sat on the floor with James and it felt normal. For the first time in a long while, he felt on the outside the way he felt on the inside and life was even. He liked feeling this way.

“I get it.”

“Do you?” He needed to know.

“You want people to see who you are, not how much you’re worth.”

“Yes.” He stared at James. From his dyed blue hair, his shimmering dark eyes, the liner around those eyes, the scruff on his cheeks, his impossibly beautiful face and the way he smiled even when frustrated...it all drew Paul in. He did like this man. He had since he’d met him.

James massaged his temples. “My dog sure likes you.”

“He seems to.” Would James like him, too? Enough to let him in and open up?

“So you think the vocational school students would be good employees?” James

folded himself up. “And they’d be reliable?”

“They would.” He leaned back, resting on his hands and crossing his ankles. Doob stretched out beside him and rested his head on James’ lap. “What did Craig do to you?”

James paled and his eyes widened. “How did you figure it out?”

“You’re like a powder keg that’s so close to blowing if you don’t talk. I’m a safe place. I’ve been in bad spots and I can relate,” Paul said. “I’m here for you.”

James tensed, then exhaled. “About seven years ago, I met Craig at a party. We sort of hit it off, but mostly not enough to go out. When he was sober, he could be funny. When he got high, he got mean. I managed to keep him at bay until about two years ago. A mutual friend of ours set us up and I caved. I went with him and some friends to a club. He hit on me and I was in a bad place. I’d just been dumped and I was lonely. He wanted to dance, so we did, but it wasn’t good. There wasn’t a spark.”

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“I’m sorry.” Was he pushing too hard like Craig?

“Me, too. We kissed and tried to get something going, but it wouldn’t. It wasn’t there. Whatever it is, we didn’t have it. He wanted to be with me so much that he believed we were together. We weren’t. I’ve tried to stay away from him and I’ve largely been successful, but he comes around every so often.”

“And the guy at the coffee shop?”

“He’s another mutual friend and he’s one of my clients. He’s closer to Craig than me and likes to start shit. Truth be told, he’s angry that Craig keeps chasing me instead of him and he’s angry that I haven’t told Craig to get lost so Craig will chase him. I’ve told Craig to get lost and he doesn’t get the message.”

“That’s messed up.”

“It is.”

“What are you going to do?” And how could he help?

“Ignore him, I guess. It’ll blow over.”

“You’re sure?” He’d known his share of Craigs in his life and they didn’t always fade away. Some could be damn persistent.

“No.” James stroked Doob’s fur. “Why? You helped me with my staffing problem. Do you have any suggestions for this?”

“Date me.” He wasn’t sure why he’d let that tidbit pop out, but there was no taking it back. He wanted to be with James and this might be their chance.

James paled again. “What?”

“Hear me out. If you’re with someone—even if it’s only in theory—then you’ve moved on and so can those two.” He’d love to be dating James for real, but he’d accept fake for now.

“You’d do that?” The earnestness in James’ eyes pushed Paul to want this more.

“I would.” Being in a sham relationship would give them time to cultivate a real one. All they needed was time and some proximity. He knew the spark was real and would grow.

James didn’t reply right away, but then started to nod.

“You want to?” Paul asked.

“Yes.” James grasped Paul’s hand. “I do.”

He loved the way James’ hand felt in his. The tingles increased and his heart beat faster. He caught the slight hitch in James’ breathing and the new sparkle in his eyes. Was it all on account of being saved? Or feeling safe? Paul rubbed the back of James’ hand. If he worked hard enough, he and James could truly be together.

“And it’s not real, right?” James asked, a bit breathless.

“Right.” Except he wanted it to be real and he could swear James did, too.

“And after what...a month? We could re-evaluate. You know, decide if this farce is

worth keeping up? Yeah?” James caressed Paul’s palm. “We might realize we’re not compatible. That this isn’t going to work.”

“What if it does work? Just in case it might?” He had to throw that out there.

“Then we see if it does. I have my doubts, but then I have them about relationships in general. Being unlucky in love tends to do that to a person.” James blushed.

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it.” He’d had his share of rough relationships, but that didn’t mean that every time he tried love, it would be a disaster. He had a good feeling about this pairing with James.

James squeezed Paul’s fingers. “I guess you’re right.”

“You guess?” He thought he’d been more convincing than that.

“I’m warming up to the idea,” James said. “At least you’re stable and have a job. My last boyfriend expected me to pay for everything and let him mooch off me. You’d be surprised by how much I don’t make. The salon is jumping, but the insurance is high, the electricity isn’t cheap and the supplies have gone up in price in the last year. If I don’t hike my prices, I won’t make shit.”

“I know how that is and I can carry my weight.” He’d have to work out a compromise on the electricity. James shouldn’t be paying for the electric in the whole theater. Truth be told and if given the opportunity, he’d spoil James rotten. “I should go. You’ve got things to do, I’m sure, and I have to handle some business.” He stood. “But I feel good about this, what we’re doing.”

“I do, too, but something occurs to me.” James stood and walked with him to the door. “If we’re going to pretend to be together, we should probably be seen together and do stuff in public.”

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“We should.” He waited at the closed door. “What do you suggest?” He wanted James to be at ease with him.

“Dinner tonight? Here. Doob and I would love the company,” James said. He grasped Paul’s hand again. “What do you think?”

For a man who wasn’t ready for a relationship, he was pretty damn good at acting like they were jumping headlong into one. “I think it sounds wonderful.” He couldn’t wait to see James again.

“Good,” James said. “And maybe we could discuss going out together.”

“Where?”

“How about we go to the Jester?” James shrugged. “I don’t club much.”

“Why not?” He hadn’t clubbed in quite a while, either. But if he and James were going to be a couple, even if it was a farce, then he wasn’t going to back down. He wanted this more than ever. Maybe they could even have the date he’d tried to ask James out for the other day.

“Good. See you at seven?”

“I’ll be here.” He hesitated at the door. He might be pretending to be with James, but he yearned to kiss him. “May I kiss you? For practice. We have to make this look good.” Right?

“We do.” James slid his free arm around Paul and eased him close. “For practice.” He tipped his head.

At the same time, Paul feasted on James’ mouth. He shouldn’t push, but he’d dreamed of this moment. He savored the softness of James’ lips, the slight scrape of his whiskers against his cheeks and the way James melted into the connection. James’ sweetness washed over Paul, and he wished he could bottle this moment. Why had he waited so long to make a move and kiss James? God, this was so perfect. He caressed James’ back, loving the way he felt in his embrace.

James whimpered. He opened to Paul, allowing Paul to suck on his tongue.

The kiss turned hotter than Paul had ever imagined. He couldn’t get enough, even if this was happening fast and wasn’t supposed to be real. How in the hell would he keep pretending to care about James when he’d come to truly fall for him?

Easy. He wouldn’t pretend. He’d give James plenty of reasons to keep this going. He wouldn’t push, but he also wouldn’t give up. A kiss and connection like this wasn’t something that could be faked. The sparks were real.

James broke the kiss, but stayed close to Paul. “Wow.”

“Yeah.” He caressed James’ back again. “You’re good at practicing.”

“You’re good at kissing.” James sighed. “We’re going to be pretty damn convincing.”

“We will.”

James trailed his fingers down Paul’s cheek. “See you at seven? Dinner and more practicing?”

“Yes.” He’d be there. “Seven.”

“Good.”

“I’ll see you.” Although Paul wanted to stay, he left before he did something foolish like confessing he didn’t want to pretend. He knew James and he’d fallen for him, but he needed more time. They needed and deserved it.

Paul left the apartment and headed up to his office. He didn’t give a shit about his business dealings at the moment, but he had to check the books and ensure the work had been done at two apartment buildings he’d opted to renovate.

He settled behind his desk and opened his tablet. He checked the photos of the buildings and the renovations were indeed underway. He worked on the books, too, running through the numbers with ease. His bookkeepers were the best and he didn’t have to check, but he always did, just in case.

He read through his emails and handled the few issues without much problem. He sent a message to Martin, his main contractor, to repair the roof on a house in Shaker, then sent the eviction notices to his lawyer to ensure they were executed properly. He hated evictions, but if the tenants wouldn’t pay—even with the six-month grace period—they couldn’t stay.

His phone rang. Although he didn’t know who it was on the other end of the line, he answered. Lots of people called him on his business line. “Hello?”

“Paul Henderson?”

“How can I help you?” He’d learned to keep his answers fairly simple to prevent giving away too much information, in case someone was upset with him. Not everyone was trustworthy.

“Are you Pauly?” the caller asked.

He paused and memorized the details of the caller. Male voice, sounds middle-aged and scratchy. He detected the sound of a bird or something screeching in the background. “I work for him.”

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“I’ve seen you around town.”

“Who?” He had to keep the guy talking and get him to disclose details.

“Pauly, don’t lie to me.”

“I work for him,” Paul replied. “Again, how can I help you?”

“Fine,” the man snapped. “You tell him to stay the hell away from my man. James is mine. Get it? All mine. He’ll get bored and he won’t stay with Pauly for long, so just tell him to end it now. James is vain and troubled. He can’t handle relationships, so cut him loose now so you don’t risk getting hurt or outed.”

A threat? Interesting. He noted how the caller believed he was Pauly. He was, but that wasn’t important. “Outed? How? My boss has nothing to hide.” Now that he’d hooked up with James, he didn’t care who saw him with his makeup or his man. Fuck ’em.

“Your boss won’t want people to know he’s a sleaze. He wears more makeup than a drag queen and he can’t be taken seriously with eyeliner. No one wants to do a deal with a freak. Will people want to rent a house from a flake?”

“I guess you’d have to ask him and them,” Paul replied. He refused to back down to this jerk or give him too much information.

“You just tell him to leave my man alone. He’s mine and I don’t share,” the man shouted. “Leave him alone.”

“I’ll pass that information along,” he said, his tone flat.

“You do it. You’re a dick and edging in on my man. I’m sick of it. He’s mine.”

Pushy little man, wasn’t he? Paul’s patience wore thin. “You seem to think I’m the man you’re looking for. I’m not. I work for him and I’ll pass this information along, but before I do, answer me a question. You’re not good at threatening or exerting power. You’re barely good at sounding tough. If you’re so smart and if you’ve convinced James is yours, then why are you getting so angry? If you’re really together and he knows it, then you should trust him. If not, you should move on.”

“You don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then leave him alone. Just do it. He’s not going to stay with you. He’ll come back to me. He always does.” The caller disconnected the call, leaving Paul in silence.

Paul pushed the phone aside and growled. Jesus. He’d just met Craig, no doubt. If that was the way Craig dealt with people, then it was no wonder James wasn’t interested. This kind of pushy was scary.

Paul massaged his temples and propped his feet on his desk. If it took everything he had, he’d prove to James he was a decent, worthy, sexy man and he’d protect him from Craig. He’d show James a relationship was possible, could be healthy and could last.

James was too good to pass up.

Chapter Five

James finished cutting the last of the peppers, then checked the lasagne. He hadn't asked Paul what he'd like to eat before he began making the dish. He'd just made it. Shoot. He should've thought about his guest before he started cooking.

His thoughts turned to Paul. He was lucky to know the man. Paul was sweet, sexy, and he liked how Paul kissed, too. But this was a fake relationship. No strings, just keeping Craig at bay.

Why did it feel like it'd become more?

Because he tended to fall more in love with his partner than his partner did with him and he usually set himself up for failure. Never intentionally, but that was how his life seemed to work out.

God. Getting hurt so many times sucked. He deserved better, but at this rate, he wouldn't get it.

Maybe with Paul, he'd have a decent chance.

Maybe.

He placed the peppers, lettuce and onions in the salad bowl, then added mushrooms and cherry tomatoes. He swiped his phone with his knuckle to check the time, but the phone buzzed with an incoming call from Duke.

"Hi." He set the phone to the speaker setting. "How's things?"

"Did you sex him up?" Duke asked.

"Who?"

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“Pauly.”

“No.” Not yet. He paused. Shit. He wanted to. He hadn’t thought about it until now, but he did want to sleep with Paul.

“You should. I sexed up Roy and it was fantastic,” Duke said. “Stop being chivalrous and stake your claim on your man.”

“I will. I guess I sorta did.”

“How do you sort of stake a claim? You never do anything half-assed,” Duke said. “Did you sabotage yourself again?”

“No.” He dried his hands. “Actually, we’re sort of together.”

“You are?”

“Yeah. It’s odd because we aren’t really together, but we are.” That made almost no sense.

Duke groaned. “What? You either are or aren’t. What happened? Tell the wise one all about it and we’ll figure this out.”

“Aren’t you the sage one all the sudden?” He sighed. “Craig happened.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah.” He shuddered just thinking about Craig.

“So you and Pauly hit it off?”

“We’re having dinner tonight.” He couldn’t wait.

“So how are you sort of but not quite a couple then?”

“As far as anyone, save for you, knows, we’re together. It’s a farce, but no one needs to know that. It’s mostly to get Craig to back off.” The plan sounded good so far. “No strings.”

“James.”

He knew that tone. He didn’t believe he’d done anything wrong, but Duke sure did.

“What?”

“You’re playing with fire,” Duke said. “You’ll both get burned bad.”

“But it’s not permanent. After a month, we’ll reassess.” Now that sounded dumb. If they weren’t really together, then why did they have to think this through or change the terms? Duke was right—he’d messed up...again.

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I do.” Sort of.

“Be smart. Every time someone says it’s easy or that there aren’t strings, there are,” Duke said. “But you know best. Let me know how dinner shakes out. I hope it’s better than I have the feeling it will be.”

“Thanks.” Some people have no faith in me.

“Talk later.” Duke hung up without giving him a chance to reply.

James nudged the phone aside. Well, shit. He’d screwed up, but all wasn’t a total disaster. He and Paul might realize they were better as friends, and this wouldn’t be a mess.

It was possible.

Paul might not want the chaos that came with James’ past with Craig. He might decide to run the other way and not look back. He’d thought this would be so easy and clean. So much for thinking.

He met Doob’s gaze. “I messed up, didn’t I?”

Doob flopped onto his side and sighed as he fell back asleep.

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So much for help from the dog.

James shook his head. He'd have to worry about the consequences of his actions later. He ducked into the bathroom to fix his face and ensure his hair looked right. He hated that Paul had seen him in such a rumpled state earlier.

He touched up his makeup and winked at himself, then left the bathroom. Something Duke had said came back to him.

“Don’t use your face as a shield.”

Tough words, but true. Could he do it?

He changed his shirt and cleaned up the kitchen. He wanted everything to look perfect. Considering they weren’t really a couple, he’d gone to a lot of trouble.

Doob sat up and looked around, then growled. He rushed to his feet. Doob bounded to the door and barked. The hairs on his back stood on end.

“Is he here?” James asked. He arranged the towels, then strode to the door. He glanced down at Doob and realized not only was his back fur on end, but so was the fur between his shoulders. Doob only reacted this way with someone he didn’t trust.

Not Paul.

He checked the security hole. Craig stood in the hallway.

Well, fuck. That explained a lot.

“James, I know you’re in there. I smell food,” Craig said. He pounded on the door. “Open up.”

He engaged the chain and quietly clicked the deadbolt into place. He refused to let Craig in.

“James, open the door. We need to talk,” Craig said. “Now.”

He knelt on the floor next to Doob and hugged his dog. Why did Craig have to keep chasing him?

“I talked to Nick. He said you’ve got a new boyfriend.”

How did Nick know already? They’d only made the decision this afternoon. James kept his mouth shut. Maybe if he didn’t speak, Craig would think he was gone and leave himself.

Probably not.

“James. Open the door.” Craig pounded again. “You need to open the door.”

No, he didn’t.

“James. Come on, James.” Craig whacked at the door. “Open up. Now.”

“Excuse me. Do you have business here?”

James recognized that voice. Paul. He managed to stand, but his hands trembled as he pressed his fingers to the door and peeked through the security hole.

“I’m here to see my boyfriend,” Craig said. “Who are you?”

“I’m here to see my boyfriend.” Paul stood at his full height, a good four inches taller than Craig.

“James?” Craig said and gasped. “No.”

“Yes.” Paul didn’t move. Just stood there taut and glaring.

“I knew he’d cheat. I knew it. James, you’re a piece of shit. You led me on. Fuck you,” Craig shouted. “Fuck you.”

James bowed his head. Jesus Christ. Why did he have to have such an abusive man in his past and why did Craig have to be the method through which he’d hooked up with Paul?

A gentle knocking resonated on the wooden door. “James? He’s gone.”

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He couldn't stop shaking, but he managed to flip the lock on the door. "Paul?"

"He's gone. I promise," Paul said. "You're safe."

He fumbled to unlock the door the rest of the way. A moment later he succeeded. He yanked the handle. "Sorry."

"Never apologize for the actions of someone else. You don't control them and he's not in control of you." Paul ventured into the apartment. "I'm changing the means of entry to this building. We're getting a doorman and better security on the rest of the doors. I don't want that man here ever again."

James sank onto the arm of the sofa. "He's a charmer. He'll find a way to get them to let him in."

"I know his kind." Paul closed the door and engaged the lock, then enfolded James in his embrace. "It'll be okay."

"Yeah?" He wasn't sure how, but he liked the way being held felt.

"You've got me in your corner and I'm not afraid of him." Paul rubbed James' back. "He's a conniving jerk, but he's not as dangerous as he projects."

He wished he believed that.

"I smell dinner and it smells wonderful." Paul kept him close. "Thanks for cooking for me."

“Oh, shit.” He detangled himself from Paul to rush to the kitchen. He grabbed the potholders and withdrew the pan from the oven. At least the cheese wasn’t too burned. “I almost forgot it was still in there.”

“Looks great, but slow down before you burn yourself.” Paul joined him in the kitchen. “Salad and lasagne? Perfect.”

“Since I managed not to burn it, yeah.” He turned off the oven. “Why don’t you carry the salad bowl to the table?”

“Sure.” Paul picked up the bowl and salad spoons. “I would’ve brought wine, but I didn’t know what you’d be making. I erred on the side of caution and waited. May I plate?”

“Sure.” He cut the lasagne into pieces and placed one piece on each of the two plates while Paul added salad to the bowls. “I’m sorry for Craig,” James said. “He’s a pest.”

“Stop.”

“No, really. You didn’t deserve to be subjected to him,” James said and filled two glasses with water. “He thinks he’s the most important person in the world.”

“I know his type. I deal with people like him when I have to do evictions. People get prickly when they think they’ll lose their home and are entitled to be there.” Paul sat across from him at the table.

“How do you know who is struggling and who doesn’t care, though?” James asked. “There must be some who are just in a bad way and others who are entitled.”

“I pay attention,” Paul said. “Honestly, I watch them, too. The ones who’ve had a run of bad luck will try to work with me. They do what they can when they can. They are

the ones I tend to be more lenient with because they don't want to be in the situation they're in and will try to get back on a solid footing. I hired two of my best doormen that way. They needed jobs and I had jobs, so it worked out. They're loyal and want to work."

"Nice." He offered over a napkin. "Thank you, by the way."

"For?" Paul arranged the napkin on his lap.

"Getting rid of Craig." He laced his fingers together. "I didn't know you could glare at someone that meanly or that he'd leave, but he did and I'm grateful."

"He's like the other kind of tenant. The ones that think the world revolves around them and they should be able to stay because they should. When they do leave, they do it in the middle of the night and leave the apartment a mess. I have no leniency for them." Paul stabbed at his salad. "With people like Craig, it's a matter of projecting. I made him think I'm bigger and scarier, so he backed down. I acted like I had more confidence and he lost his."

"Sounded like it." James sighed. "Instead of talking about Craig, why don't we eat up while it's hot?"

"I will." Paul grinned. "It smells great and you look fantastic."

"Thank you." He'd probably smudged his face again, but it didn't matter. He didn't need to impress Paul. "You aren't wearing yours."

"I had a meeting."

He nodded. "Because you don't think they'll take you seriously if you're gussied up?"

“Pretty much.” Paul pushed the lettuce around in his bowl. “A lot of business is conducted based on looks and if they don’t think I look the part, they won’t take me seriously.”

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He'd thought of that. "Have you considered working with the LGBTQ community?"

"How so? I'm not shutting you down, so please, enlighten me."

"What if you opened one of your apartment buildings as a shelter for the LGBTQ community? The youth especially need a place to go," James said. "You could be true to yourself and an example to them because you've succeeded. They wouldn't get a pass because they'd have to help take care of the building."

"I hadn't thought of that, but I like it." Paul dipped his head. "Nice."

"You wouldn't have to worry about what people thought of you because you'd be a role model to them that you can be yourself and be successful."

"You're brilliant."

He wouldn't say that. "I do have good ideas from time to time." He ate in silence, enjoying Paul's company. Paul exuded strength and character, plus he was solid. God, he was handsome, too.

Once he finished his dinner, James dabbed his mouth. He'd eaten too much, but it was worth it. Paul finished and collected the empty dishes.

"That was good," Paul said. "Thank you."

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been thanked for dinner. Maybe never. He sipped his water, then toyed with the condensation on the glass. "What do you need

to do tonight?”

“Make a few calls, but nothing exciting.” Paul returned to the table. “I want a doorman here as soon as possible.”

“Having money makes that sort of thing happen faster, doesn’t it?”

“That and just a bit of power.” Paul shrugged. “I’d like to know you’re safe.”

“Thanks.” He sat back in his seat. “Where do you live? Not here or I’d have seen you more often.”

“I’ve got a condo across town. You’d like it because there’s plenty of space, and Doob would like it because there’s a backyard.”

“He would,” James said. “I feel guilty that he can’t run more.”

“Next time, we’ll go to my place.” Paul left the table when James did and joined him in the kitchen. “I’ll help you clean up when I’m done on the phone.”

“I’ve got a dishwasher, so take your time.” James set about putting the extra pasta into a container set for the fridge. The rest of the salad was put in the crisper before he wiped down the counters and loaded the dishwasher. He prided himself on cleaning up as he went so the final job wouldn’t be so overwhelming.

A few moments later, he filled Doob’s bowl, then turned off the kitchen light and joined Paul in the living room.

Paul held the phone to his ear and paced in front of the sofa.

James did his best to ignore the conversation. It had nothing to do with him anyway.

He settled on the window seat and watched the traffic. Living in Norville could be a pain. Everyone knew everyone else's business. The buildings were old and many needed a good refurbishing.

But Norville had charm. People looked out for one another. They did seem to care. One day, he wanted to have a family. Maybe he wouldn't have children, but rather have dogs as his kids, but he wanted to stay in Norville to raise them. Would Paul share his desire?

"Done." Paul tucked his phone into his pocket, then joined James on the window seat. "The doorman is on his way and my locksmith is working on a new lock system for the building as we speak. I've also informed everyone that Craig is no longer welcome on the property."

"You're thorough." He'd impressed James.

"I didn't like how he treated you. It was embarrassing."

"You don't have to protect me."

"Okay, then I'll protect my assets." Paul shrugged. "I don't like him."

"He's not my favorite person."

Paul sat across from him on the window seat. "Recline against me."

He'd wanted to keep some space between them, but why? To protect his heart? To keep up the façade? Too late. He'd developed strings and wanted to be with Paul. He reclined against Paul's chest. In all the times he'd stretched out on the window seat, he'd wanted the moment to be just like this. No other guy had ever wanted to join him.

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Paul embraced him. “You’ve got a great view.”

“Thanks. I love being able to sit here and listen to music or the sounds of Norville on a summer night with the windows open. It’s relaxing.” So was sitting with Paul. “We should probably set some rules.” Before we get in too deep or I lose more of my heart to Paul.

“Like?”

“Expectations. I’d like to know what you want from me.”

“And vice versa.”

“Yes.” James laced his fingers with Paul’s. “Like how much of this is a show and how far are we going with said show?”

“Well, I did ask you out, so I’m content to truly date.” Paul stroked the top of James’ hand. “I really had to work to ask you out that night.”

“Why?”

“I was scared.”

“Of me?” He wasn’t scary.

“Of you, but mostly that you’d reject me.”

James tipped his head to look at Paul. He should put on the brakes, but he couldn't help himself. "I messed you up."

"A little."

"Why did you give me another chance then?" He should've gone the other way.

"I learned very early on that I shouldn't give up on people because of one decision. Get to know them and find out why they reacted the way they did, I was told. See things from their side before rushing to judgment. That's what I did with you."

"I'm glad." He tilted his head and kissed Paul. Without that second chance, he'd never be here right now with Paul. Thank God.

Paul groaned and caressed James' throat as he continued to kiss him.

James stroked Paul's arm. This moment was so hot, but tender, too.

A buzzing sound interrupted the kiss. James inched away. "What's that?"

"My phone." Paul groaned and withdrew his phone. "It never fails to happen. Just when I'm in the middle of something good, business intrudes."

"Do you need to answer it?"

"Unfortunately, I do. My phone buzzes when it's a call or text from my core staff."

"Answer it, then." James left the window seat. "Then we can plan a proper date."

"I'd like that." Paul held his phone, but didn't press the button to answer. "Thursday night? My place?"

“Yes.” He followed Paul to the door. “I have a confession.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t know if I want to keep up the farce,” James said. “I think I want to try to let this be real.”

“Give me a few dates, then tell me how you feel,” Paul said.

Oh. He’d thought they were hitting it off better than that. “Sure.”

“I’m kidding. I’m not ready to keep this façade up. Not when I’m interested in you.” Paul kissed him. “I like you, too, but I need to go. See you at the shop? I’ll be around tomorrow.”

“I’d love that.”

“Good.” Paul kissed him again. “Until tomorrow.”

“Until tomorrow.” He watched Paul leave. He and Paul needed to slow things down, but he liked their pacing and wanted more. He’d seen Paul in a new light and wasn’t ready to stop.

He could fall hard for this man.

Maybe he already had.

Chapter Six

Paul texted James the next day and apologized for not being able to visit him at the salon. He hated letting James down, but some disasters required handling in person.

Over the course of Monday and Tuesday, he helped to serve two eviction notices and met up with a couple who were six months behind in their rent. He appreciated their honesty and opted to give them another chance. He also helped set the wife up with a job in his office as a secretary.

He assessed a building for potential purchase as a set of apartments, then met with his bookkeeper to discuss James’ suggestion for the LGBTQ center. He knew nothing about running such a place, but the current facility in Norville was a ranch house on First Avenue. Once he talked with his bookkeeper about his ability to buy such a building, he met with the director of the current one, Tad Cummins, about upgrading.

“You really want to help?” Tad scrubbed his face with his hand. “How much community service do you have to complete? Or who are you trying to impress? We never get help simply from the kindness of someone’s heart. There’s always a catch.”

“Come again?” He sat at the table with Tad and couldn’t believe what he’d heard.

“No one volunteers to help me without wanting something in return or to help their own situation,” Tad said. “My kids are seen as trouble. They get kicked out of their own homes, abandoned by their parents and belittled. They’re brittle, fragile and tough, but a lot of them are one push away from going off. If you’re not for real, then don’t waste my time.”

“I’m not trying to impress anyone or looking for a tax write-off,” Paul said. “I was one of those kids and I’d like to help them.”

“You’re part of the community?” Tad narrowed his eyes. “I never would’ve guessed. Not that it’s mine to question. I’m sorry. That was uncalled for to say anything.”

“It’s all right. I expected you to be suspicious,” Paul said. “Most are. The truth is, I came out in college, but my mother caught me wearing her makeup when I was fourteen. She said she needed me to not be gay and to not touch her things. It hurt because she’d tell me I wasn’t the son she’d expected. She still isn’t happy with me. Doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah, it does.” Tad grasped Paul’s hand. “That’s not fair, but you’re here, so that helps.”

“It does.” He liked being able to talk about his past with someone who understood. Then again, James would understand. He just hadn’t told him yet. “When I was seventeen, I started my own business buying and selling property. I bought two houses at an auction and with a credit card. Sad, really, but I maintained them and

when I rented one out, I used the other as a refuge until I rented it, too. I still own them and I like helping people, so it's a good fit. As for the center and helping you, that was my boyfriend's idea, but it's a great one. Do you know James Mason?"

"I do." Tad chuckled. "He gives the kids free haircuts and teaches them how to use product. He's a good man and helps me a lot. Does he still have the dog?"

"Doob?"

"That's the one." Tad brightened. "So you're serious?"

"If I can help one kid have a safe place to go, then I'll be happy."

"Do you have building suggestions?" Tad asked.

"I thought I'd discuss that with you first. You know your needs and probably have a list of places you'd like to try to go," Paul said. "I'm more in tune with finances, but if you give me a few suggestions, we can see what fits. This is your shelter to run."

Tad rapped his knuckles on the table. "Youareserious."

"I am." He wouldn't have gone to this much trouble if he weren't.

"We looked at properties two years ago. We'd been in the basement of the old St. Mark's church, but the owner didn't want riff-raff hanging around." Tad sighed. "He turned it into an apartment building."

"I know. I tried to buy it for that reason, too. I got beat out, but I ended up buying the theater instead, so it worked out." Paul smiled and laced his fingers together. "I got James in the deal."

“Sounds like.” Tad picked at his ring. “So, after we got kicked out, we moved the shelter here because I own this house. It’s way too small, but it works.”

“Then what would be better?”

“I’ve looked at one of the old Victorians on Nesper Street. Those houses have plenty of rooms, some yard space for cars and access to the main road. A couple have been for sale for a while so they might be reduced in price. The kids can do the simple painting and refurb stuff if that’s needed. They’re willing to work. The last time we looked, one of the ones that already sold was too expensive and the other was cheaper, but falling apart.” Tad shook his head. “If you can get us into 1400 Nesper, that would be great. It’s still a bit expensive, but it’s in the best condition of what’s available.”

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He checked the property on his phone. The house was indeed for sale and not too costly, but it would need some repairs. “Will the residents also be tasked with upkeep?”

“They will. That’s part of the deal. You carry your weight here.”

Nice. “Do you have counselors that come in?” He could’ve used one when he’d first broken out on his own.

“I do, but I’d like to have someone available on a more regular basis. At the Nesper Street house, it’d be possible,” Tad said. “It’d be a blessing, too.”

“Let me see what I can come up with.” He could afford the property and he’d turn it over to the shelter to be run. The tax write-off would be sweet, but he wanted to save other at-risk LGBTQ kids, too.

“Thank you,” Tad said. “You’re a good man.”

“I’ve seen a lot, but I wouldn’t say I’m that great.” He left the table. “I’ll be in touch.”

“I hope you are.” Tad walked Paul to the front door. “This town isn’t bad, but the kids who end up here feel like they don’t belong. They’re in a bad way and need someone to say it’ll be all right. Some of them have lived on the streets and others end up working the streets. I want to help them see they’re worthy and wonderful. They are an asset. Plus, a bigger place would help me get them better and discreet health care.”

“They’re afraid?”

“Some are. It’s a lot to take in and it’s embarrassing to admit they’ve got a problem or need to talk to someone. We all struggle and I hope to make it a little less of one.” Tad shrugged. “I’m trying.”

“Then I’ll do my best for you.” He left the shelter and called his bookkeeper again. If he could get a deal going today, then he would. He contacted the real estate agent handling the house to see if he could view the property that day.

Why wait?

* * * *

Paul returned to his condo and changed. He didn’t want to wear his suit any longer. He’d been a businessman for long enough today.

He’d gone through the Nesper Street house and felt confident about purchasing it for the LGBTQ center. He liked what he’d seen and believed the elbow grease needed to get the house ready for move-in day wouldn’t be much. All they had to do was get the paperwork rolling and the offer accepted.

Right now, he needed to go for a run. Time to work off some excess energy. He locked the condo, then tucked both his key and phone into his armband case. He positioned his earbuds, then turned on his music and went through his battery of stretches.

Ten minutes later, he set off for his run. His muscles ached but he loved running. The fresh air, being alone with his thoughts and burning calories were good things. He should’ve texted James, though, before he left. Too late to contact him now. Unfortunately, he’d been busy. He liked spending time with James, but he needed to

be with someone who could handle the intensity of his job and being left alone a lot.

He believed James would understand.

Being with a businessman required patience and passion. James was so much like him. They should be able to make it.

He jogged to the salon. The marquee was lit and flashing. He slowed, then turned his music off before heading inside. If nothing else, the sign drew attention.

James stood at the reception stand. “Hi. Look at you.”

“Hi.” He crossed to James and kissed him. They had to make this look good, right? Plus, he liked kissing James. He didn’t need to fake anything. “How’s things? Where’s Doob?”

“He’s over here. Doob.” He gestured to the furry dog bed. “Your buddy’s here.”

Doob jumped to his feet and rushed over to Paul. He wagged his tail as he collided with Paul’s legs.

“Hi, bud.” He petted the dog. “Good day?”

“He’s had a great day. Mine’s been decent. I’ve been busy.” James closed the appointment book. “I hired a new stylist today and got a request for a friend of mine, Charlie, to get him a date.”

“Will you?” He hoped not with James.

“I will. He’s a good guy.”

“With you?” Hereallyhoped not.

“No.” James smiled. “I set him up with a fellow named Mack. They’re both into comic books and cosplay. They should hit it off.”

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“Good.” He wasn’t sure he wanted to risk his relationship with James. “Are you busy tonight?”

“I am. I have the chamber of commerce meeting at seven.” James groaned. “It’s a necessary evil. A few people on the board insist on running everything and don’t really know what they’re doing. They can be too pushy and brusque for their own good, but I like the support of the group and being part of the community this way. They work with us on advertising, so that helps, too.”

“Business can be tricky.” He rested his hands on his hips. “Why don’t you stop by the condo when it’s over?”

“It’ll be nine before it concludes.”

“I won’t be asleep.” He bridged the gap between them. “Maybe you could stay over.”

James’ eyes flashed. “Oh?”

“Why not?”

James nodded once. “Might be nice.”

He hoped it’d be more than nice. “Could be pretty hot.”

“Yes, it could.” James slid his hand over Paul’s sweaty chest. “I think I’ll drop Doob off before I go to the meeting.”

“Bring him to the condo. I’ll watch him.”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“Not a bit.” Paul scrawled his address on the first appointment book page. “I’ll be waiting.”

“I’ll bring him over around six-thirty.”

“I hope you do.” He kissed James again. “See you?”

“You will.” James winked. “I can’t wait.”

“Me either.” He left the salon and resumed his run. He had an extra spring in his step. He looked forward to seeing James and spend the evening together. James made him happy.

He finished his run and returned home. After rehydrating, he showered, then dressed in a simple concert T-shirt and jeans. He’d planned on taking James to a club the next night, but what if they had a nice evening in?

He could decorate the patio and they could share a bottle of wine while they danced or talked.

He liked that idea.

He stared at himself in the mirror. Why was he going with a barefaced look when he could be his true self? James seemed to like him dolled up. Besides, if he wanted James to fall for him truly, he needed to be his authentic self. That was when he felt the most like himself.

He applied the concealer and worked his magic with the powder and contouring brushes. He added shadow to enhance his eyes, then donned liner and mascara. He worked with his brows and added a bit of glitter to the upper swell of his brow line.

When he stepped back, he admired his work. Not too bad.

He smiled at himself, then filled his glass of water in the sink. He carried the glass to the living room and debated what to do while he waited for James to arrive. He couldn't wait for time with the dog and his man. He hadn't had a dog in years and wanted one.

As he waited and wandered around the living room, he flipped through the emails on his phone. He noticed the correspondence concerning the property considered for the LGBTQ center. The bid had been given to the seller. Now it was a waiting game. The offer was lower than the asking price, but it was the first offer in six weeks. They might not accept, but they also might be interested in moving the property and go along with the offer. He could pay cash, which helped and was eager to get the project moving forward.

He scrolled through the rest of his emails. He didn't have anything too pressing, which helped. He wanted to be able to enjoy his evening with James.

At six-thirty, he spotted James' car in the driveway. It wasn't hard to see the car—James was the only person he knew who drove a roadster. His heart skipped a beat. God, he was acting like a teenager seeing his crush. But he didn't care. He wanted to make the right impression.

James and Doob walked up to the front door.

"Hi." He opened the screen door for them. "Hi, Doob."

Doob surged in front of James and entered first. James grinned. “He’s excited.”

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“Well yeah. It’s new.” He helped James with the grocery bag. “What’s this?”

“His toys.” James unclicked the leash. “He’s good, but don’t let him out without a leash unless you’re in a fenced yard. He’ll listen to me, but I hope he listens to you. He can be a pistol.”

“My backyard is fenced. Unless he’s a jumper, he should be fine. I mean, it’s a six-foot-tall fence.”

James sighed and nodded once. “He’s not. He is a sleeper, though, and he’s been gassy today.”

“Well, he’s going to be excited for you to come back.” Paul dumped the toys onto the floor. “I got treats.”

“You do?”

“A client came to my office, heard your dog, thought it was mine and brought treats.” He shrugged. “They thought they were helping.”

“That’s nice. Confusing, but nice and he loves treats. If you feed him, he’ll love you forever.” James lingered in the doorway. “I don’t want to go to this meeting.”

“I bet you don’t, but in no time it’ll be over.” He wanted James to love him forever. Was that too much to ask? He loved the dog. That had to be a good start. He embraced James. “It’ll be quick, I bet.”

“I hope so.” James nuzzled Paul’s cheek. “You look so sexy. I can’t wait to see you in a few hours.”

“Hopefully less.” He wasn’t sure he could make it that long.

“Yes.” James let go, then hugged Doob. “Be good.”

Doob snorted, then strolled over to the couch where he made himself comfortable.

“I think he’s happy. He’ll be snoring and tooting soon.” James shook his head. “I hope you don’t mind dog fur on your furniture.”

“Not a bit.” Paul grasped James’ hand. “See you?”

“Yes.” James lingered another moment, then left.

Paul closed the door, but moved to the window to watch James leave. A piece of his heart went with him. He turned his attention to Doob. “Want to watch television? I’m dying to catch a ballgame.”

He settled with Doob on the sofa. The dog cuddled right up to him, then started snoring. So much for being a pistol. All he needed to do now was start making noise from the other end.

Paul stroked the dog’s fur and turned on the television. He switched to a baseball game. He didn’t care who was playing as long as the matchup was even. He petted Doob as the game proceeded. He should see if there was a race streaming anywhere after the game concluded in case the contest ended before James returned.

He settled against the sofa and his eyes grew heavy. Scratching the dog behind the ears soothed him. He hadn’t thought he was sleepy until now.

His phone buzzed and he retrieved the device. When he looked at the time, he realized half an hour had blown by. Shit. He didn't think he'd been sleeping, but maybe he had. He checked the notification—texts from James.

Got started on time, but already on a tangent. This could take a while.

He chuckled. He'd bet James was bored out of his mind. He typed out a reply.

Imagine me kissing you.

He sent the message and waited for James. Either he'd make him happy or annoy him. The phone pinged within seconds with a new message from James.

Now that's not fair. I want to be kissing you.

He forgot all about the game and focused on the conversation.

I want to unwrap you and taste every inch.

A few moments after he sent the message, James replied.

I want to be unwrapped.

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Christ, he couldn't get James back there soon enough.

A new text popped onto the screen. The second he saw the sender, his blood chilled. Henri, his ex-boyfriend. Damn it. Henri had walked out on him because he didn't like being ignored.

He swiped over to the message, despite wanting to delete it outright.

I want to come over. I miss you. You've been hiding.

Fuck. He didn't want to see Henri ever again. He deleted the message, then switched back to his conversation with James.

I want you on your knees. Want you tasting me. Want to feel your mouth on me, then I want to return the favor.

He sent the message and shifted in his seat. Let James chew on that.

James replied in a few moments.

Yes. All of it, yes.

At the same time, another message from Henri showed up.

I miss you. You're home?

He swiped to dismiss the message, then decided he'd better answer. If he kept

ignoring Henri, he'd get texts all night.

Just stop. Not interested. Please stop.

He sent the message and waited for a reply from James. He couldn't wait for James to finish the damn meeting so they could test out his bed and fuck until they couldn't take it any longer.

Chapter Seven

James stared at the message. It must've been sent to the wrong person. Why else would Paul tell him to stop? Was he going too far? Couldn't be. Paul had started the naughty texts. He barely paid attention to the rest of the meeting and almost missed the vote on additional advertising. He wanted to get in on the full-page spread in the newspaper and if he didn't vote yes, then he'd be left out.

Once the meeting concluded, James gathered his things and tried to ignore the uneasy feeling racing along his spine. He couldn't wait to get the hell out of there and get some answers. Okay, sure, he and Paul claimed they weren't going to have strings. But after their dinner together, it felt like they were an actual couple. Maybe he'd been put on the back burner for the last two days. It happened. People got busy.

But what if something had changed Paul's mind? What if he realized he wasn't ready for strings and every other entanglement? He'd retrieve his dog and go home. If Paul had changed his mind, then all right, but let him get his dog first.

He left the meeting and drove straight to Paul's. His thoughts raced as he drove, but he refused to get overworked. If he did, he risked getting into an accident and he didn't want that. He loved his car too much.

He parked and debated leaving the engine running. No, he couldn't be rash. First, he

had to give Paul a chance to explain, then he'd walk out with Doob.

James marched up to the door and knocked.

"Come in," Paul called. He met James at the door. "Hi, sexy."

"Hi?" He barged past Paul and over to the sofa. He hated to bother Doob when he looked so comfortable. "Doob, we're going."

"What? Why?" Paul closed the door. "Where are you going? Is everything okay?"

"Fine." He picked up the leash. "You said you weren't interested. Please stop." He trembled with frustration and anger.

"Wait." Paul picked up his phone. "Fuck me sideways."

"No, thank you."

"Wait." Paul held up his phone. "I meant to text that to someone else."

"Oh? Someone you've got waiting in the wings? I know we said this was temporary and fake, but it felt like it was something more."

"It is." He grasped James' hands. "My ex-boyfriend texted me and I was trying to put him off. I must've replied to you with the message for him. Looks like I sent him the one for you."

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“Peachy.” He didn’t want to hear this.

“No, you don’t understand. Please listen to me.” Paul let go, but didn’t step back. “I must’ve sent him the message that said I want to fuck you until we both can’t walk.”

“So he’ll be on his way over.” He held tight to the leash. “Should we just go?”

“No. I want you to stay. Put your car in the garage and stick around. I don’t want to be with him. Don’t want to taste his kiss, don’t want to feel him beside me or have him in my bed. I want all those things with you.” Paul held out his hand. “Please stay?”

Part of James didn’t want to. He wanted to be angry and hurt over getting the wrong text. The rest of him couldn’t be mad. He’d accidentally sent texts to the wrong people and embarrassed himself a couple of times doing it. This was just an accident.

“Will you stick around? Doob and I are having a good time vegging out and I’d rather it be the three of us,” Paul said. “It won’t be the same without you.”

“I know.” He bowed his head. “It just...I got so angry and confused. Here we were texting hot stuff, then you sent that and it was like my world collapsed.”

“I understand. I’d have been hurt if I’d been in your shoes. I’m embarrassed I didn’t pay attention to who got what message.” Paul nodded to the door. “Pull your car in, then it’ll be safe overnight and we can enjoy ourselves.”

He handed over the leash, then pulled his keys from his pocket. “Okay.”

“Thank you.” Paul curled his fingers under James’ chin. “I won’t let you down again.”

“I know you won’t.” He left the living room in favor of his car and pulled into the garage. As the big door shut, a set of headlights sent white light under the door. He hustled into the condo. “Is that...?”

Paul nodded. “Henri. I really fucked up.” He strode to the front door. “I’m sorry, babe.”

Babe?He liked being called that. “Don’t worry about me. Just get rid of him.”

“You have no idea how much I want to.” Paul opened the front door, but kept the screen door shut.

Doob left the couch and the hairs on his back stood on end. James loved Doob’s innate meter for the decency of people. If Doob didn’t like them, then James didn’t want to know them. He knelt with the dog and petted at the back of his head to reassure him.

“My love. I knew you’d want me again.” Henri yanked on the door handle. “You wanted me here to make love. Why aren’t you letting me in?”

“I sent you the wrong text,” Paul said. “It was a mistake.”

“A mistake?” Henri snorted. “You said you wanted to fuck me.” He crinkled his nose. “Who is that? And what do you have on your face? What are you doing to yourself?”

What a nice guy.Then again, James had come charging into the condo with an attitude, so he wasn’t much better. Still, he hadn’t thought he was that bad.

“To answer your questions, that would be my boyfriend,” James said. “I haven’t done anything to my face that wasn’t already there. This is who I am. If you can’t accept that—which it doesn’t sound like you can—then fine. I’ve moved on and I don’t need you.”

James petted Doob and kept his mouth shut. This guy was so pushy. Mean, too. He didn’t know how Paul stood up to him, but then again, James considered himself too meek for his own good.

“You should at least invite me in for drinks,” Henri said. “For my trouble.”

“I didn’t get anything for drinks.” Paul shrugged. “I sent the wrong text to you and I don’t have the fancy stuff. Sorry.”

“You always have the fancy stuff.” Henri cocked his brow. “Is that why he’s with you? Because he’s here for your money? He spent it all, which is why you don’t have any?”

Christ. What a gem. James knew plenty of guys who dated other men for money, but he wasn’t one of them. There had to be a spark.

“Well?” Henri snorted. “I thought so. What’s he doing? Paying your rent? For your new apartment? Maybe for your car? He’ll dump you and want the cash value before he goes. Just mark my word.”

Paul exhaled and rested his hands on his hips. “Are you done?”

Henri could leave at any time. That’d make James happy. James stood and took his place beside Paul.

“Oh...so you picked a younger model,” Henri said. “Are you lying to him about your

age? He's forty-five."

James wasn't sure when Henri spoke to Paul and when he spoke to him, but he wasn't about to talk back. He shouldn't have to listen to this, but he also didn't want to give Henri the satisfaction of an answer.

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“We’ve done a lot more talking and other things, but I doubt you’d believe me.” Paul slipped his arm around James. “Are you done?” he asked Henri.

“Just know this man is selfish, brash, pushy, brusque and demanding. He’ll treat you well for now, but he’ll treat you like shit when the next hot thing comes along,” Henri snapped. “He bores easily and he’s got a small dick.”

“Henri, really.” Paul shut the door, stopping any further conversation.

“Nice guy.” James blew out the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “I’m glad I pulled my car in.”

“He wouldn’t wreck it, but it’s better to be safe than sorry,” Paul said. “I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“You did say not to apologize for something you can’t control,” James said. He slid both arms around Paul. “I’m sorry I got so upset with you.”

“If I’d have received that text, I’d have been upset, too.” Paul rested his forehead on James’ and brushed his nose along the bridge of James’ nose. “I’m glad you came over.”

“I did have to retrieve my dog.” He swayed with Paul. “And I did want to see you.”

“Yeah?” Paul caressed James’ ass. “Hungry?”

“Not really.” He tipped his head and kissed Paul. The second he tasted him, his world

righted. He didn't need food—he needed Paul.

Paul squeezed James' ass. He held him closer and grinded on him.

Blood rushed to James' dick. His desire grew and he craved more. He shoved his hands under Paul's shirt. The feel of Paul's hard body and soft skin frayed James' nerves. He opened to Paul and sucked on his tongue. Paul tasted wonderful. No, perfect. Decadent. He bumped noses with him a couple of times, but also caressed Paul's nipples. God, the man was so hard and delightful.

Paul wrenched his mouth free. He opened the front of James' shirt, then dropped to his knees. He slid his hands up over James' chest. At the same time, he licked a circle around James' navel.

James groaned. Heat engulfed him. He couldn't think of anything else except how this made him feel. He slid his fingers into Paul's hair. "Yes."

Paul said nothing and opened James' pants. He shoved the denim and briefs down James' legs, exposing him.

His cock bobbed in front of Paul. A groan bubbled in his throat and rumbled in his chest. He loved how Paul nuzzled and teased him without actually taking him in. Such a naughty man and so delicious, too. "Paul."

Paul still said nothing. Instead, he stroked James. While he did, he fondled James' sac.

A moan vibrated in James. He plucked his own nipple with his free hand and rocked his hips. He needed to be fucked. Paul glanced up at him and grinned. Passion filled his eyes. He opened his mouth.

“Yes,” James said. “Take me in.” He inched forward again. “Oh God.”

Paul kept his gaze on James. He swallowed him deep and flattened his tongue along James’ shaft.

The sensation of being inside Paul twisted his senses inside out. He shivered.

Paul bobbed his head. He buried his nose in James’ curls. When Paul groaned, the vibration ran straight through James.

James petted Paul’s hair. He loved being blown. Loved being treasured, too. He undulated into Paul, slowly fucking his mouth. He wanted this moment to last, despite the lust rushing through his veins.

Paul hummed and vibrated him again.

“Paul.” He wanted to say something more intelligent, but the words wouldn’t come. All he could do was feel. He trembled as Paul kept bobbing his head. Paul nudged him right to the edge.

Paul eased one hand up to James’ chest. He played with James’ nipple while he fondled his balls and sucked on his shaft.

The sensations were too much. James curled forward. “I need to come.” He tugged on Paul’s hair. “Fuck.”

Paul let go with a pop and sat back on his heels.

James snapped his attention to Paul. “Wha...” He stared at Paul. “You’re evil.” He wasn’t going to let James come. Well, hell.

“I can’t let you finish when I’d rather be inside you when you do.” Paul helped James out of his wadded-up clothing.

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James removed his shirt, then followed Paul to the bedroom. His cock bobbed and his skin tingled with need.

Still, a thought occurred to him. "I should let Doob out."

"You should." Paul offered James a black silk robe. "I should've thought of it, too."

He shrugged. "Doob?"

The dog left the sofa and trotted to the back door. Paul opened the sliding door and switched on the light.

Although James would've never walked outside at his apartment in nothing more than a robe, here he could do it without issue. He strode outside to watch Doob. Much like everything else with Paul, this was easy and comfortable. It felt right.

Once Doob finished his business, he came in and Paul locked the door.

"I should be irked with you for denying me my climax, but I did it to myself," James said. "I forgot about my dog."

"It happens." Paul tugged him to the bedroom. "Stretch out. I want to look at you."

James dropped the robe and crawled onto the bed. "Do I measure up?"

"You do." Paul removed his T-shirt, then stripped out of his jeans. He stood tall before James and flexed.

James propped himself on his elbows. “My God.” Paul was too perfect for his own good. He was one fantastic, toned body, taut skin and just enough hair to be sexy.

Paul stroked his dick. “You seem pleased.”

“I am.” James splayed his legs. He caressed his dick, then balls. “Want me?”

“I do.” Paul crawled onto the bed and settled on top of James. His cock thrummed against James’ and his warmth spread through James. He kissed him, sucking on James’ tongue.

James kissed him back with gusto. The intensity and passion within him came rushing back. He loved the feel of dick on dick. He propped himself on one elbow and threaded the other one around Paul’s torso.

Paul nudged James fully onto his back and broke the kiss. “Relax.”

He wished he could. All he wanted to do was experience Paul. He wriggled beneath him. “Paul.”

“I’m here.” Paul scooted back on his heels and trailed his fingers down James’ body. “I want to be inside you.”

“Do it.” He needed Paul right now and couldn’t wait much longer.

“Soon.” Paul left the bed long enough to retrieve a condom from the dresser. He also held up a bottle of lube. “Can’t forget these.”

“No.”

Paul stretched out on top of him again and kissed him.

James roved his hands all over Paul's body, learning the planes of him. He slid his palm to Paul's ass.

"Christ yes." Paul sucked on James' neck.

James groaned again. He could stay right here forever. His brain buzzed and his nerve endings tingled. He grinded on Paul, loving the friction.

Paul stroked James' thigh, then kissed his way down James' chest to his navel. He pushed James' knees up, exposing his hole.

James whimpered. "Yes." He petted Paul's head. "More."

"Uh-huh." Paul nibbled down James' dick. At the same time, he fondled James' balls.

James panted. He held on to his knees and tried to watch Paul. Nothing else mattered—just Paul.

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Paul bobbed his head, licking and sucking on James' shaft. He buried his nose in James' curls again and caressed James' hole.

Electricity shot through James' body. "Fuck me." He'd never felt need this deep before. Then again, he'd never had a man so hot and desirable wanting him, either. He loved the swell of Paul's ass, the way he wore the liner and brought out his eyes, the wisp of hair between his pecs and the way he kissed. Mostly, he liked the way Paul cared.

Paul continued bobbing his head. He popped the cap on the bottle of lube, then dribbled the clear fluid over James' hole.

James shivered. Soon, he'd get what he wanted—Paul inside him. He shuddered, teetering on the edge. His need overwhelmed him.

Paul pushed one finger into James. "Breathe. Relax and let me in."

He tried. Dear God, he tried. He bore down on Paul and rode his finger. "Fuck." His muscles tensed and his mouth watered. He wanted to return the favor and blow Paul, too.

"Good boy." Paul resumed bobbing his head. He pumped his finger in time with his licks. Within a few moments, he added more lube and another digit, stretching James.

The burn surged through him, but he didn't care. He cried out. "Paul." He panted and grinded as he adjusted to Paul. He bucked and writhed. No matter what he did, he couldn't find relief. He caressed Paul's hair. "I...love...fuck."

Paul chuckled. He stopped blowing James, but continued to pump his fingers. He didn't let up and instead, increased his pace. Fire lit in his eyes. He met James' gaze. "Ready for me?"

"Yes." He couldn't think straight at all. His mind seemed to melt as desire washed over him. "Please?"

Paul withdrew his fingers slowly. He dribbled more lube over James' hole, then stood beside the bed. Without tearing his gaze from James, Paul ripped open the condom wrapper. As he sheathed himself, he smiled. "I've been wanting to do this since I met you."

"Fuck me?"

"Yes." Paul lubed his cock and stroked himself.

James shuddered. He couldn't wait for Paul to give him what he wanted. His entire being begged for Paul. "Please?" He didn't mind a little begging. He loved dirty talk, too. He loved being used this way and needed Paul even more. "Paul."

Paul stroked his cock. "Masturbate yourself while I fuck you. I want you to come apart when I do."

He'd been so close all this time. God. The second he touched himself, he'd combust. James allowed Paul to tug him to the edge of the bed and fold him in half.

Once Paul lined up his dick with James' hole, he pushed into him.

James groaned. His ass burned and he'd never been so stretched this way, but he wouldn't change a thing. As Paul moved within him, he exhaled and bore down on him again. When Paul picked up speed, he met Paul thrust for thrust. He basked in

the delight of being filled. At the same time, he wrapped his hand around his own cock and stroked.

The combination of his fingers on his body and Paul within him turned his senses inside out. He groaned again as Paul's fingers bit into his hips. The orgasm bubbled within him and each thrust pushed him closer to the edge.

Paul yanked on James' torso, pulling him tight to his own body. He slammed into James.

The room spun and James embraced the orgasm. He cried out and cum spurted onto his abs and chest. The hot seed seared him to his core.

Paul growled. "That's fucking hot." He pumped faster until he groaned and surged deep into James. His cock thrummed within James, then he collapsed on top of James. He smeared cum between them, almost as if he'd sealed them together. He kissed James hard. When he rested his forehead on James', his breath warmed James' cheeks.

James loved this moment. He wanted to stay right here, too, and say something to break the silence, but what? Nothing seemed worthy or intelligent. He listened to the cadence of their breathing and the beat of his own pulse. Things had changed between them. Nothing would be fake after this.

Nothing.

He'd allowed this man to climb behind his defenses and implant himself in his heart. He didn't know Paul had done this all so easily. James liked to think he was a smart man and cautious. But the second he'd allowed Paul to get close to him, he wanted to be with him.

Paul sighed and kissed James' neck. "Damn."

He agreed, even if he couldn't form the words. He'd made love before and thought he'd once found the right guy for his forever, but nothing compared to Paul. He didn't give a rip about the money or the property. Paul could be the working-class guy who swept the floor and James would've been happy. All he wanted to do was be with this man.

He lowered his legs and cuddled into Paul. "You've blown my mind." He closed his eyes as he came down from the orgasmic high.

"Likewise." Paul withdrew. He left the bed for a few moments, then the mattress dipped as he returned. He dragged a blanket over them, then sighed. "Tired?"

"A little." He opened his eyes. "You've worn me out, but I don't mind."

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“I bet not. I bet this was a lot better than your meeting, too.” Paul tucked him to his side. “Doob and I had a good time.”

“I bet you did. He loves to cuddle.” He glanced down at the foot of the bed, where Doob had joined them. He’d curled up between James’ feet like he would’ve at the apartment. “Doob’s happy.”

“I hope you are, too.”

“I am.” He threaded his arm around Paul’s chest and shifted enough to tangle his legs with Paul’s. “This is where I want to be.”

Paul kissed him. “Was the meeting okay? We never got a chance to discuss.”

“It was the usual. The same people wanting more attention for their businesses, like theirs were the only ones in town.” He shrugged. “We have plenty of insurance companies and I wouldn’t go to any of them besides my friend Arthur’s office. He’s never pushy and he’s not trying to get everyone to buy his partner’s artwork.”

“That’s good.” Paul kissed James’ temple. “Tonight, save for the few bumps, has been just about perfect.”

He couldn’t have agreed more.

Chapter Eight

Paul held James and delighted in the moment. He liked being part of a couple and

wanted to be needed. With James, he had that and so much more.

He caressed James' bare arm. "When did you realize you wanted to be a salon owner? Not everyone is interested in owning their business."

James chuckled softly. "When I cut my mother's hair better than what she got at the salon. She asked me to fix her haircut and I did. She liked what I did, so I chose to pursue it. I'd cut my own hair for a couple of years by then and even worked wonders on my sister's 'do." He shrugged, then drew circles around Paul's areola. "It's something I realized I could do well."

"Why did you dye your hair blue?" He liked the color and couldn't imagine it being any other hue.

"No reason other than I like the color blue." James grinned. "Plus, it works with my eyes."

"Yes, it does." Pink wouldn't have had the same pop.

"I forgot to tell you I called the vocational school," James said. "Thank you."

"Oh? How did it go?" And why hadn't he mentioned this before now?

"It went well. I guess they'd done other partnerships with other salons, but they wanted one that was LGBTQTIA oriented. I guess there are a lot more kids who want to style hair, but didn't think they fit in anywhere and were fading in the program," James said. "The second they got the chance to work with me, they wanted to start right away. In fact, I get to meet the first three students tomorrow."

"You're kidding! That's great." He kissed James. "I'm proud of you."

“Thanks, but it was your idea. I wouldn’t have thought of that alone.”

“But you followed through. That’s wonderful.”

“I get the first students tomorrow and they can’t cut hair or pose as stylists, but they get experience with the peripheral jobs—sweeping, receptionist duties, clean-up and making calls. When they graduate and have their license, I do have the option to hire them.”

“Great. You’ll have a more trustworthy crew this way and you might even be able to fill two salons with workers.” He traced the seam of James’ lips. “Might even be able to take time off, too.”

“One day.” James continued to trace Paul’s areola. “Did you get anywhere with the shelter purchase?”

“I’m waiting for the counteroffer, but I did put in a lowball one on the Victorian on Nesper. It’s one that Tad has been looking at,” he said. “The house he chose hasn’t had lots of offers or even looks, so I don’t know what’s the stall.”

“Maybe the owner is on vacation?” James asked.

“Could be.” He hadn’t considered that. The people he dealt with tended to want to get deals done as soon as possible. Taking time usually meant the deal wouldn’t work. “I’m glad you suggested I start the deal, though. I like Tad. He seems like a good guy and this will be something that helps the community.”

“It will and he is. I give the kids at the shelter haircuts and help them understand how to take care of their hair. Some of them have been on the streets so long they don’t remember how or they’re in such a state that a good washing isn’t the only thing they need.” He shook his head. “One poor young man was living under a bridge and

covered in fleas. He hadn't washed his hair in a month and wasn't sure where to go to take a shower."

"That's terrible."

"He was scared," James said. "Most of them think they're alone and unwanted, so they want to belong but aren't sure how to ask. I'm glad they have a place to go, even if it's too small, and I hope they get the bigger place soon."

“Me too.” He really wanted this deal to work.

“When I came out, my mother wasn’t a fan, but she came around. I was lucky. She accepted me—after her initial shock—and she loved me,” James said. “When I was a kid and figuring myself out, I had this dream that this wonderful person would come into my life and rescue me. This person—male or female—would understand and love me. My quirks wouldn’t be bad.”

“They’re not.”

“No, but it takes a strong person to be this understanding.”

“Am I on the list to be that guy?”

“You are.”

“Good.”

James shifted on the bed. “I should take my makeup off before I sleep in it and wreck my skin.”

“I should remove mine, too.” Paul left the bed with him and headed into the bathroom. “I have special water that keeps the skin cleaner.”

“Nice.” James stood with him at the sink. He and Paul took turns washing off the makeup.

Paul tried not to stare at James, but he'd never seen him without his makeup. He was sexy with the makeup and beautiful without it, too.

"What?" James held on to the edge of the counter. "You had my dick in your mouth and seen me naked, so it's not like you can't believe what you're seeing."

"I sort of can't." It wasn't the right thing to say, but he couldn't think of something better.

"Jesus." James turned away from him and left the room.

"Wait." He turned off the light and followed James to the bed. "Don't get defensive. I'm not trying to hurt you. Far from it."

"Then what?"

"I've never seen you barefaced." He sat on the edge of the bed and tugged James onto his lap. "You never let anyone see you this way."

"Duke calls it my shield."

"Duke?" He didn't recognize that name.

"A friend. He's engaged now."

"Ah." He nodded once and stroked James' bare back. "I can see your face is your shield. You feel safe with it in place."

"I do."

"Why? You're handsome with and without it. I love when you go glam, but I like this

way, too.” He trailed his fingers along the upper swell of James’ ass. “You’re handsome.”

“I’m plain.”

“You might think so, but I disagree.”

James fidgeted. “I feel like I’m missing a piece of me without it.”

“I know. I feel the same way when I have to go out without mine,” Paul said. “But you’re comfortable in yours and I’m afraid of being judged in mine.”

“I feel like I’m being judged without it. I saw the look of shock on your face,” James said. “Your eyes got all big and surprised.”

“Well, yeah, but it’s because I know seeing you this way is a gift. You must really trust me if you’ll let me see you so vulnerable. I’m honored you chose me and let me in.”

James smoothed his hands over Paul’s chest. “It’s hard for me.”

“I know.”

James nodded. “But I’m safe with you.”

“You are.” He stood James on his feet, then guided him to the bed. “Stretch out and relax. You need to.”

“I do.” James crawled between the sheets with him and tucked into Paul’s side. “I need to leave early.”

“Why?” Not that he minded, but he was nosy.

“To open the salon and meet the students. My truck comes with our supplies every morning at ten, too,” James said. “I’m not trying to duck out on you, but I do have to go.”

“Understood.” He did. Sometimes work had to come first. “I’ll be up when I finish my paperwork and various dealings for the day.”

“Good.” James snuggled in close.

Doob settled on their feet again and within a few minutes, both he and James were asleep.

Paul smiled to himself. He’d made progress today—not just with James, but with himself. He’d opened up more with James than he’d done with other men.

He'd allowed James to see the real man and James hadn't shied away. Knowing he'd been so bare freaked Paul out, but it also gave him confidence.

James was one in a million.

* * * *

Paul woke the next morning to an empty bed. He should've known this would happen. James had told him as much. James had had to go and when Paul looked at the clock, he sighed. It was almost ten in the morning. No wonder James wasn't there.

Paul left the bed and padded nude to the shower. He turned on the water. While steam billowed from the open stall, he rubbed his face.

He hated feeling so old, but he'd been up late with James. He had the right to sleep. Still, he wished he'd been awake when James was gone.

He stepped into the shower and cleaned his body before shampooing his hair. As he soaped, he smiled to himself. He had a boyfriend. He had someone to love.

He rinsed, then turned off the water. He dried himself and he couldn't wait to see James. Hell, he couldn't wait to tell everyone he was happy.

He dressed in slacks and a button-down, then checked his phone. He had fifteen emails, four missed calls, a voicemail and three texts.

He checked the texts first—all from James.

Had to get to the salon.

Had a perfect night. Can't wait to see you.

See you.

Not the most eloquent texts, but they made his heart sing.

He typed a quick reply.

I understand. See you later.

Part of him wanted to add something else, but what? He was enamored with James, but was it love? Too soon to tell.

Way too soon.

He focused on the voicemails. There was one from the real estate agent for the Nesper house. His offer had been accepted. Hot damn. He needed to complete the paperwork, but soon the shelter would have a new location.

He called Tad.

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“Hello,” Tad said. “I didn’t expect to hear from you. How are you? What’s the damage?”

“I’m fantastic. No damage. Actually, I have news for you.”

“Oh?” Tad asked. “What? On the center?”

“You’re getting the Nesper Street house.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Nope. The seller accepted my offer. I’ll meet with the agent today to sign the papers.”

“You’re heaven sent.”

He laughed. No one had ever said that before. “Well, I don’t know about that. What I am is happy to help.”

“You’re wonderful.”

He continued to laugh. Most of the time when he did a deal, one side wasn’t happy. Getting thanks and praise was good, but odd. “I’ll let you know when I get the deed and the timeline for moving in so you can plan.”

“Yes,” Tad said. “This makes my day.”

“I’m glad. I need to handle some other paperwork, but stay tuned.”

“I will. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Talk later.” He waited for Tad to hang up, then whooped. Helping others felt good. He’d have to make a monetary donation to the center to help them with set-up.

He checked his emails and missed calls, carefully going through the various information. He couldn’t wait to tell James what had happened.

By noon, he’d met with his advisors and real estate agent. He visited the realty office to sign the papers. He’d take possession of the house in one month.

Perfect.

When he finished meeting with his electrician and plumber concerning various help and work tickets on his properties, he ventured up to the salon.

He should bring James food, shouldn’t he? The man didn’t eat enough. He stopped at the sub shop, picking up sandwiches for himself and James. He headed to the salon. As he walked up to the building, he remembered something his mother would say—he could find a hundred things to do on his way to eventually getting around to his main task.

She was right. He’d thought of other things he could do before he went into the salon. He always came up with tasks he should complete while trying to accomplish his current one.

He ventured into the salon. A young lady stood at the reception desk.

“Hi,” she said. “Welcome to Dye Hard Style. May I help you? Do you have an appointment?”

“I’m Paul Henderson. I help out here.” He stopped at the turnstile. “Is James busy?”

“Mr. Mason? He’s with a client,” she said. “I don’t see your name on my list. Just a moment.”

At least she was thorough. He appreciated her doing her job. Paul waited for his lover and the girl to return. A moment later, she rounded the counter with James in her wake. Doob surged up to Paul.

“Hi.” James nodded to the girl. “Casey, this is Paul. He does volunteer here. Doob knows him, as you can see.”

Paul knelt to pet Doob, who damn near knocked him over. “Hi, buddy,” Paul said. “You’re happy today.”

Doob licked his face and pushed him onto his rear end. Paul laughed and continued to pet the dog.

“See? He’s okay.” James nodded. “But I’m glad you checked. If you see him, he’s permitted here. He’s my boyfriend.”

“Oh. Okay.” She smiled. “That makes a difference.” She stuck out her hand. “I’m Casey.”

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Paul managed to stand, then shook hands with her. “Paul. Good to meet you. Are you in the cosmetology program at the vo-ed?”

“I’m in the business program.” She beamed. “I wanted to work with a business and see how it’s run. Mr. Mason was willing to let me work here and says I can have the receptionist position when I graduate in October.”

“Very good.” Paul met James’ gaze. “Smart move.” He moved through the turnstile.

“Thanks.” James patted his thigh for Doob. “Come on, Doob.”

James left Casey at the reception desk. “She’s a good egg. She’s competent with the system, cordial with the guests already, and she’s fit in well. I met her back at the LGBTQ center. She was there in the shelter portion with her girlfriend. She’s sweet and she’s doing a good job, even after only a couple of hours. We’ll see how she works out in a month, but I feel good about her being here.”

“Good.” He joined James and Doob in James’ office. “Do you have lots of clients today? If you have time for a break, I brought lunch.”

Doob sniffed the bag and nosed the handles open.

“Thank you.” James pushed the other chair up to his desk. “Be right back.”

He placed the sandwiches on the desk and neatened the piles of paperwork. If given the chance, he’d gladly help straighten the stacks. But only if James gave him the go-ahead.

James returned a moment later. “Okay. I needed to let Casey know I’m on break. I’ve got two new stylists and two students in addition to her working today. Lance and Ky are on probation, but they started this morning. They’re good and competent, but I’ll leave the door open to keep an eye on them.”

“Smart. You’re a smart guy.” He’d wanted the door closed so he and James could make out, but he understood. He kept his eye on his people, too.

“How’s things?” James opened his sandwich. “Thank you for this. It smells delicious.”

“I hoped you’d have time to eat and you’d be hungry.” He opened his own sandwich. “I bought the Nesper Street house and thought we could celebrate.”

“Congrats.” James beamed. “You’re fantastic.”

“I just told Tad and I could swear he was crying, but didn’t want me to hear it.”

“I bet he was. He’s tenderhearted.” James bit into his sandwich and groaned. “I didn’t realize how much I needed food and to sit down.”

“You deserve it.” He watched James devour his food. The guy did seem to need to eat. He was too thin for his own good. “Do you take many breaks?”

“No.” James continued to eat. “I spend too much time working. I need to keep stylists and not be so popular, but seventy-five percent of my stylists leave to start their own salons. My services are popular, so I’m always busy, which helps the bottom line, but not my sanity.”

“You need to balance yourself more.”

“I do.” James put the sandwich down. “I’m not good at delegating. I worked too hard to get Dye Hard off the ground and I don’t want to see it go down.”

“But you can’t keep it afloat on your own.”

“Pretty much.”

“Give yourself a break. You did a good job with the business.” He reached across the table and held James’ hand. “Trust yourself.”

“I know.”

“What do you want to do tonight? I said we’d go out, but I’m game to stay in,” Paul said. “You seem tired, so why don’t you come over and we’ll have dinner?”

“We were supposed to do that last night.” James grinned and his eyes shimmered. “But I’d like a quiet night.”

“Then it’s settled. Bring some kibble for Doob, a change of clothes, toothbrush, and we’ll have a date at my place.”

“I’d love that.”

“Good.” He squeezed James’ fingers. “I’ll clean up here, then meet you at the condo.”

“You bet.” James let go and finished his sandwich. He groaned a few more times. “This is really good.”

He couldn't argue. He ate his lunch in silence.

James balled the paper after he ate the last bite. "Oof. That was too much, but just right."

He chuckled and finished his own sandwich. "I want to take care of you."

James' eyes widened. "No one has ever said that."

"I'm not like anyone else."

"No, you're not." James collected the garbage and tossed it. "My next appointment is a color and blow out. It'll take a while and I need to prep for it or I'd stay here in the office a little longer."

"No problem. I'll get to sweeping up."

"Thank you." James kissed him. "You're one in a million."

"And I'm falling for you." He'd said it and had no regrets over saying the words out loud.

"Well, okay." James beamed. He didn't say the words in return, but Paul didn't mind. They needed time and he'd give James all he needed. He knew how he felt about James, even so soon. He'd fallen hard for James Mason.

James finished the last of his clients and cleaned up his area. His feet ached and so did his back, but he'd put in a solid day of work. He prided himself in keeping his customers happy, no matter how much it sometimes wore him down.

Ky approached him. "I'm leaving. Do you need anything?"

"No." He glanced over at Ky's station—clean, orderly and ready for the next day. "All done? Did you have any issues?" He hadn't noticed any, but he'd been busy, too.

"No, I had a good day." Ky nodded. "I like the clientele here. It's eclectic and exciting. You're pretty easy to work for, too. You don't hover over us and only ask for five percent. That's nothing. My last salon insisted I split my take fifty-fifty."

"Steep." He'd never had to do that, but some salons could be greedy. Maybe he didn't ask enough from his stylists.

"Yeah. I'm glad to be here. I don't feel like I'm being judged."

"You're not. I hope you stick around, because you do good work," James said. "I watched you today and I liked what I saw."

"Thought you might keep an eye on me." Ky chuckled. "I expected you to watch. It's your salon."

"Some stylists wouldn't agree with you." He'd had a few stylists who wanted him to back completely off.

"It's your salon. I'd like to open one, but not now." Ky folded his arms. "Who was that guy here earlier sweeping up?"

"Paul." They'd slept together and he believed Paul was his boyfriend, but things

could've changed since they'd been together.

"He's cute."

"He's my boyfriend," James said. "It's new."

"He comes here to clean up? Then you've got a good one—or he's in dire need of a job," Ky said.

"He has a job, but he likes to come here to help."

Ky nodded. "I'm glad I asked who he was before I made a move. I don't butt into relationships."

"Good. I hate the extra drama in my salon." Ky was handsome and younger than James. He'd be a catch for Paul or anyone else. But James hated lots of interpersonal drama.

"Anyway, I'm heading out. I'll see you tomorrow," Ky said. "Thank you."

"Have a good night." He had his first appointment the next day at ten-thirty. Some days it felt like he never got to leave the salon.

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Ky left him alone and Casey had gone a half an hour before. Only Lance remained at his station, finishing a haircut for an older lady. James didn't know the client, but that wasn't strange. He didn't always recognize everyone right away.

James finished cleaning up the salon and locked the front doors. When he returned, Lance turned the customer around to admire her new cut.

James now recognized her. Mrs. Trumbull. "Hi, Phelma," James said. "Lance made you lovely, doll."

"He did." She grinned. "He even complimented my hair."

"I told her I didn't believe she was seventy-five—not with this few grays. It's just not possible and it means she's a unicorn," Lance said. He removed the cape. "You're done, honey. James can take you at the register."

James stood at the counter to handle the transaction. Happy customers were returning customers. He brought up her account in the system and located her particular appointment. When she joined him at the counter, he turned the tablet around to see the charge. "That'll be thirty-five dollars."

"A bargain." She offered up her credit card. "I'm glad you hired him. I liked how you cut my hair, but you're always so busy." She patted his hand as he gave her back the card. "You're doing a good job."

"Thank you." He turned the tablet sideways for her signature. "I appreciate your business."

“This is the only place I buy my shampoo. Of course I’ll be back.” She scrawled her name on the screen. “I need an appointment in a month.”

James gestured to Lance. “New appointment.”

“Yes.” Lance joined them at the counter. “When for?”

“A month from now,” she said. “I’ve got a wedding to attend.”

James pulled up the scheduling calendar. “Would you like exactly one month from today?”

“I’m off on that day. It’s a Thursday. That’s the day I have my niece,” Lance said. “Will Friday work?”

James brought up the next day. “We have something at ten-thirty, but depending on when you’re supposed to be at the wedding, that might be too early. We have five, but that might be too late. Is it a morning or afternoon wedding? Or is it on Saturday? If Lance is willing, he could get you in at nine on Saturday.” He tended to overthink these things.

“Five on Friday is fine.” She pulled out her phone. “It’s Friday at eight. I don’t know why they’re waiting so long, but my granddaughter insisted on that time.” She shrugged. “I see the text. Thank you. Have a good night.”

“You keep those hairs beautiful,” Lance said. “See you soon, hon.”

“You will.” She waved, then left.

“She’s exciting,” Lance said. “I think I heard gossip about everyone in this town over the last forty-five minutes.”

“You probably did. She likes to talk.” James checked the receipts and noted he’d been given the proper percentage of Lance’s sales. Good. “How do you like it here?” He closed down the tablet. “Happy?”

“I am, thank you. This is a great atmosphere. Much better than the cut-rate salon I worked at before.” Lance nodded to his station. “Give me ten minutes to clean up and we can close.”

“I locked the front door and we don’t have any other appointments tonight, so you’re fine.” James stayed at the counter and sent the totals for the day to his laptop in the apartment. He printed the strip of receipts, then shut everything down. Once he turned off the main lights and switched to the security ones in the front of the salon, he joined Lance back at his station. “Need help?”

“Almost done, but thank you.” Lance swept the hairs up and deposited them in the bin. He wiped his counter. “Are you busy tonight?”

“Me? I’ll be heading to my boyfriend’s this evening. You?” James turned the lights off at the four stations. “Doing anything fun?”

“I was going to ask you out for drinks,” Lance said. “As friends.”

“Maybe another night.” He hadn’t gone out for drinks in forever. Not with friends or lovers. “Maybe all the stylists can get together and have a night out.”

“That’d be great.” Lance tossed his rag into the dirty towels bin. “I’m ready.”

“Great.” He bagged up the used towels and rags. He’d take them to the apartment and wash them later. He could probably bring them along to Paul’s, but he should ask first.

Lance gathered his phone, wallet and keys. “If you want to come out, I’ll be at the Jester with friends. See you.”

James waved. “Maybe next time.” He wasn’t in the mood to go to the Jester. He’d rather be with Paul.

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As Lance left, James locked up the rest of the way. He liked the quiet of the end of the workday. He checked the doors once more, then collected the receipts, his messenger bag and tablet, before stopping at the hamper to get the bag of washing. “Hey, Doob?”

With the dog in the lead, he slung both bags onto his shoulder, then ventured over to the Annex. He locked the door behind him. Doob surged ahead as James went upstairs to his apartment. He left the washing and his satchel, then packed an overnight bag. While he worked, he tossed Doob a chewy bone. He needed to look through his mail and shouldn’t leave the damp towels behind. He flipped through the envelopes, noting the couple of bills he needed to pay.

He’d work on the bills tomorrow, but the towels wouldn’t wait. Once he collected everything for the night at Paul’s, he texted his boyfriend.

Heading over soon. Mind if I bring stuff to wash? The towels will get moldy if I don’t.

While he waited for a reply, he walked his other bag to the car. When he returned to the apartment, his phone buzzed. A text from Paul.

Bring it over. I don’t mind helping. Plus, moldy doesn’t sound good.

He replied right away.

Thank you!

He tied up the laundry bag, then hooked the leash onto Doob. He tucked a bag of dog food beneath the knot in the laundry bag. “Ready, Doob?” He patted his pockets to ensure he had his keys, then picked up his satchel and the laundry bag before he grabbed the leash. He headed to the hallway and locked up before going down to his car. Doob settled on the front seat while James loaded the other bags into the trunk.

“Do you like Paul?” he asked the dog while he opened the garage door. “You seem to. I do.” He pulled out of the garage, then ensured the door closed before he drove off. “He seems to like us, too. I want to keep him around.”

Doob barked as James stopped at the end of the alley and clicked the dog’s harness into the seatbelt. He’d almost forgotten to engage the belt.

“I’ll take that as approval.” James drove off, leaving the Annex and salon behind. He motored over to Paul’s condo. His heart soared. He’d be with the one man who cared about him and that was a heady thought.

He pulled into the driveway alongside Paul’s condo. The garage door opened and Paul stood in the cavernous space. Paul gestured to him so James stopped in the garage and parked beside Paul’s car. He felt like he’d come home. Odd, since he didn’t live there, but he knew his heart belonged to Paul.

Paul closed the garage door, then joined him at the trunk end of his car. “Need help?”

“I could use some.” James let Doob out of the car first. “I hated bringing the laundry, but I didn’t want it to get gross.”

“No problem. The washer is right inside the door,” Paul said and carried the bag into the house. “Help yourself. I made tacos for dinner.”

“You’re too good to me.”

“You need to eat.” Paul helped carry the rest of the bags into the house. Doob surged in front and bounded to the living room with his leash still on. “It would appear he needs to run.”

“He could use a walk. I haven’t been able to take him in a while.” Guilt washed over him. “I’m a lousy dog parent this week.”

“You’ve had a lot to do and we all understand,” Paul said. “Let’s eat and we can take him around the neighborhood.”

“Deal.” He liked that idea. “Let me put the first load in the washer.”

“Sure. I’ll take him out back while you do.” Paul winked, then left.

“Thanks.” James dumped half of the bag into the washer, then pulled a couple towels out before adding the detergent and fabric softener. He’d run them through the sanitizer machine tomorrow.

As the washer started, he leaned on the machine. He’d never felt like this before—the strange combination of relief in having someone to lean on, but coupled with the weight of his day on his shoulders. He massaged his temples, then ventured through the condo to the back patio.

The moment he stepped outside, his breath caught in his throat. Paul had strung oversized clear outdoor lights across the ceiling of the porch. He’d strung twinkle lights along the railings and the table featured not only a white tablecloth, but two white taper candles. There was a single red rose in the vase in the middle of the table.

“Paul.” James’ breath clogged in his throat. “Wow.”

Paul sat on the steps and petted Doob. He glanced over at James. “Done already?I

wanted to do a grand unveiling.”

“I am.” He lingered in the doorway. “Paul.”

Paul stood. “Yes?”

Doob trotted up to James and sat at his feet. He swished his tail, but made no other noise.

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“I need to feed Doob,” James said. He stumbled over his words.

“I have a bowl on the floor for him,” Paul said. “What’s wrong? Don’t you like picnics?”

“I love them, but this is all too much.” And so wonderful. James located the bag of dog food. “You’re too good for me.”

Paul embraced him and stilled his hands. “Are you cheating on me?”

“Are we really together?”

“The last I knew we were,” Paul said. “I don’t sleep with anyone I’m not attracted to. I’m with you because you’re the one I want. No more faking.”

“Paul.” His knees weakened and he sagged into Paul.

“Did you cheat on me?” Paul stroked James’ back. “Just tell me.”

“No, I didn’t. No inclination to, either.” James clung to Paul. “It’s all been too much and I should feed Doob before he gets too restless.”

Paul let go as James dumped food into the bowl. When James sealed the bag and placed it on the counter, Paul slid his arms around him from behind. He rested his chin on James’ shoulder. “Was the day too much?”

“Everything’s been too much.”

Paul led him to the table. “Have a seat. It’ll be okay.”

He sank onto the chair. “Paul.”

“I love hearing you say my name, but I’m concerned. What’s wrong?” He reached across the table and held James’ hand. “Am I coming on too strong? I’m good at that.”

“No.” He sighed. He had to get a hold of himself. “It’s been a day, yeah. I gave up some control to the other stylists, meaning I’m not there on my own, like you saw. It’s good but it’s scary. I guess I’m more of a control freak than I thought.”

“It’ll get easier.”

“I know,” he said. It had to get easier, right? Paul had gone through this. He’d understand. Yet, James felt like he was so alone. Then there were the other things he had to deal with. “But then Ky asked if you were free because he wanted to ask you out and that got under my skin.”

“Wow.”

“Would you rather be with him?” He’d understand if that was the case. He’d be hurt, but he’d understand.

“No. I got the person I want.”

That helped, but it wasn’t enough. “Lance asked me out for drinks.”

“When it rains, it pours.”

“Yes.” He allowed himself to chuckle. “I turned him down.”

“I had no doubts.” Paul rubbed James’ hand. “A lot of things have changed and that bothers you, doesn’t it? The notion those two wanted to get with us isn’t the problem. You’re having a hard time with change.”

“Yes.” Maybe Paul did understand.

“You weren’t happy before but you knew what to expect and now it’s all different. Change drives you nuts.”

“Yes. Exactly.” James nodded. “I have a routine and it was safe.”

“And now? It’s not safe?”

“I have more to lose and it scares me.”

“I get that completely.” Paul smiled. “I want you and I want you to be happy. I hope it’s with me, but I understand if it’s not.”

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He stared at Paul. The words were right there. All he had to do was open up. “I started this relationship with the understanding that it wasn’t real and in these last few days, I realized I’m not good at faking it. I’m not good at lying, either. I’m not ready to move in together, but I’m ready to tell everyone we’re together. I’ve dreamed of being surprised just like this. Being in a relationship like this.” He waved his hand. “This is all romantic and perfect.”

“Then fuck Craig. This is us and it’s real and we’re happy.” Paul shrugged. “I’m on board.”

“Even through my fears and freakouts? Even with my dog being so pushy?”

“Even then.” Paul squeezed James’ fingers. “You’re safe here and I believe we’re a good team. You and I balance each other. Plus, you’re good in bed.”

“So are you.” He sighed. Paul was right. So many things had changed, but not in a bad way. He’d gotten things he wanted and his life was good. Stressful, but nothing he couldn’t handle. “Thanks.”

“For?”

“Talking me down and letting me vent.”

“Always.” Paul kissed James’ knuckles. “Eat. You can’t walk your dog if you’re hungry.”

“I can, but this smells delicious.” He let go and left the table long enough to fill the

bowl of water for Doob and check the bowl of food was full. While the dog ate, James joined Paul outside.

“Better?”

“Gotta feed the dog.” He smiled and relaxed. Things were happening fast, but they felt right. Being with Paul was easy and sweet. He liked the pacing and what could be their routine. He glanced into the condo to ensure Doob ate before filling his own plate.

“Is he good?” Paul asked. “I left the water out for him.”

“Thank you. I had to refill it. He’d drained it.” He sat across from Paul at the little table. He wanted to make small talk, but no words came to him. He simply ate in silence.

Paul fixed himself two tacos and ate. He said nothing, but did rub James’ foot under the table.

James loved the closeness between them.

Paul finished his first taco. “Do you normally do two miles with Doob? Or three?”

“Sometimes three, but most of the time only two.” He dabbed at his mouth. “We go as far as Doob wants.”

“I’m keen to go when you’re ready,” Paul said. “I should’ve run this morning, but I didn’t have time.”

“Business?” James at his other taco.

“Between the dealings for the center and the other rental property issues, yeah.” Paul picked at the fallen cheese. “I had a lot to keep straight.”

“I have enough trouble keeping the business with the salon under control, so I understand and applaud you for keeping yours in order.” He finished his other taco.

“It’s stressful, but that’s why I have my staff and bookkeepers to handle it. I always check their work, but I do trust them.” Paul picked up a piece of shell from his plate. “I admire you for doing most of this yourself. I need my team.”

“Thanks.” Sometimes owning the salon felt like a thankless job. “I need to go over my books tonight, but I don’t have the bandwidth. Maybe you could look at them with me when we get back?”

“I can.” Paul grinned. “Then we have sex.”

“Yes.” He ate the bits of hamburger and lettuce that had fallen out of his tacos. “I should check on Doob. He’s been rather quiet.”

Paul finished his dinner and carried the plates to the kitchen. While James collected the other plates, Paul loaded the dishwasher. James peeked into the living room where Doob had stretched out on the couch, like it was his own personal spot.

“He’s lounging.” James shook his head. “It’s like he lives here.”

“Hey, it’s a comfy couch.”

James returned to the patio and blew out the candles, then carried the platter into the kitchen to Paul. He helped Paul finish cleaning up. Once the leftovers were put away and the dishwasher started, plus everything else handled, James dried his hands on the towel.

Paul retrieved his shoes from the closet. “Let me get some socks.”

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“Sure.” He donned his own shoes, then clicked the leash onto Doob’s collar. The dog sprang into action, ready to go on the walk. He danced around James’ legs, catching him up in the leash.

Paul came back into the room and laughed. “He likes his walkies.” He sat on the bench and donned the socks, then his shoes. He picked up his keys and pocketed them. “Ready.”

“We are, too.” James allowed Doob out of the house first, then tugged on the leash to keep him in step beside him. Paul settled in on James’ right side.

James loved this. He had a partner. “Do you get to walk around the neighborhood a lot?”

“I do. I try to run here and head down to the paths at the park at least once a day. The distances are good for getting my heart rate up and working on my 5k pace.” Paul held James’ hand. “I bet you like walking with Doob.”

“I do. The walks are our adventures.” He nodded to the people working in their yard. This was the exact picturesque place he wanted to live in. But he was jumping the gun. He and Paul weren’t living together.

But they were together officially.

With Paul beside him, they walked most every street in the complex. Some of the condos were bigger and some smaller, but most looked a lot alike. Still, James rather liked the atmosphere of the area.

What he liked best was being with Paul in public. Everyone could see them and know he was happy. Paul was right. Fuck Craig. No more letting his ex have power.

He, Paul and Doob returned to the condo. Once in the dwelling, James unhooked the leash. Doob bounded through the living room.

“Ah, a happy pup.” Paul closed the main door after already closing the screen door. He removed his shoes and placed them on the mat. “We did three miles.”

“I bet.” He was tired and his feet ached. He hadn’t really felt the distance until he returned. Being with Paul made the long walk feel shorter. Now that he was back in the condo, he had no desire to work on his books. So the work needed to be done? He wasn’t in the mood.

“Want help with those figures?” Paul asked. He sat beside James. “Or are you just looking for someone to encourage you to get it done?”

“Encouragement would be nice.” He needed all the pushing he could get. “I’d rather be naked with you.”

“And dance with me on the patio?” Paul asked. “I didn’t string those lights out there and doll myself up for no reason.”

“You did that for me?” He’d never had anyone do anything so romantic. “I’m touched.”

“Good. I want to take care of you.” Paul winked. “Let’s get that stuff done so we can dance. I’ve got a playlist cued up and I hate dancing alone. I’ll even switch your laundry for you.”

“Thank you.” He couldn’t blame Paul for being persistent. He wasn’t a fan of dancing

alone, either. Besides, the faster he got his bookkeeping done, the sooner they could indulge in each other. “Let’s get my shit sorted out because I’m dying to dance with you.”

Chapter Ten

Paul turned on the playlist he’d programmed into the smart system. Music filtered through the condo and played softly on the patio speakers. When he’d bought the condo, he hadn’t thought he’d use the expensive sound system. Now, he appreciated having it.

He held his hand out to James. “Will you dance with me?”

“I’d love to.” James accepted his hand and joined him on the patio. He cuddled in Paul’s arms.

Within seconds, Paul had them swaying to the beat of the song. He pressed a kiss to James’ temple.

“This is perfect,” James said. “Like a movie.”

“Yeah.” He couldn’t have said it better himself.

“So romantic.” James tilted his head and grinned. “You’re spoiling me.”

“It’s not hard to do.” He rested his forehead on James’ and sighed. “I know we said this was fake, but I don’t want it.”

“What?” James froze. “Paul?”

“I mean, I don’t want fake. I want this to be real. You and me,” Paul said. “If you

want me.”

“I do.” James slid his hands into Paul’s back pockets. “Very much.”

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“Good. Then we’re us.” His heart sang. This was what he needed—James.

“I wanted a place to belong and I found it here,” James said. “I know it’s fast and we need time to keep figuring this out, but I want to try. I want to take that time.”

“I do, too.” He needed the precious days to fall deeper for James. He wasn’t ready for James and Doob to move in, but he couldn’t see his life without them.

James squeezed Paul’s ass. “I want you.”

“You do?” He kissed James. He wanted him, too.

James grinned. He tugged Paul closer and grinded on him.

Paul opened to him, taking the kiss deeper. He sucked on James’ tongue and basked in his taste. Blood rushed to his growing erection and his nerve endings buzzed. While he kissed James, he guided him into the condo. He broke the connection long enough to ensure Doob was inside with them, then shut the sliding door.

Paul walked James to the bedroom. Along the way, he caressed the planes of James’ chest. A rumble vibrated in his own throat. James was so perfect and sexy. So taut, too. He caressed his lover’s belly as he eased James’ shirt out of the way. As he traced the line of James’ abs, he shivered.

James groaned and collapsed on the bed. When he landed, he held Paul to his chest and his eyes widened.

“Hi there.” Paul resumed kissing him. He continued touching James and memorizing every inch of his body.

James raked his fingers along Paul’s back. “Hi.” He kissed Paul. “Make love to me.”

“I will.” He sat back on his heels and helped James out of his shirt. He curled over him, then nipped and kissed along James’ chest. He sucked one of James’ nipples into his mouth, then pinched the other.

“Yes.” James petted Paul’s head. “Feels good.” He rocked his hips. “More.”

Paul switched to James’ other nipple, then, instead of tweaking the one he’d licked, he slid his hand down to James’ waistband. He popped the button on his jeans, then eased his hand beneath the elastic of his underwear.

James pulled on Paul’s hair. He grinded against Paul’s hand and moaned.

Paul glanced up at James’ face while he continued to suck on his lover’s nipple. He loved the way James’ body came alive beneath his touch. The way his nipple beaded and he moaned when Paul caressed him.

Paul stroked James’ cock, needing him on the edge. He stroked faster and drew a groan from James.

“Fuck.” James let go of Paul’s head and balled his hands in the sheets. “Need you.”

He’d get him soon. He kissed his way down James’ body to his navel. He swirled his tongue around his lover’s belly button and pinched his nipple again.

“I need to be naked.” James shoved his pants and briefs down his legs until he stretched gloriously naked beneath him. A fine sheen of perspiration glittered on his

chest. Hunger filled his eyes.

“Love that.” Paul kissed James’ inner thigh and stroked his cock.

“More.” James grinded in Paul’s hand. “Oh God.”

Paul swallowed James to the root and buried his nose in James’ pubic hairs. This was the perfect moment. James tasted delicious and intoxicated him. He bobbed his head.

James threaded his fingers into Paul’s hair again and guided him. Paul loved every second. He toyed with James’ hole and fondled his sac.

“Oh God.” James squirmed. He bucked and writhed beneath Paul. “Paul.”

“Yes?” He stopped blowing James. “My love?” He’d taken a risk by referring to James that way, but he didn’t care.

“Need you.” James caressed Paul’s cheek. “So much.”

“I’m here.” He swatted James’ hip. “Roll onto your belly, then on your hands and knees. I want to see your ass.”

“Yes.” While James complied, Paul left the bed.

At the same time, Paul undressed. He left his clothes on the arm of the chair and made James wait for the ultimate prize. He wanted James right at the edge of coming apart and craving him. “Stroke yourself.” Paul retrieved lube and a condom from the dresser. “Show me you’re excited.”

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“I am.” James rocked his ass and stroked his dick.

Paul swatted James’ butt with the bottle. “Oh, fuck. That’s hot.” He tossed the rubber onto the bed. “Love it.”

James growled. He glanced over his shoulder. “More.”

Paul swatted him again, this time with his hand. “Yes?”

“I love it.” James widened his hips. “Fuck me.”

He settled behind James. He couldn’t wait to be inside his lover. While James caressed his cock and balls, Paul swatted him a third time. He opened the bottle of lube and dribbled the clear fluid over his lover’s ass. He loved the tight rosette of James’ hole. James had the perfect pucker. He caressed him.

“So pretty.” Paul worked lube into James’ hole. He eased one finger in and prepped James before pushing deeper. While he held on to James’ hip, he leaned over him and kissed James’ back.

“Oh, yeah...” James chuckled and bowed his head. “I love it.”

“There?” He curled his finger, stroking James’ prostate. He moved in and out, getting James ready.

“Yes, please?” James shivered.

Paul added more lube, then a second finger. He opened James more and pushed deeper. Power engulfed him and he worked his digits harder in and out of James, then swatted James' hip.

James grinded and writhed. He met Paul thrust for thrust. Feeling James' eagerness and the passion in his own veins was too much for Paul. He withdrew his fingers.

He donned the rubber and added more lube to James' hole. He lubed his dick, then lined himself up with James' ass. With one thrust, he pushed into James.

James moaned again. "I love that burn."

So did he. He held on to James' hips. Within seconds he worked into a steady rhythm, in and out. He felt complete when he pushed to the hilt into James. They were one body and one soul. He was home with James.

He'd never be the same after this. Never.

He'd fallen hard for James. His heart belonged to this man and he couldn't let go.

James groaned and shuddered. "Paul."

"Fuck." He swore he had lightning in his veins and power in his body. He growled and lost himself in the perfection of fucking James.

"Paul." James panted.

Perspiration shimmered on James' back and his muscles flexed. He shivered as he stroked himself.

"I can't hold back." James shuddered. "Oh fuck me."

“I am.” He slid one arm around James’ waist and swatted James’ hip for the last time.
“Come apart for me.”

James shuddered again and squeezed tight around Paul, holding him in deep. He tensed. His entire being seemed to vibrate as he came. His moan echoed in the room. He sagged beneath Paul, planting his shoulders on the bed.

The sheer delight of seeing James pushed Paul over the edge. He pistoned into James, then growled as he came deep within James.

The world seemed to slow around him. Nothing existed except this moment and James. Nothing else mattered. Paul slumped on top of James and exhaled. This was the perfect moment and they shared a quick, but perfect love with years of room to grow.

James was all his.

Nothing could be better.

Paul held on to James. He never wanted this moment to end. He’d found the man who made him tick, want to scream at times and be the best version of himself possible.

James groaned. “I love this, but I should probably switch that laundry over.”

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Paul chuckled. He should be upset that James was worried about the laundry and not basking in the afterglow of sex still. But he understood. James was like him, thinking about a hundred things at one time. “There’s a basket above the washer. Feel free to use it to stow your towels until you’re done.”

“Thanks.” James kissed Paul’s hand.

“You don’t have to thank me,” Paul said. “My stuff is all available to you.” He pulled out and left the bed long enough to ditch the condom. He checked on the dog, happy that Doob had found the pile of blankets he’d left on the floor for him. The dog looked up at him for a moment, then stretched and resumed sleeping.

Ah, dogs. He loved the way dogs went boneless when they slept. He brushed his teeth and removed his smeared makeup, then returned to bed.

A moment later, James carried the basket into the room. “I’ll fold it when everything’s done. Thanks.”

“Welcome, but I meant it. I have no problem sharing everything with you.” When James returned to bed, Paul moved the blanket and welcomed him into the warmth. “Come here. You need to rest.”

James cuddled up to him. “You take care of me. It’s almost like you’re in charge of me.”

“No, I see how you’re working yourself to death and I want you to give yourself the chance to rest. You’ll end up in a frazzle and if I can help you reduce some of the

strain, I will.”

“You’re too good to me.”

“You’re just right for me.” He liked having a partner. “Sleep.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice.” James sighed. A few moments later, he fell right asleep.

Paul waited long enough to ensure James had truly conked out, then left the bed. He donned a pair of shorts and headed out to the kitchen. He cleared the table the rest of the way outside and turned the lights off, then locked up properly. He put the last of the dishes in the dishwasher and turned it on before placing his phone on the charging pad.

The screen flashed and instinctively, he checked the notification—a text.

Who would be texting him at this hour? Could be a problem at one of his properties, but then he’d have heard the sound effect associated with his business lines. He tapped the icon to retrieve the message.

From Noel.

Christ. His stomach churned. His ex-boyfriend wanted him? What did he need?

Saw you own the Clayton Estates. Interested in a partnership? We were good once.

He deleted the message. He and Noel were hardly good at business together and even worse in bed. Noel didn’t understand how to have money and he’d gotten Paul into debt on their lone business venture together. Noel wanted to take, take, take and give absolutely nothing back.

Another message showed up, again from Noel. What was it with his exes returning to his life? He had what he wanted and didn't need the past to keep cropping up.

Are you in Norville? Stopping by your office today. Got a minute?

He wasn't in the mood for this. He deleted the second message without bothering to respond. He had better things to do. Besides, why was Noel texting him at this hour?

The man was probably drunk.

"Are you avoiding me?" James shuffled nude into the kitchen. "I snored, didn't I?"

"No, I forgot to charge my phone and wanted to start the dishwasher." He ensured the machine had started the cycle. "I put your towels in the dryer. The others are sitting on the dryer and waiting to go into the basket."

"Thanks." James enfolded him in his embrace. "You're a gem."

"I'm just a man." Sometimes he didn't feel good enough for James.

"Then, man, come to bed."

"Yes, sir." Ah, he'd managed to do his avoiding trick again... Damn it. But why was he acting this way? He liked being with James. Was there something missing? It didn't feel like it. Then what was the problem?

Things were going too well—that was the problem—and it was bound to crash soon. Nothing ever totally worked out for him.

"What's wrong?" James asked.

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“Just thinking.” He stroked James’ back. “How life throws us curve balls and how we handle them. I’m glad I decided to go this direction with you.”

“Me, too.” James walked them back to the bedroom. “I’ll still be here in the morning, so go to sleep. I hate sleeping alone.”

“I do, too.” He crawled into bed with James and tucked up to him. He appreciated James’ ability to talk him down, too. James understood what was wrong without saying anything and seemed to know how to make it better. He fell asleep in seconds, holding on to the man who held his heart.

* * * *

Paul woke to the scent of coffee in the air. He left the bed and dressed in a pair of shorts, then shuffled to the kitchen where James stood with a glass of juice.

“You made coffee.” He accepted the cup James offered him. “Thank you.”

“Thought you could use it.” James sipped the juice. “Doob had to go out so I let him and made you coffee.”

“You don’t drink it. Coffee.” He stood with James at the back door. “This is perfect, but if you don’t drink it, you don’t have to make any for me.”

“You like coffee.” James shrugged. “It wasn’t hard, but no, I don’t drink it.”

He slid his free arm around James. “Well, other than that, this is perfect.”

“What?”

“Having you here with me. With Doob. We’re a family,” Paul said.

“We are.” James sighed and leaned into Paul.

“I’ve never had a family. Not like this. I love you, James.”

James froze. “What?” He tipped his head and met Paul’s gaze. “You love me?”

“I do.” He knew his heart and he saw no reason to hold back the words.

“Even so fast?”

“Even so.”

“I don’t know what to say.” James stayed in his arms, but remained tense. “Wow.”

“I know. I don’t expect you to say anything. I threw something huge at you this way and it’s a lot to take in,” Paul said. He stared at James’ eyes. He loved the way the man’s eyes sparkled with and without the makeup. He was the sexiest thing Paul had ever seen.

“It is.” James toyed with the wisp of hair between Paul’s pecs. “I care about you. So much. I care and I want this to work. I’ve never felt this way about anyone else.”

“But?” He tipped his head. “What else?”

“But I’m scared to fall in love. I’m scared to admit I’m falling for you, too. I’m not ready to say those words.” James trembled slightly.

“I know.” He stilled James’ hand. “That’s okay. We have time to figure this out. I’m not rushing you.”

“I know.” James brushed his mouth across Paul’s, then nuzzled his cheek. “Give me time. I know how I feel and I want every second with you. I want the happy ending.”

“You’ve got whatever you want.” As long as he could make James happy, he was set.

“Thank you.”

Something buzzed and Paul recognized the noise—his phone. Jesus. Why couldn’t he have a sweet moment with James without someone else pushing in?

“Is that your phone?” James nipped at Paul’s throat. “Answer it. Might be business.”

“It could be.” But he doubted it. He let go of James and rounded the counter to pick up the phone.

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James let Doob in, then filled the bowl with food for the dog. While Doob happily munched on his kibble, James finished his juice.

Paul dragged his focus from his lover and forced himself to pay attention to his phone. He had three emails, a text and two voicemails. He checked the missed calls—both from Noel. Fuck. He'd have to get rid of his ex or just plain block him at this rate.

“Anything wrong?” James rinsed his glass, then left it in the sink.

“No.” He shook his head. “Just business.” He shouldn't lie. James deserved to know the truth and since he'd done nothing wrong, he shouldn't have to hide what was going on. “It's not business.”

James rested his hands on his hips. “Okay.”

“My ex has been texting me and he's left a couple voicemails. I haven't heard them yet, but he's trying to come back,” Paul said. “He knows I'm in the black and I'm doing well. He thinks he'll be able to have a slice of my good fortune.”

“One of those.” James smiled. “Do you love him?”

“No.” God, no. He'd never been in love with him.

“Then don't worry about it.” James tweaked Paul's nipple. “I'm not threatened. I know what I've got and what I want—you. I don't need your money or your prestige or whatever. I just want you and to keep falling for you.”

“That’s what I want, too.” Paul held him close and breathed him in. Life wasn’t perfect, far from it, but with James, he had everything he wanted. James was the one.

His one.

Chapter Eleven

Over the next month, James spent his days at the salon and his nights with Paul. He’d grown more comfortable with him and they’d shared plenty of dates in public. He loved being able to go out with the man he craved and let everyone know he and Paul were together. Paul didn’t wear his makeup only at home or when they went to the clubs, but all the time now. He’d relaxed his look as well. Where Paul had been buttoned-up and full-business before, he’d started wearing his collar loose and stopped wearing the tie. Sometimes he even wore jeans with his sport coat.

James loved the slight changes because it meant Paul was more comfortable in his own skin.

James settled into a good routine with Paul, too. He liked having someone to share his walks with and Doob appreciated going on so many walks. They ate dinner together and had become a team. He’d even been able to join Paul at the closing for the Nesper Street house and was able to be there when Paul signed over the house to the LGBTQ center. Tad and his team of young people had already started on the improvements. Most of the rooms had been painted and they’d even moved some furniture in. There had even been an article in the paper about the sale and new usage of the structure for the center. James hadn’t been in the photos, but he beamed as Paul stood with Tad and the young people at the transfer.

James applied his makeup and admired his reflection in the mirror. He’d made it to the salon on time for the last three weeks, and all because of Paul. He finished putting on his eyeliner. Life was good. He hadn’t been given any threats from Craig and he’d

been able to move forward with his life.

He joined Paul in the kitchen as Paul poured a cup of coffee. “You look fantastic,” Paul said. “A million bucks.”

“Thank you.” He’d allowed Ky to open the salon that morning, despite his misgivings and worries about losing control.

“When do you go in?” Paul sipped the coffee. “At ten?”

“Ten-fifteen.” He packed up his tablet, wallet and phone, then checked he’d left his keys with his messenger bag. “Are you staying home today?” He paused. “Or is this a workday?”

“A work-from-home day,” Paul said. “Why?”

“I’ve got to speak with the lady from the vocational school today. Would you be willing to keep Doob here? She’s afraid of him.” He hated saying that, but the lady hadn’t been fond of Doob hanging around during her first visit.

“Sure. We’ll have a guys’ day.” Paul rounded the island and put his coffee down. He enfolded James in his embrace. “What would you like for dinner tonight?”

“Surprise me.” He had no idea what he’d like. No, he’d prefer to get through the day first. “I should get going. Thanks for keeping him here.”

“James.” Paul kept him in his arms. “You don’t have to thank me.”

“I might not, but it’s good manners to thank you.” He kissed Paul hard. “Plus, you deserve that.”

“Thank you.”

James chuckled. “Now I’ve got you saying it.”

“You do.” Paul let go. “Have a good day. We’ll be here when you get home.”

“I know you will.”

“Love you.”

James hesitated. He wanted to say the words right back, but when he tried, they melted away. “I’m fond of you, too.”

Paul winked.

James collected his things and headed out to the garage. He packed the towels in the trunk, then left his bag on the passenger seat. He opened the garage door, then backed down the driveway. He left the condo, but most of his heart stayed with Doob and Paul.

He drove right to the salon and parked in the warehouse. He ensured the main door was shut, then carried the towels first to the salon. Once he had the towels put away, he retrieved his bag and locked his car.

Ky stood at his station in the middle of a haircut for a gentleman client. Ky nodded to James as he passed, but didn’t stop his work.

Lance dusted off his chair and arranged his tools on the counter of his station. He glanced over his shoulder. “Hi.”

“Good morning.” James carried his bag to his office, then locked everything but his phone up before returning to his own station. All he had to do was prep for his first client. “How did opening go this morning?”

“Well,” Ky said. “No problems. Casey showed up on time, so did Lance and I didn’t

accidentally set off the alarm.”

“Good.” He liked being able to trust them. He’d only let Ky open one day of the week for now, but it still helped.

Casey rushed up to him. “Mr. Mason?”

“Casey. How are you?” James asked. He shook out the cape and arranged it on the back of his chair in advance of his first client of the day arriving.

“I’m fine, but you have a problem.” She squeezed at her fingers. “There’s a man in the lobby who says he knows you and he wants the dog.”

The dog? James dropped the cape. “Pardon?”

“There’s a guy named Craig?” She shook her head. “He says he’s owed a reward and he’s got the owner of your dog. Isn’t your dog...your dog?”

“Doob is mine.” He’d paid the fees for the dog tags, had Doob microchipped and up to date on his shots. It’d been over a year since he’d found the dog and, damn it, Doob was his.

“What do I do about the guy?” Casey asked. “He’s creeping me out.”

“I’ll handle it.” He strode up to the lobby and spotted both Craig and another man. He fortified his nerves and squared his shoulders. He hated dealing with Craig, but if there was even a chance Craig had found the original owner of Doob, then he’d have to talk to them. “Craig.”

Craig faced James and grinned. “Hi, love.”

James shuddered. Craig wasn't his love. He never had been. "How can I help you?"

"I found the people who owned your dog." Craig gestured to the other man. "This is Joel. He and his wife, Sadie, owned Doob. They named him after a song and their kids miss the dog."

Joel didn't say anything and didn't appear all that broken up. In fact, he didn't appear to want to even be there. "You had Doob?"

"They did," Craig interjected. "They'd like him back."

"I'd like to hear it from them, er...him." James turned his attention to Joel. "Where did you lose Doob?"

"He ran out through the back door and never came back," Joel said.

"Do you have photos of him?" James asked. Everyone had photos of their animals these days. Hell, he knew some people who had more images of their pets than their children.

"Uh..." Joel pulled out his wallet and opened it to a photo of a dog that could be Doob, but it could also be just about any black Labrador. The animal didn't have the small patch of white fur on his chest like Doob.

James wasn't sure what to do. For all he could tell, Doob could be Joel's dog. Then again, he might not be.

"This is his dog," Craig said. "I helped him find the dog and you need to cough it up. You also owe me. Wasn't there a reward for information?"

"I didn't offer up a reward," James said.

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“I thought you did.” Craig shrugged. “Where is the mutt? You need to give him over to his family. They miss him.”

For a family who missed the dog, Joel didn't seem too heartbroken. He didn't seem too interested in being there, either. James held up his hand. “I need to make a phone call.”

“Why?” Craig reached for James. “The dog isn't here, is he?”

“I need to make a call.” James pulled out his phone and stepped away from Joel and Craig. This could be another one of Craig's bullshit moves. Then again, Doob might be Joel's dog. He tapped Paul's name and waited for the call to connect. He wasn't sure what to do.

Paul answered in two rings. “Hi, babe. What's up? Need me to sweep up?”

“No, I need you to come up here. Leave Doob at the house and come up here. My ex showed up and claims he's got the guy who originally owned my dog.” James' hands shook. “He wants the dog back.”

“I'll be right there.”

James didn't bother to speak. Instead, he hung up and tried to cover his fear. He approached Craig and Joel. “I have a few questions.”

Craig folded his arms. “Shoot.”

“For Joel.”

Joel paled. “Uh, sure.”

“Do you have proof of ownership? Of Doob? Like medical records? Adoption records from the shelter?” James asked. “Microchipping?”

“We didn’t get him chipped,” Joel said. “Never had the cash.”

Unfortunately, that added up. Doob hadn’t been chipped when he’d shown up at the salon. “How about vet records?” James asked. “You must’ve had him in to get his shots.”

“I didn’t bring them.” Joel shifted his gaze to Craig. “You said this would be easy.”

Craig shrugged.

James noted the strange exchange between the men. Something felt off about the situation. “Joel, do you have your dog license records?”

“I forgot to turn them in,” Joel replied. “Really.”

Paul walked into the salon without Doob, but with anger written all over his face.

Craig shook his head. “Oh, no. This wasn’t supposed to include this jerk.”

“I see.” Paul stepped between James and Craig. “You’ll have to deal with me.”

James waited until Paul herded Craig outside. He focused on Joel. “When did you get Doob?”

“Look, I don’t know a damn thing about the dog. I’ve never seen your dog and I wouldn’t know him if you asked me to pick him out,” Joel said. “I’ve never had a dog.”

“I’m sorry?” He must’ve misheard Joel. “Excuse me?”

“The picture I showed you was the dog I had when I was a kid. Standard black lab. He died when I was fifteen. He was a happy, dopey, lovey dog and I haven’t been able to bring myself to replace him,” Joel said. “I’m not married, I don’t have kids and we never owned your dog.”

“I don’t understand.” James wobbled. “What’s going on?”

“Craig said I could make a grand if I told you the dog was mine. He wanted me to lie,” Joel said. “I can’t lie to you. I don’t know you, but I can tell you love that dog. I’m sorry I needed the money and let Craig talk me into doing this. I didn’t think this would get out of control so fast.”

James leaned on the reception stand. His stomach lurched. “So you know nothing about my dog?”

“Not a thing.” Joel shook his head. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what you did to that guy, but he’s really pissed. I’m not taking your dog and I don’t want anything from you. I’m sorry I got wrapped up in this. I’m not a good guy—I was going to take his thousand bucks to go through with this, but I didn’t. I’m also not at his level of jerk.”

“I appreciate your honesty.” James hooked his fingers in his pockets and hoped he looked a lot more confident than he felt.

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“I need to go. This whole fucked-up mess isn’t worth a grand.” Joel walked out of the salon.

James sagged against the receptionist stand again. Casey hurried up to him. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Fine.” He regained a little of his composure. “If either of those two comes in again, tell me. Don’t let them past the turnstile.”

“You’ve got it.” She nodded.

Ky gestured to his client. “Case? He needs to pay.” Ky touched James’ arm. “Got a moment?”

“Yeah, sure.” He shook his head to clear his thoughts, then followed Ky away from the receptionist station. Lights ringing the posters illuminated his face. “What’s up?”

“Are you okay?” Ky asked.

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? He rattled you.”

“He tried to concoct a story about someone wanting my dog.” James sank onto one of the empty stylist chairs. “I know there’s a chance someone will come forward and claim Doob. He wandered into the salon one day and never left, but there’s a good chance he did belong to someone. They might still be looking for him. They might

want him and might have felt empty without him. I can't keep him if he belonged to someone else."

"And that bastard brought that up, which bothered you." Ky widened his stance and folded his arms. "That's not fair."

"It's not."

"But if they haven't come looking for him by now, then they might not," Ky said. "You've given him a good home."

"I'm worried that he belonged to someone else." Maybe a kid who lost their best friend when Doob ran away. Maybe a couple of kids who've been bereft thinking their dog was dead.

"He might, but you've adopted him. I'm sorry for them, but that's how it goes sometimes. You've given him a good home and he's your best bud," Ky said. "Hang on to that."

"Yeah." He didn't have much else.

"And it's a plus that he gets along with Paul. My sister had a dog that hated her boyfriend. I meanhatedhim. The funny part? The dog was right to dislike him. The guy had been cheating on her. If Doob likes Paul, then they're both keepers."

"True. Did she find someone better?" James asked.

"Yeah, she met Ryan and they've now got two kids. The dog loves the kids and they're a unit. I think the dog thinks the kids are his kids." Ky shrugged. "Don't let that jerk have power over you, especially concerning your dog. Doob is yours."

“Yeah.” He sighed. He had to keep hold of that thought.

“But you should look into getting a no-contact order,” Ky said. “If that guy is going to behave that way, then he doesn’t belong here. You don’t need that kind of headache and we don’t want that kind of trouble. For us or you.”

James nodded. His head ached. Paul was right. Things were going so well. Of course something would have to go wrong. That was life.

“Your ex won’t stop until he kills you.” Ky shook his head. “He’s dangerous.”

He stared at Ky. He knew damn well Ky was right and he’d left Paul alone with Craig outside. “Fuck.”

“Keep yourself safe,” Ky said. “He’s bad for business, bad for you and a headache you don’t need.”

“You’re right.” He had to call the police. The longer he went without going through channels to keep Craig at bay, the more it appeared he was putting up with Craig’s shit.

Paul stood outside of the salon with Craig, blocking Craig’s access to the building. “You need to leave.” He’d put up with this jerk’s crap for long enough.

“James is mine.” Craig cocked his hip and folded his arms.

“Uh-huh.” He refused to let Craig bait him.

“This is fake,” Craig said. “You’re faking.”

“Right.”

“You won’t admit it, will you?” Craig narrowed his eyes. He curled his lips in a sneer and glared at Paul. “He’ll see I’m the one that’s the most loyal because I helped him find the owner of his dog.”

“You did?” He kept his expression stony. “I see.” Doob was safe at the house and no one would take him away from James. Not under Paul’s watch.

“He doesn’t need that dog,” Craig snarled. “The dog is in the way. We were tight before that fucking dog showed up.”

“Animals often know what we can’t figure out.” He sounded like a guru.

“James used to have a good time. We’d drink, fuck and club, but then the dog showed up. Then you showed up.” Craig shook his head. “You ruined this. You’re just a fucking sweeper.”

“He won’t forgive you,” Paul said, his voice even.

“What?”

“He won’t forgive you for allowing that man to take his dog. James is quite loyal and he will hate you for what you’re decided to do.”

“He loves me. He’ll let me back in.” Craig snorted. “He always comes back to me.”

“You’re an annoyance.”

“And you’re fucking clueless.” Craig tensed as a police cruiser pulled up. “What the fuck?”

Paul remained where he was and nodded to the officer. “Good morning.”

“I have a report of a disturbance of the peace.” The officer left the cruiser. “Do either of you have business at this establishment?”

“I do, sir,” Paul said. “This is my building. I can show you records if you’d like.”

“He’s lying,” Craig shouted. “This guy doesn’t own this building. JP Henderson does and he’s not here.”

“I am. If I might withdraw my wallet, I can show you.” He held up his hands and waited for the go-ahead from the cop.

“Please do.” The officer stepped up to Craig. “Mr. Watson. You’ve been warned to stay away from this property. What business do you have here?” He checked Paul’s ID, then handed the wallet back to Paul.

“The restraining order was dropped,” Craig said. “I’m dating the man who runs the salon.”

The officer turned to Paul. “I have records that you’ve filled out paperwork for a no-contact order against Mr. Watson.”

Paul nodded. “I did.”

“Then, Mr. Watson, you’re not permitted to be on this property.” The officer gestured

to the sidewalk. “You’d best be on your way.”

“You’re kidding. My boyfriend is in there,” Craig snapped. “I have business here.”

James ventured out of the salon. “Officer Tackas.”

“Hello, Mr. Mason. I’m here for the disturbance call,” the officer said. “Mr. Watson will be leaving now or he risks arrest.”

“James, tell them I’m your boyfriend,” Craig shouted. “Tell them.”

“Is he?” the officer asked. “According to my records, he’s not permitted to be on this property.”

“He’s not,” James said. “He’s bothering my customers and making a nuisance of himself.”

“Mr. Watson, this is your final warning to leave.” The officer rested his hands on his hips. “What will it be?”

Craig growled, then shook his head. “You’ll regret this.” He stomped away, leaving James and Paul with the officer.

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James grasped Paul's arm. "I need to go to the police station to fill out a no-contact form. I can't have him at my business bothering my customers."

"No, you can't." Paul didn't want to add extra security to the salon, but someone had to stop Craig.

"If you'd like to come to the station, we'll get that paperwork started, Mr. Mason," the officer said. "

"Sure." James squeezed Paul's arm. "Will you stay here and keep an eye on things until I get back?"

"You know I will." He'd risk anything to keep James safe and happy. No one deserved to live in fear and Craig needed to back the fuck off.

Chapter Twelve

Paul waited for the police to leave and debated what to do next. He'd given his statement and wasn't needed now. But he couldn't be sure Craig wouldn't come back and annoy James. Paul could put security up at the salon, but he had to know Craig would leave James the hell alone. He headed into the building and called his security team. They could keep an eye on the building without being obtrusive.

As long as he could keep James and Doob safe, he'd be happy. He checked the feed at the condo to ensure Doob was fine. According to the live video, the dog was crashed out on the couch and snoring. Good enough for Paul.

He stopped Casey. “Hi.”

“Hi.” She folded her hands. “Is Mr. Mason okay?”

“He’s fine. A little freaked out, but that’s to be expected,” Paul said. “Do you remember what that man looked like?”

“The one who showed up claiming to want to take Doob? Yes.” She nodded. “I won’t forget him.”

“Good. He’s not permitted in the salon for the duration,” Paul said. “If he tries to come in, then contact the cops and let us know right away.”

“I will.” She smiled. “I’m glad you’re here to help Mr. Mason. He seems like he can use all the support he can get.”

“You’re right and you’re good support for him, too.” He winked. “I need to speak to the other stylists. Got things under control up here?”

“I do.” She held up her hand. “What about any of Mr. Mason’s appointments? I haven’t checked the book, but I’m sure he’s got someone coming in, plus he’s supposed to meet with Mary Namey, the JVS advisor at noon.”

“He should be back by noon, but we’ll see what happens with the appointments. You check the book and we’ll figure something out.” He nodded once. “Thank you.”

“You bet.” She fiddled with the tablet.

He left her alone at the receptionist counter, but kept an eye on her as he approached Ky and Lance. “Isn’t there another one of you?”

“We had Stella, but she quit. She opened her own one-woman salon across town.” Ky shrugged. “All the better for us.”

“It is.” He hooked his fingers in his belt loops. “Here’s the deal. The gentleman who came in here is one of James’ exes. He’s not a nice guy and he’s hell-bent on causing trouble. We need to pull together to keep this salon fantastic. I need you to keep an eye out for that guy and if he comes in and manages to get past Casey, you need to let me, James or the cops know. He’s not permitted in this building.”

Lance nodded. “Was he really going to hurt James?”

“He could.” He hadn’t heard anything about hurting anyone, but he wouldn’t put anything past Craig. “Do either of you have any openings for the next hour and a half?”

“I’m booked,” Lance said. “My next one should be here in five minutes.”

“I’m booked, but I can do two chairs if we need to help James,” Ky said. “He doesn’t need this hassle.”

“I appreciate it. I’m hoping he doesn’t have anything scheduled because I know it’s hard to juggle two chairs, but he’s filling out the paperwork for a no-contact order.” Paul grabbed the broom. “I’ll stick around at least until after lunch so he’s got extra help.”

Ky smiled. “Thanks.”

“Sure.” He swept the salon with the broom, then the silent floor vac. Truth be told, he simply wanted busy work until James returned. Just knowing someone wanted to harm James upset him. He finished cleaning the floors, then turned his attention to the product display counters.

“We got new product in,” Casey said and opened a box. “If you can turn the products so they’re facing forward and order them, I’ll add the new bottles. I’ve already inventoried them, so we just have to put them out.”

“Good.” Anything to help James. He turned the bottles and arranged the tags to better showcase the prices of each item. Within half an hour, he and Casey managed to tidy the entire cabinet. He stood and stretched. His knees cracked and his back ached from being hunched over, but he didn’t care.

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“Better.” Casey checked off the last item. “Everything is out and we’re back in business. We really sell a lot of the purple and blue conditioners. Seems like we can’t keep them in stock.”

“That’s good. That means people are coming in.” He dusted his hands off. His phone buzzed and he checked the notification.

A text from James. His hands shook as he retrieved the message.

On my way back. Took longer than I thought to fill out the paperwork, but he can’t come within five hundred yards of me. Be there in ten minutes.

He sighed. Thank God. He paced and wandered until James returned to the salon. The second he spotted James, his heart raced and his mind settled. His love had returned.

James ventured into the salon and his shoulders sagged. “I didn’t think it was that hard to fill those things out.” He headed straight to his office.

Paul followed him and shut the door behind them. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” James settled on his chair. “I’m tired already and I’ve got a screamer of a headache, but I finally got Craig out of my life. If he comes within five hundred yards of me, my dog or my business, he can be arrested. Good enough.”

“It is.” Paul rounded the desk. He knelt in front of James. “Doob is fine. He’s snoring on the couch.” He held up his phone to show James the live feed.

“Good.” James leaned back in his seat. “At least one of us is relaxed.”

“Yeah.” He turned off the feed and left the phone on the counter. “What about you?”

James snorted. “He threatened to take my dog from me. Said he’d found the person who originally owned Doob and he’d get the dog back to them. Then he acted like he’d done me a favor.”

“He thought he had. Thought you’d be eternally grateful because he’d gotten the problem—Doob—out of your life.” He held James’ hand.

“Doob isn’t a problem. He’s my dog. He’s my sidekick.” James massaged his forehead with his free hand. “He’s the most loyal thing I’ve got in my life.”

“You’ve got more than just him. I know it’s new, but Casey, Ky and Lance are damn dependable. They’re all worried. Not just them. I’m worried, too. You mean the world to me.”

“I know.” James met his gaze. “You’ve become the most trustworthy person in my life.”

He liked hearing that, because it was true. “What can I do to help you?”

“I saw someone has straightened my product case. That’s huge.”

“I got Ky to help out if you needed someone to cover your appointments.”

“I called Mrs. Harmon and Gayle Siemens to reschedule their cuts to later today. They were both gracious and happy to help me,” James said. He rubbed Paul’s hand. “I wish I understood why he wants to be so rotten to me. It’s not like we had this great romance. We were barely friends and awful the few times we went out

together.”

Paul sighed. “He sees you’re happy. That’s one big thing. He sees you’re happy without him and it annoys him because he wants to be that person who makes you smile. For another thing, he knows he missed out on someone special. Part of him knows you’re a great guy and he’s not meant to be with you. That has to hurt. It’d hurt me if I found out you and I weren’t meant to be.”

“Who says we’re not?”

“Not me.” He held James’ hand. “The big thing is that he can’t control the situation. People act strange when they lose control. I don’t know why he’s acting like this, but you have to keep your head up and go about your life. Don’t let him have power. You have the right to live your life.”

“I do.” James leaned forward and kissed Paul. “With you.”

“I hope so.”

“Yeah.” James nodded and rested his forehead on Paul’s. “You make me happy and I feel so much safer with you.”

“Then I’m doing my job.”

“You are.”

He nuzzled James’ cheek. “Let me take care of you. Let me feed you. What would you like for lunch?”

“I have a meeting in forty-five minutes.”

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“You do,” Paul said. “I can leave while the meeting’s taking place and be back by the time you’re done.”

James smiled. “How about another one of those sub sandwiches? Whatever you got the last time works.”

“Sure.” He’d do whatever James wanted. “I’ll stop by the house and check on Doob, too.”

“I’d like that.” James kissed him. “Thank you.”

“Welcome.”

“Still love me? Despite everything crazy happening?”

“Sure do.” Without a doubt. He’d fallen hard and fast for James. No one else would fit. He’d found the missing piece in his life. His James.

James scooted forward in his chair and kissed Paul once more. “I need to get out there. Mrs. Cernan should be coming in shortly. I didn’t explain to her what happened, so she’ll expect me to be ready for her.”

“She’s the lady who has her hair dyed bright red, isn’t she?”

“The same.” He hated coloring her hair because it made his hands all red, but she liked the way her hair looked when he finished and she tipped well, so he couldn’t argue. Hopefully his gloves would stay intact and he wouldn’t have to worry about

staining his hands.

“I’ll be around and once the lady shows up from the JVS, I’ll head out to get lunch and check on the dog.” Paul stood. He held his hands out to James and helped him to his feet.

“Thank you.” He liked having a partner. He’d come to that conclusion so many times, but it never got old. Paul had become the partner and lover he never knew he needed. He walked with Paul to the door. Soon he’d be able to tell him he loved him. He’d explain he wanted to merge households and stop living in the Annex. He liked his apartment, but he’d rather be with Paul. The condo felt like home.

Paul opened the door and Mrs. Cernan stood in the reception area. She smiled as James strode over to her.

“Hello.” She brightened. “I didn’t see you at your chair and thought you’d gone home sick.”

“Nope.” He gestured to her. “Would you like a cup of tea or coffee? I need to check the schedule and pull the supplies out for you, so it’ll be a moment.”

“I’d love a coffee. Do you have those almond roast pods?” she asked.

“The ones with the hint of almond? Or the creamer?” He had both. “Feel free to make a cup. The pods are all stocked and you know where the creamer is.”

“I do.” She clapped him on the shoulder. “You’re worth waiting for.” She walked past him to the coffee maker.

“She’s right.” Paul picked up his broom. “Get to work.” He winked.

“I will.” James checked the appointment book on his tablet, then gathered the supplies needed for her appointment. Finally, something normal. He could cut, style and dye with the best of them. While he prepped his station for his appointment, he stole glances at Lance, Ky, Casey and especially Paul. He had a great crew around him. They hadn’t freaked out under pressure and helped when he needed them. Maybe having a staff that wasn’t so revolving was a good thing after all.

He managed to get through Mrs. Cernan’s appointment and had her back to her flame red look just as Ms. Namey walked into the salon. Talk about cutting it close. He turned Mrs. Cernan around to admire her coif.

“Good?” He stood behind her. “The red does bring out the blue of your eyes.”

“You’re sweet-talking me,” she said. “But I appreciate it. I also love what you’ve done. You always make me beautiful.” She left the chair, then pressed cash into his hand. “I’ll make my next appointment with Casey. Thank you. I can’t wait to show the girls.”

“You’ll be the highlight of the gathering, doll.” He didn’t look at the money she’d given him. Instead, he focused on her. “Thank you and I look forward to your next appointment. I hope you’ll still entrust me with your style and color.”

“Of course. You’re the only one I trust with my hair.” She paid the bill, then left the salon.

James pocketed the money, then cleaned up his station. Ms. Namey joined him at his styling chair. “Hi,” he said. “I got behind this morning. I’ll be ready in a moment.”

“No rush.” She folded her hands on the top of the chair. “I heard it’s been interesting.”

“Casey filled you in?” He wiped down his station. “I’m sorry for that. Not for her telling you, if she did, but the commotion.”

“I’ve had my share of intrusions. This incident wasn’t great, but it’s not the end of the world,” Ms. Namey said. “I trust it won’t be happening again?”

“Not if I can help it.” He wiped his hands, then tossed the towel into the bin. “Would you like to talk in my office?”

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“I wanted to get a better feel for the salon and speak with you about which students would be good fits for working here. I see Casey’s thriving. Adam and Doug have asked to be placed here. They’re both up-and-coming stylists. They’re eager to learn the business and could be perfect for booking appointments or clean-up.”

“I’d like to give them a try.” He nodded. “Casey is working out well, you’re right. I hope when she graduates, we’ll have someone just as capable to step into her role.”

“You will.” She patted him on the arm. “I’m satisfied with what I’ve seen and I’m thrilled to have the cosmetology school partner with your salon. We will be listing your business in our directory for students and on our information for parents. I’m sure they’d like to know their students are heading to satisfactory places to gain insight.”

“I’m sure.” He couldn’t wait to tell Paul the connection to the JVS would be longer-term.

“By the way, what made you want to set up a salon in the old theater?” she asked. “I love the atmosphere, but I’d never have expected this to be a salon.”

“It was available, it was cheap and they sort of had the set-up. All I had to do was install the various stations.” He hooked his fingers in his pockets. “That and I didn’t fiddle with the main room. The seats were removed because they weren’t in great shape, but the building’s owner rents the screening room out for large parties. It works out, even if it’s not still a theater.”

“At least we didn’t lose the building and history for Norville.” She nodded. “Thank

you and if you would send me your logo, website information and anything else you'd like me to include in our advertising, that would be great."

"I will. I'll have Casey get on it today." He walked with her to the door. "Thank you."

"No, thank you. This is an opportunity our students wouldn't always get." She shook hands with him. "We appreciate it."

"Likewise." He waved as she left. At least the meeting had gone well.

James returned to his station and finished cleaning up, then checked the time for his next appointment.

Paul strode into the salon and tapped James' shoulder as he passed. "I can't stay."

"What's wrong?" James followed him to the office. "What happened?"

"Nothing concerning us or Doob. Doob was still happy and hanging out at the house. He discovered he could sleep on the bed and was stretched out there. Gave me heart failure thinking he'd somehow gotten loose, then I found him."

"Ah." James pushed the door mostly shut. "Then what's wrong?"

"One of my apartment buildings in Shaker is right where a water line burst and the tenants are freaking out that they have no water. I can't fix the pipe. The city is working on that. But I'm coordinating a shipment of bottled water to be sent there. I'd have my people do it, but I'm trying to expedite the situation."

"You're a good man." The best, really.

“I have to go so I can handle it.” Paul placed the bag on the desk. “Sorry.”

“It’s work. You have to do it and I don’t mind.” James embraced him. “Thanks for being here and helping me. I don’t know how I would’ve handled that without you.”

“That’s what being a team is all about. I’m on your side.” Paul kissed him. “I need to go. See you at home?”

“You will.” Home. Damn, that’s a sweet thought.

Paul nodded to the side door. “I’m heading out that way. Need anything or want something special for dinner?”

“I’m in your hands and I’m good.” He’d been spoiled with Paul and he wanted everything to stay this way.

“I’ll see you.” Paul kissed him. “Love you.”

Fuck. “See you.” Why couldn’t he say it? He watched Paul leave, then hurriedly ate his lunch before heading back out for his afternoon appointments.

Five hours later, he finished his last cut and style. Casey locked the front doors and dowsed the lights in the foyer. Ky had gone home an hour before and Lance was in the midst of cleaning his area. James completed the appointment, then tidied his area while the woman paid and left. Once the customers were gone, James printed and saved the information for that day’s sales. Casey left first, then James switched on the security lights. Lance finished up and tossed his towels in the bin. He helped carry the bin to the office, then clocked out

James collected his things, the receipts and the bin of towels, then carried the lot to his car in two trips. He locked the building up the rest of the way, then left the salon.

He drove right to Paul's condo. His heart, his love and his dog were there.

He had everything he wanted with Paul.

He just hoped he could keep his eyes open long enough to enjoy their time together tonight. He hadn't expected to find love with Paul, but damn, he was lucky.

Chapter Thirteen

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The next afternoon, Paul ensured there was an increased watch on the salon. The nice thing about having money meant he could pay people handsomely to keep an eye on his love's business. The building belonged to him and he refused to allow someone to fuck with it. He ensured the security team would stay out of sight, but have constant eyes on the former theater and the Annex building. It made him feel safer to know James was protected.

He headed to Shaker to check the water problem at the apartment building. According to the reports he'd been given, the water main should be fixed soon, but that didn't make it easier for the people going without water. He'd brought in more bottled water for the tenants, but he wished the main would be fixed faster.

He spoke to Hudson, his superintendent of the Shaker building, then left the office. A dull ache formed behind his eyes and he wanted to go home.

As he left the building, Noel strode up to him. For fuck's sake. What did this jackass want now?

"Hold up," Noel said. He caught up to Paul. "Where are you going? Leaving so soon?"

"I need to head home."

Noel straightened Paul's tie. "You look different."

"I feel different." He twiddled with his keys. "Do you need something?"

“I wanted to talk to my friend.” Noel grinned.

Noel wore sunglasses and Paul couldn't tell what his former boyfriend was thinking. Right now, it didn't matter. He didn't give a shit about Noel.

“Are you available for coffee?” Noel asked. “We haven't caught up in a long time. I sent some texts, but I doubt they went through.”

“If you did, then I never got them.” He'd lied, but he didn't care.

“I should resend.” Again, Noel grinned. “So how about that coffee?”

“I need to get moving. I've got another appointment. See you around.” Paul sidestepped his ex and rushed over to his car. He slid behind the wheel and kept the windows up, despite the heat, as he drove away. He'd wasted too much time with Noel in the past and didn't have time for him now.

He drove to the salon and parked in the warehouse. He left his vehicle next to James' and headed into the salon. Along the way, he had a spark of an idea. If he and James moved in together, James wouldn't need the apartment. There were at least four units in the building that could be rented that way. With the warehouse space, the building would be perfect for an art space. He could turn the apartments into housing for artists and the warehouse into workspace. He'd have to talk to James first, since it was his apartment Paul wanted to rent back out and the warehouse space where James parked his car, but if they designated space for the cars...the building could be an art mecca.

He headed into the salon with an extra spring in his step. Doob trotted right up to him and collided with his shins.

James dusted his chair off, then glanced over his shoulder. “Doob.” He spotted Paul

and brightened. “Hi. I wasn’t expecting you here today.”

“I got done a little early.” He kissed his boyfriend. “The water issue in Shaker should be fixed by tomorrow, but I’ve kept the tenants happy for now, so that helps.”

“Good.” James tucked his hands into Paul’s front pockets. “Does this mean we can have another date tonight?”

“We can.” He rested his forehead on James’ and sighed. “I have a question for you.”

“Sure.” James brushed his nose along Paul’s. “What?”

“Would you be interested in moving in with me?”

James froze, then leaned back a bit. “Uh...you really want that?”

“You practically live there already and I’d rather have you with me all the time. I love waking up beside you, having you there when I go to bed, sharing my life with you...why not?”

James shrugged. “I never thought about it.”

“I’d be lying if I didn’t say I didn’t have an ulterior motive, too.”

“Oh?” James crooked his eyebrow. “What’s that? Going to ask me to marry you?”

He hadn’t considered that, but he liked the idea. “Not exactly.”

“Then?” James didn’t pull away, but he did tense.

“I’m debating turning the Annex into an art enclave. We don’t have a place for artists

to congregate, live and work. Not really. There's the community center, but you can't work there all the time," Paul said. "I looked at the warehouse and the wasted space. Why not put it to use? You'd still have the back entrance to the salon and it'd be all yours. Plus, I'd like to get back to using the theater for more than just wasted space. Since I bought the building, it's been empty."

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James toyed with Paul's pockets and narrowed his eyes. "What about parking my car? I don't want to park the old gal on the street."

"You'd have a dedicated spot."

James didn't speak right away. "It's a lot of change."

"I know and I realize you don't like change." He cupped James' jaw in both hands. "I hate to admit it, but I'm a businessman. I see space and I want to make it more useful. It's not much different than the center."

"I know."

"What do you think?"

"I need some time to think about it, but it's ultimately your building, so you can do what you want with it."

"I meant about moving in with me."

"That's what I needed time to consider." James closed his eyes. "I want to. I want to be with you that way, but it's a big change. What if things fall apart? What if we don't work out?"

"Then we don't, but would you want to live in the building I own if we're not together?" He'd let James stay there as long as he wanted.

“I guess that makes sense.”

“Think about it. I’m not offering the building up today. Not even this month,” Paul said. “No pressure.”

“I know.” James smiled. “You’re a diamond.”

“I’m yours.”

James glanced to the right, then lowered his voice. “I was accused today of gold digging.”

“Who said that?” He stayed close and caressed James’ cheek. “A client?”

James nodded. “She said you were worth six million dollars and I’d conned you.”

“Did you?” He chuckled. “She does realize I picked you and there wasn’t any digging?”

“I let her talk. Personally, I thought it was funny. Yes, I let you pay for some stuff, but I haven’t demanded anything from you,” James said. “But I do let you spoil me. I shouldn’t.”

“Don’t sweat it. I want to give you the world. It makes me happy.” He kissed James one more time. “Want me to take Doob home with me? Then he can run and potty.”

“He’d love that. He’s been itching to ride in the car longer and could probably use a nice nap in the sunshine.” James smiled. “I know you’re just being a good guy and you’re treating me well. I know it’s who you are, but I need a little more time to figure this out. Is that too much to ask?”

“Nope.”

“You’re sure?” James asked. “I don’t let just anyone take care of my dog, much less leave with him.”

“I know and I’m honored you’re trusting me to keep him safe.” He brushed his nose along James’. “Get your work done. We’ll be at home waiting on you and I’ll make you dinner, because I love to cook.”

“Good. I’m terrible at it.” James laughed. “See you later. Hey, Doob?”

The dog sat at their feet and swished his tail.

“Want to go for a car ride?” James asked. “With Paul?”

The dog barked.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Paul let go of James. “Did you hear anything else about Craig and the guy who claimed to be Doob’s owner?”

“Craig tried to bribe the guy with a thousand dollars to lie and say the dog was his. Apparently the guy was a crook because he wanted the cash, but not that much of one because he told me the truth.” James retrieved Doob’s leash and shrugged. “According to the dog warden, even if someone comes forward now, Doob’s mine. If it does happen and Doob goes to them, then I’ll have to make the hard decision, but not now.”

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“Good.” He accepted the leash. “You and Doob are a matched set. No one should split that up.”

“Not even you?”

“I want to be your partner and co-parent to Doob.”

“I’d like to keep doing that.” James sighed. “My next appointment is at three-thirty. See you at six?”

“We’ll be there.” He scratched Doob behind the ears, then patted his own hip. “Ready, Doob?”

The dog barked and his nails clicked on the floor.

“He’s ready.” James kissed Paul once more. “I’ll be home around six-thirty.”

“Love you.” He winked, then left the salon with Doob. He helped the dog onto the back seat of his car. Once he clicked the dog’s leash into place in the seatbelt, he closed the door, then rounded the hood and settled behind the wheel. He left the garage and ensured the door closed behind him, then drove home to his condo.

He rolled the windows part way down for air to move through the vehicle and keep Doob cool. He motored through town, taking in the sights. He noted the lack of artistic spaces and the various shops selling every kind of art. Why not have a place for the artists to get together?

He drove through the housing development to his condo and parked in the garage. Once the door was down, he retrieved Doob from the backseat. “Want to go out?” He opened the main door for the dog, then followed him through the condo to the sliding door. He unlocked both the door and the screen, then let the dog roam the backyard. He stood on the patio and removed his tie. He shrugged out of his sport coat and sat on the railing.

Doob sniffed all around the yard, then did his business. He did a few laps simply running around in the grass.

“You’ve really got energy to burn off.” Paul laughed. He wished he had that much zeal. The day had worn him out. He couldn’t wait to open a bottle of wine, cook some ziti and have a nice dinner with the man he loved. He wasn’t sure how long he sat outside, but the quiet and time alone with the dog soothed him. It refreshed him.

The doorbell rang and Paul froze. He hadn’t heard the doorbell in forever. No one came over and when they did, they rarely used the bell. He herded the dog back into the condo, then shut the sliding door before heading to the front.

Paul checked the security screen for his doorbell and groaned.

Noel.

Of course. He’d made some progress with James and this would have to be the next step—his ex trying to fuck it up. He shushed Doob, who growled, then stepped out onto the front patio.

“Noel.” Paul rested his hands on his hips. “You’re here.”

“I thought you lived in this development. It’s nice. Pricey. Secluded.”

Not secluded enough if his ex had found him. He hadn't lived here when he'd dated Noel. "What are you doing here?"

"Seeing you. Aren't you going to invite me in?" Noel asked. He rocked on his heels. "I mean, we're old friends."

He swore he still heard Doob growling. "I can't." He didn't want to risk Doob barking up a storm at Noel.

"You have a dog? You hate dogs," Noel said. "You refused to play with my sister's dog."

"I never actually refused. The dog wasn't given the chance to play." Noel's sister Nella kept the Chihuahua on her lap the entire time. "But my dog isn't fond of strangers."

"I'm not a stranger. We were lovers." Noel reached for Paul.

"What do you want?" Paul asked. "I'm expecting someone." Not for a little while, but still. Noel didn't need to know that.

"Oh? Does your someone know about the dog?"

"He does." Why did he have to explain that to Noel?

"Does this someone know about your use of makeup? Your proclivities?" Noel snapped. "Does he know you're not like everyone else? Hmm?"

"He does." He had to keep his voice calm. Letting Noel know he'd irritated Paul would only give Noel energy.

“And he—it is a he?”

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“He’s a he, yes.” It didn’t matter what James was.

“Is he okay with the way you live your life?”

“He is.”

“Does he know you’re moonlighting at that awful salon? I mean, what is that place? Do they show movies while you’re getting a haircut?” Noel rolled his eyes. “So dumb.”

Showing a movie wasn’t a bad idea, but unless there was a way to keep the tablet or screen clean, all while turning the chair for the client, it wasn’t practical. “It’s a salon that’s using the former theater. It’s repurposing the building.”

“I guess that’s not so bad,” Noel said. “But does your boyfriend know you’re working there? With that flake who runs it?”

A flake? Nice. He didn’t like Noel any longer, but he really didn’t like bullies. Noel didn’t know James and couldn’t make a judgment on him. “He does.” His patience thinned. “What’s your point?”

“He might be an understanding guy, this boyfriend of yours, but he might be threatened by you going to the salon to push a broom. He might not want to share you with anyone,” Noel said. “I wouldn’t. Or is this boyfriend of yours ignorant?”

“Stop.” He’d had enough. “What do you want? To argue? To talk about my love life? Something else?”

“I wanted to try to win you over again. We were good once and we could be again. We had a good time.” Noel inched up to Paul. “You and I had a strong relationship. Our business was fun and I liked being with you. Besides, we’re a good match. I’m in your age group, we have the same experiences, we’re both versed with money...and the sex was hot.”

His patience crumbled. “You wanted my business so you could claim it as your own and the one time we tried to work together, I had to bail you out. You screwed me over.” The sex hadn’t been that hot and he’d seen a side of his ex that made him sick. Noel wanted to use people, not love them.

“It was a misunderstanding.” Noel shrugged. “You don’t know what I was thinking.”

“You messed up.”

“I might have, but that doesn’t mean you can’t give me another chance.”

Paul sighed and shook his head. “I don’t have time for this.” He spotted James’ car coming up the street. He checked his watch. James must be done early. It wasn’t even five.

James parked in the driveway beside Noel’s car. He left his vehicle and strode up to the patio. “Hi.” He threaded his arm around Paul. “Who is this?”

“This is my ex-boyfriend,” Paul said. “Noel. Noel, this is my boyfriend, the very understanding James.”

James offered his free hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Noel paled and inched backward. “You.”

James met Paul's gaze. "Me?"

"Noel saw you and didn't think you and I were good matches for each other," Paul said. "He's opinionated." He was talking about Noel like he wasn't there and he didn't give a shit. Maybe Noel would get the hint and leave.

"I see." James tucked his hand into his pocket. "Well, it's nice to have met you."

"Right." Noel backed up on the patio. "I need to go."

"Have a good afternoon." Paul waved and stayed on the patio until Noel was in his car and leaving. "Fuck me."

"I'd like that," James said. "What was with him?"

Paul opened the door for them and stepped into the condo. He waited for James to join him, then closed the screen door. He sighed. "Noel, for some reason, decided he'd like to try again. He texted me a while back and I ignored the messages. I deleted them, but he didn't get the hint when I didn't reply, so he happened to find me over in Shaker. I thought I'd managed to get away from him there, but he found me again. He can be persistent."

"What did he want? Just to get together?"

"I'm guessing he wanted me to go into some business venture with him, but you showed up in time to save me from him asking." Paul sank onto the sofa. Doob jumped up there with him and he scratched the dog behind the ears. Paul tugged James onto his lap, straddling him. "What brings you home so fast?"

"A cancellation. My last client needed to come in on Monday, not today, so I moved her appointment and printed out my information before I left. The guys were done

already and Casey wanted to see her boyfriend's baseball game, so we all left." James held Paul's hands. "I've been thinking about what you said."

"About moving in?"

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“That and the art space.” James scooted closer to Paul. “And love.”

“You did?” His heart raced. He squeezed James’ fingers. “What did you decide? Did you decide anything?” He wanted to be hopeful, but he had to be patient, too. He and James shared something so strong and he refused to deny it, but he couldn’t rush it, either.

“I’ve been thinking that moving in does make the most sense. I mean, I like being here with you and I like the condo. Doob has room to run and the neighborhood is fantastic,” James said. “Plus, you’re right about the artist colony. We need one in Norville. It’s an artsy town, but we have nowhere for the artists to congregate.”

He nodded. He couldn’t push, no matter how much he wanted to.

“I’d be willing to give up my apartment in the Annex so the building could be an artist colony.”

“Only for that?”

James grinned. “No. Mostly because I want to be here with you. What you said about waking up beside me and the last moment before we go to sleep...it got to me. That’s how I feel about you. I’m not me without you.”

He could work with that.

“I also got to thinking about Craig.”

“Him?” He bit back a groan.

“Hear me out. I got to thinking that if he’d have done something stronger and tried to hurt you or Doob, I’d be lost without you. Just thinking about losing you made me realize I do love you. I’ve been falling since we met.”

“You love me?” He couldn’t hold back the grin.

“I do.” James kissed him. “I can’t imagine being anywhere else with anyone else. You’re my person. You’re our person.”

“You’re mine, too.” He’d been so lucky. From the moment he’d embraced James, he knew he’d found his heart and his home.

“Now you mentioned something about fucking.” James left Paul’s lap, then closed the front door. “I believe we were going to have dinner, then fuck, but who says we can’t have desert first?”

Paul scrambled off the couch and rushed after James. “I like the way you think.”

James tugged Paul close and kissed him with a passion and ferocity he never knew possible. This man flowed in his veins. He walked Paul back to the bedroom. This time, he’d take control. This was his chance to show Paul just how much he loved him.

He nudged Paul onto the bed and crawled on top of him.

“You’re in charge?” Paul chuckled. “I like it.”

“I hope so.” James unbuttoned his shirt, then tossed the garment onto the floor. Chilly air wrapped around him and his nipples beaded. Sitting on Paul like this made him

feel sexy. Made him feel invincible.

He leaned over Paul and kissed him again, this time sucking on Paul's tongue. He roved his hands over Paul's chest, needing to touch him everywhere.

Paul stuffed his hands down the back of James' jeans. He massaged James' ass and the move turned James on. He ground on his lover. The freedom in being true to himself and his feelings spurred him forward.

James groaned into the kiss, then opened the front of Paul's dress shirt. He kissed his way down Paul's jaw to his chin, then throat. He stroked Paul's pec before tweaking his nipple.

"Fuck me, I love that." Paul trailed his fingers along James' back. "Need you in me."

He'd have to prep Paul first. If he went too fast, he'd hurt him. He doubted he'd be able to stretch this out because he wanted Paul so much, but he should make this moment last.

James continued to kiss down Paul's chest to his nipples. He sucked one in his mouth while he popped the button on his lover's pants with his free hand. He unzipped his trousers, then eased his hand beneath the elastic of Paul's boxer briefs.

"My God." Paul massaged the back of James' neck. "More."

"Soon." He scooted down Paul's body to help him out of his trousers. "Have I ever told you I love when you wear those boxer briefs? It's like a present only I can unwrap."

"Oh yeah?" Paul's eyes sparkled. He'd smudged his makeup, but he still looked just as sexy as ever.

“I’m the only one who can see what you’re hiding, even if it’s not all that well hidden.” James stood long enough to shuck his own jeans and underwear. He stepped out of the wadded-up clothing. When he crawled back on top of Paul, Paul gathered his dick and James’ in his hand. He stroked them both.

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An instant sizzle ran along James' spine. He loved the feel of their bodies together. He groaned and rutted in his lover's hand. "If you keep doing that, I'll come before I can be in you."

Paul moaned. "Don't want that. Do we?" he asked. "I'll come right after you."

He expected that. James bit one of Paul's nipples. He needed this man to be just as much on the edge as he was already.

"Damn." Paul bucked against James. "You're frying my brain."

Good. That was what he wanted to hear. "We need the stuff."

"We do." Paul continued to thrust into his hand and against James' cock. "Dresser."

He knew where the supplies were, but if he didn't say the words out loud, he'd forget to retrieve the lube.

"Want you bare." Paul let go of their erections and grasped James' wrist. "Fuck me bare."

James paused. He and Paul hadn't done that before. But if they were going to live together and going to be lovers forever, then they should be completely uninhibited. He left the bed long enough to retrieve the bottle, then joined Paul again.

"Fuck me." Paul reached for James.

“Soon.” James knelt between Paul’s legs and folded his knees to his chest. “I want to look at your face when we do this.”

“Yes.” Paul held on to his legs. He nodded and parted his lips. Desire shimmered in his eyes.

James slicked his fingers, then caressed the crease of Paul’s ass. He massaged the tight pucker, but continued to look at Paul’s face. He needed the connection of their gaze when he did this. He wanted to know he had Paul with him the whole time.

Paul groaned and bore down on him as James pushed his middle finger into him. “That’s...heaven.” He arched his back and writhed on James’ digit.

“I love it.” James reached between Paul’s legs and stroked his cock in time with his thrusts into Paul’s ass.

Desire spread all over Paul’s face. He peered over at James from under his lashes and his brow furrowed.

“Yeah?” James increased his speed. He let go of Paul’s dick long enough to add more lube to his fingers, then pushed his index finger and middle one into Paul. He resumed masturbating Paul’s shaft.

Paul opened to him more and whimpered. “So full.” He shuddered and the muscles in his legs trembled. He tucked his legs closer to his chest. “Fuck me.”

“Yeah?” James pumped faster. He admired the way Paul blushed from his hairline to his chest. The way his nipples beaded and his dark hairs stood out from the relative paleness of his skin. The way he looked so sexy beneath James.

“Please?” Need clouded Paul’s voice and hunger filled his eyes. “I need you.”

He wasn't going anywhere. Not now. Not ever. James withdrew his fingers, then let go of Paul's cock. He stroked himself a few times, then arranged Paul's legs over his thighs. He lined himself up with his lover's hole and pushed. He moved slow, but the second he started to bury his erection deep in Paul, his thoughts scattered. This was the first time they'd made love this way—with him topping—but it wouldn't be the last. Paul was the one he'd never known he'd been missing and the one he couldn't live without.

James pushed to the hilt, then held on to Paul's hips. He leaned over him and kissed Paul. "Ready?"

"So ready." Paul trembled again. "So close, too."

That was what he wanted to hear. James built up a steady rhythm, moving in and almost all the way out of Paul, loving the way they fit together. Paul held him deep.

"Oh...God." Paul met him thrust for thrust. The sound of their lovemaking, the creak of the springs, their moans all seemed so loud in the air.

James lost his worries and almost every other thought except about being with Paul. Paul consumed him. He threw himself into the act of fucking Paul. As Paul cried out and let go of his leg to stroke his cock, James' orgasm built low in his belly. He surged into Paul.

"That's right," James said. "Don't hold back. I want to see it."

Paul shuddered and moaned. He jerked on his dick. Within seconds, a ribbon of cum shot across his belly. He shivered and sighed. "Fuck."

"Yes." Seeing Paul come nudged James over the edge. He surged into Paul, pushing to the hilt each time. The more he fucked Paul, the more he needed to come. He cried

out. “Paul. Fuck. Me.” He slammed into Paul and stopped as his cock throbbed. The orgasm washed through him, leaving him blissful and sated. He added a couple more thrusts, then stretched out on top of Paul, smearing cum between them.

“Hi.” Paul embraced him. “Come here often?”

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“Always with you.” He kissed his lover. The joke was corny, but he loved it because he could share this moment with Paul.

Paul panted and held him. James wasn’t sure how many minutes had passed before Paul finally spoke and he didn’t mind. He liked the silence and the sheer delight of the moment.

“I came to Norville not knowing I’d find someone who could make me whole,” Paul said. “I had no idea my future would be here. I just knew I had to come to this town, buy that theater and meet you. You changed me. You’ve helped me accept who I am and in my own skin.”

“You’re beautiful inside and out.” He kissed Paul. “That’s why I fell in love with you.”

“So are you.” Paul traced the line of James’ jaw. “Embracing you is like holding forever in my arms.”

“Then it’s a good thing I like being embraced.” He stared into Paul’s eyes and saw not only forever, but the love of a lifetime. He’d thought he had everything when he opened the salon, but he’d been wrong. He needed Doob to show he could be loved unconditionally and he needed Paul to show him he was worthy of that affection.

Now he truly had everything he could ever want.

“You do know this means we need to have round two, right?” Paul asked. “Make things even?”

James laughed as he clung to Paul. “Of course.” He’d never be bored with Paul. Not lonely or sad either. Things wouldn’t always be perfect, but as long as he had Paul embracing him, he’d be just fine.