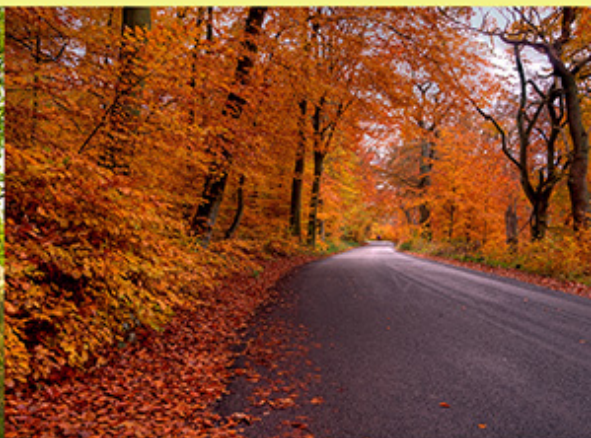
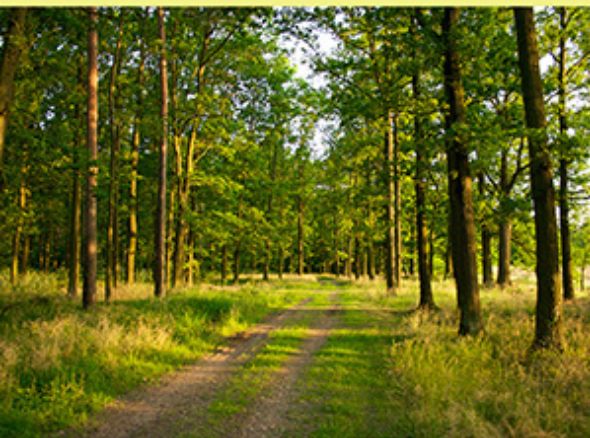


LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

# TROUBLED HEART

**Sammy Goode**

## Table of Contents

Love is an Open Road.....	3
Troubled Heart – Information.....	6
Troubled Heart.....	7
Chapter 1.....	8
Chapter 2.....	15
Chapter 3.....	21
Chapter 4.....	24
Chapter 5.....	28
Chapter 6.....	31
Chapter 7.....	40
Chapter 8.....	43
Chapter 9.....	48
Chapter 10.....	53
Chapter 11.....	63
Chapter 12.....	71
Epilogue.....	78
Author Bio.....	80

# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## TROUBLED HEART

**By Sammy Goode**

### Introduction

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

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

### Words of Caution

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

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

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

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

All rights reserved worldwide.

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

Troubled Heart, Copyright © 2015 Sammy Goode

Cover Design by Goodreads M/M Romance Group  
Cover Photographs from  
[Pixabay.com](http://Pixabay.com) and [freeimages.com](http://freeimages.com)

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

# TROUBLED HEART

By Sammy Goode

## Photo Description

Two men, with both passion and anger in their eyes, stand pressed together. The taller, broader man is holding the other tightly while pushing him against the wall. His one hand is wrapped around the smaller man's forehead, his face leaning in as if to whisper in his ear. There is such tension in this picture. The taller man's face is full of raw need and desire, which is obviously warring with some deeper hidden emotion.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I hope you see that same thing I see when I look at this picture. The love and passion is so obvious. But I also see fighting in their expressions.*

I would love to see a HEA, but not historical or sci-fi, and please, no rape. Other than that, whatever you want.

*Sincerely,*

*Lynnette*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** bears, enemies to lovers, grief, hurt/comfort, smaller top, tearjerker, twinks, widower

**Word Count:** 30,799

# **TROUBLED HEART**

**By Sammy Goode**

## Chapter 1

Hunter stared at his computer screen, willing the day to be over. He knew he should be reviewing the Diamond Builders contract for any flaws. Neal had sent it via email two days ago, and it was awaiting Hunter's sign-off in order to be implemented. It would bring big money into the company, and given Hunter's lackluster performance as chief contracting negotiator over the last few months, the coffers needed any monetary boost they could get. Forcing himself to focus, Hunter reread the same line item again and highlighted the dollar amount to remind himself to ask Neal if it included the updated supplies list sent in by Rick Travis, owner of the company.

Hunter shoved his keyboard away from him. It was no use. The run-in he'd had with the stupid neighbor of his the night before was still fresh in his mind, rankling his already frayed nerves. He wished to hell the people on his floor would just stay out of his way. The old lady meant well, but she was constantly asking him how he was, and the simpering twink next door got on his last nerve just by breathing the same air. Hunter tried to remember the guy's name. What was it? Emmett? Eddie? Eli! That was it—Eli—what a stupid name!

So why was it that he was sitting at work, and the only thing he could concentrate on was how much of an ass he'd been when the old lady's grossly overweight mutt had come flying at him while Eli scrambled to catch him? You'd think he really cared what the guy even thought of him. He didn't. First off, Mr. "party boy" Eli was definitely not his type. Hell, he didn't even have a type since Stephen... and with that, Hunter's thoughts stopped dead in their tracks, and he seemed to cave in on himself.

Crouched over his desk, Hunter seemed smaller than his six-foot-four frame. He tended to tower over other people, and more than once he had heard the term "bear" tossed about when he entered a gay bar. It's not that he was burly like most bears; it was more that he gave off a certain aura that basically said don't fuck with me. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth when it came to the bedroom. If anything, Hunter tended to enjoy being the receiver during sex, especially when Stephen had been the giver.

He glanced once more at the clock, noting the hands had barely moved, and rubbed at his eyes. He needed coffee and two ibuprofen if he was going to make it till lunchtime. He felt like someone was relentlessly banging a gong hidden behind his forehead, and once again Hunter made a mental note to refrain from scotch or, at least, the entire bottle in one go. Glancing back at the



computer, Hunter saw the flashing signal indicating a new email. Clicking on the icon, he groaned aloud as he realized the email was from none other than Stephen's father, John. Hunter could have kicked himself—he knew John had a stupid tracking thing that showed if Hunter had opened and read the notes he sent. Now the decision remained to either click on the weekly correspondence or ignore it, the latter of which would no doubt encourage a concerned phone call enquiring as to how Hunter was doing. Heaving a huge sigh, Hunter clicked on the flashing signal and began to read.

*Hello Son,*

*How are you? Helen and I have certainly missed seeing you at Sunday dinner these past few months.*

Son... Hunter winced at the term of endearment. John and Helen Crosswhite had embraced Hunter from the moment Stephen had taken him home for that first Sunday dinner over three years ago. A simple meal, it would become the most comforting of traditions the two men enjoyed together. It had been a running joke that after their honeymoon last year, the boys would be expected at the weekly feast, and by god, if they hadn't done just that, returning home in time to grab a bite with Stephen's parents. But after Stephen died, Hunter could no longer endure the somber atmosphere that now hovered over their weekly meal.

In short, it was just too damned hard to see the grieving couple when he himself could barely live with the memories of the only good thing that had happened to him. He knew deep down inside Stephen would have wanted him to continue the dinners because that is exactly what Stephen himself would have done had the circumstances been switched. God, how Hunter wished that had been the case. Every day, he had to claw his way to the surface of the dark hole he had sunk into the previous night. The crushing loneliness of being the one who was left behind to pick up the pieces of his life permeated nearly every moment of Hunter's day.

Hunter's hands gripped the edge of his desk as his grief swept over him again. Stephen... Jesus, how he missed him! Forcing himself to read on, Hunter swiped angrily at the gathering tears in his eyes.

*I was wondering if you might be able to come over this Sunday? Frankly, we miss you, Son. You must know how much we care about you.*

Hunter closed his eyes and let the realization sink in that it was almost a full year since the accident had taken his husband from him. Twelve long months of

what felt like a never-ending nightmare. Just a few months after the funeral, everyone told him he should try to move on. “Get back on the horse.” “Go out there and date somebody, or better yet, find a fuck buddy for a while.” His friends meant well, but Hunter simply couldn’t find it in himself to follow their advice.

At first, the callous way his friends had viewed his loss as something he could fuck away angered him. But as time went by, he tried to see it for what it was—their way of caring for him even though these were really Stephen’s friends more so than his. Hunter was the prickly one in their relationship. Stephen constantly had to remind his buddies that Hunter’s bark was worse than his bite. As time went on, it just seemed easier to stay home, drink when the feelings got to be too much, ignore the fact he not only hadn’t had sex since Stephen’s death, but he couldn’t seem to keep it up long enough to get himself off. It all just seemed so useless.

The bright screen tugged him back to reality. Hunter forced himself to read the rest of the email, dreading what he knew was sure to come next. Each correspondence ended the same, and every time he held his breath as he let the last few sentences John had written wash over him.

*We miss you, Hunter. It’s time to stop punishing yourself.  
Please, come visit us soon.*

Hunter shut down the window and sat back in his office chair, a small shudder rocking his frame. He would not lose it here at the office, not again. He dug his fingernails into his palms, relishing the brief pain as they bit into his hands. Taking a deep breath, Hunter returned to the open contract on his screen and put the message out of his mind. He would respond as he always did with a politely worded thank you and a gracious decline. That chapter of his life was finished. Sunday dinners held nothing but pain and regret for him now, yet another reminder of what he had lost. Maybe his friends were right. Hunter stared at the document. Yeah, maybe it was time to find himself some nameless one-night stand and put this senseless whiny shit behind him. God knows, Stephen would have never wanted him to sit around and drown his sorrows in alcohol every night. Just one more way he had failed his husband.

Growling in disgust with himself, Hunter pulled up the website for Players, the gay bar on 46<sup>th</sup> Street. He remembered cruising there with some frequency before meeting Stephen. As he recalled, it was just this side of seedy, with boys hooking up in the dark hallways and sucking one another off in bathroom stalls.

It was the perfect place to forget, to finally put Stephen to rest. If he couldn't shut down his memories maybe he could have some willing gay boy bend him over and fuck them away.

\*\*\*\*

Hunter closed out the site, saved the changes to the contract, and shut down his computer. Shoving it into its case, he stood up, grabbing his jacket and swinging his bag over his shoulder. It was time to make a change. Time to find his balls again and stop crying like a fucking baby. Hunter felt the anger swim up into his throat and nearly choke him. Swallowing it down with a new-found resolve, he made his way to the door. Quitting time had come and gone. It was happy hour, and Hunter had a deep thirst. Tonight he would make his way to Players, have a drink, and then take a trip to the back room where some nameless guy would fuck him senseless. That's all Hunter needed to "get back on the horse."

He took the elevator down to the first floor and hit the lobby. Turning right toward the parking lot, Hunter tore off his jacket and tie and rolled up his sleeves, heading toward his Tesla. Stephen had mocked him for buying the electric car, but Hunter wanted something that was good for the environment, so sue him. Tossing his jacket and tie into the back seat, Hunter slid into the car, breathing a sigh.

What was he doing? All the anger that had provided the rapidly waning determination seemed to evaporate as he stared at the flat panel display in front of him. Clubbing had never been his thing, and he'd only begrudgingly gone along with Stephen, who had always seemed to thrive on that kind of thing. And now he was about to go to the very place he loathed, where even more memories of a dancing, flirty Stephen would rear their ugly heads. Hunter's forehead made a dull thudding sound as it hit the steering wheel. He needed to do this. He needed to stop living in the past. Stephen was not coming back. He was fucking dead, and nothing was going to change that. Hunter gritted his teeth against the onslaught of memories that came tearing at him.

*Hunter waited impatiently, cell phone to ear, as it rang and rang trying to connect to Stephen's office line. With growing impatience, he wondered once more what the hell was so important his husband had to go and ruin their planned day off by checking in at work instead. Hunter loved Stephen dearly but his need to be continually on top of things at the law firm was wearing thin. Yes, the money would be great if he made partner, but the long hours were killing his lover and putting a big strain on their relationship.*

*Hunter blew out a frustrated breath as the ring tally notched upward to eight. Then, just as he was about to hang up and storm down to the office to physically drag Stephen back home, he picked up.*

*“Taylor, Greene and Weiss, Attorneys at law, may I help you?”*

*“Yes, you can. I’d like my husband released from the fucking ball and chain you have wrapped around his neck, please.”*

*“And hello to you too, babe.”*

*Stephen chuckled warmly, and Hunter briefly considered giving in to the warm feeling that suddenly swept over him at the sweet sound. But before he lost his resolve, his impatience spiked and he remembered he could be hearing that laugh in person had his damn lover not been intent on breaking his ass trying to earn brownie points from his bosses. Never the most rational when it came to time with Stephen, Hunter nearly winced as he heard his own normally soft voice bark out in a harsh tone, his words snapping across the connection.*

*“Don’t be all cute with me, Stephen. Where the hell are you? This was supposed to be our day together, remember? We were going to have a nice dinner at Maggiano’s and spend Valentine’s Day eve with each other. No interruptions, no partying with friends, and no WORK!”*

*Even Hunter felt himself recoil inside at the aggressive and anger-soaked words he had just finished spitting into his cell. For a moment, he closed his eyes and silently cursed his lack of control. Just as he was about to ask Stephen to forgive his outburst, he was met with an equally furious one bursting through the line aimed directly at him. If there was one thing Hunter should always remember, it was not to piss off his husband. It’s not that Stephen yelled or fumed like Hunter was known to do; no, instead, his sweet man turned into a sheer wall of ice, and every word he uttered seemed to cut down and burn the poor fool who got in its path.*

*“Why don’t you tell me what you really think, Hunter? Or is that what that bellowing in my ear was just about? Christ, I told you at least three times this morning I had to come in and move the Stephenson case off my desk or get my ass handed to me tomorrow morning in front of everyone at the weekly staff meeting. Do you really think I would rather be in here than at our favorite restaurant with you? “*

*Hunter heard himself begin to apologize for his angry outburst, but Stephen was having none of it.*

*“Check that—don’t bother answering. I’ll only hear how I should be there with you right now anyway. Jesus, sometimes you’re like a broken record. For once, can this not be about you and what you want? Can you pull your head out of your ass and focus on me and the shitty things I sometimes have to do for this fucking job?”*

*This time Hunter managed to interject while Stephen drew breath.*

*“Listen, I’m sorry, okay? I just had all this stuff planned for us, and once again, the office had to go and fuck it all up.”*

*He heard a bitten-off curse blend into a disgusted huff as Stephen cut him short, again. Hunter closed his eyes as the clipped tone barked across the airwaves at him.*

*“Don’t you mean I fucked it all up, AGAIN? We both know you view my job not as something I have to do but as something I choose to do with the end result being we get less time together. Isn’t that right, Hunter? Christ, why am I always the bad guy here? No, don’t answer that. Listen, I’ll be heading out in fifteen minutes. Unless I’m mistaken, that means if I go directly to the restaurant, we can still make our reservation. And when I get there, we need to talk. Do you understand? We need to hash out all this shit about my work hours and your increasing need to complain about them. I’m really tired of bitching at one another about this, Hunter. And I’m hoping you are too. So I’ll meet you in fifteen or so. And, hey, happy Valentine’s Day to you too!”*

*Hunter heard the distinct click as Stephen hung up on him. Tapping the cell not too lightly against his forehead, he closed his eyes and silently began to berate himself for being such an ass on the phone. There was nothing he could do now except walk the three blocks to Maggiano’s and hope to god his husband didn’t chew him a new ass in front of the entire restaurant. Sighing, Hunter grabbed his coat and gloves and ventured out into the snowy night, thanking his stars he wasn’t going to have to drive in the icy mess and hoping Stephen took his time on the road tonight.*

*Hours later, when the police had come and gone and Hunter was numbly waiting for Stephen’s parents to arrive to claim the body, he saw the tiny number indicating he had a voice mail. Lifting the phone to his ear, he heard his husband’s voice for the last time.*

*“Hey babe, listen I’m really sorry for being such a dick earlier. You’re right, this job was supposed to slow down, and it’s done a total three sixty on me, and you’ve been the one to put up with it time and again. So, listen, order*

*us some calamari, and I'll show you how well I grovel when I get there, okay? God, Hunter, I love you so much. I'm so sorry for being a hard-ass earlier, and I promise I'll make it up to you. See you soon."*

*Hunter closed his eyes and let the tears come.*

He hated remembering that night. Despised the fact the last words he spoke to Stephen had been in anger. There were days he wished he'd been the one driving that night. Hunter gave himself a little shake and looked at himself in the rearview mirror, trying to see past the desperation he saw lurking there in his eyes. With grim determination, Hunter shoved away his memories, put the car into reverse, and backed out of his parking space. Turning the car toward the main road, he made the turn that would take him to the club and what he hoped would be a night that might help him start to forget the loneliness that was currently his constant companion.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 2

Eli strained under the three bags of groceries that threatened to make him whimper in a most embarrassing way. Damn, he needed to get back to the gym. His slight boyish frame belied his twenty-seven years of age. A man of Eli's stature was commonly referred to as a "twink" in the gay vernacular. A moniker he loathed along with its unspoken assumption he would be an automatic "bottom." Eli, on the other hand, had never bottomed in his life and did not intend to in the foreseeable future, thank you very much.

Eli had always been small and wiry. His friends, all of whom were much bigger than him, would laugh every time he threatened to beat them down for all the "elf" aspersions they cast his way. Was it his fault he was only five feet seven? God knows he tried to work out, but no matter how much he hit the gym, he could barely raise a knot in his slender arms, much less an actual muscle. His grandmother had called him wiry. He was wiry all right, much to his despair. Eli dreamed of having a broad chest and meaty arms. He longed to be able to claim he had six-pack abs and not just a six-pack of coke in his fridge! But it was not to be. No, he was a little guy and definitely not set to grow any more in this lifetime.

Grunting as he made it up the last few stairs, he tried his best to scurry unnoticed past his neighbor's door, his cheeks flaming as he recalled the last time he and its occupant ran into each other—literally. His hazel eyes narrowed when he thought about the surly man who lived next door, and a grimace of distaste marred his handsome face. If only he'd waited just ten more minutes to take Max out, he and Mr. Hunter "3B" Mathews would have remained politely indifferent strangers.

Eli liked the people on his floor; he truly did. Miss Emily across the hall in 3A was his particular favorite. She was a delightful elderly woman who made him cookies every other Friday as a way of thanking him for taking little Max, her dachshund, on his nightly walk. At the ripe old age of eighty-three, Eli found it amazing the sweet old woman managed to get around as much as she did. Oh, to have that kind of energy at her age! But it was just too dark and scary for Miss Emily to be out and about late at night, not to mention unsafe as well. No, it really wasn't any bother at all for Eli to help his neighbor and take her cute, but admittedly rotund puppy, for his last stroll of the day.

So, every evening between ten and eleven, he grabbed the dog and took him for a short jaunt (um, drag) around the neighborhood. Little Max could afford

to shed a few pounds, and how the fat little mutt did not get brush burns all over his rather ponderous belly, as Eli pulled him along the sidewalk every night, was a mystery.

Regardless of the dog's wounded expression each time Eli had to put leash to collar, Miss Emily insisted on the nightly torture, er, walk. And every other Friday, after graciously accepting his oatmeal raisin cookies (shudder) Eli dutifully took them to his office the following Monday where his coworkers leapt on them like they were the last meal of a dying man, choking them down with disgusting moans of ecstasy. Eli secretly hated oatmeal raisin cookies, but he simply didn't have the heart to tell sweet Miss Emily that, hence the orgasmic cookie scarf down at the workplace every other Monday.

But everything went wrong a week ago, after the Sunday evening "walkies," as Miss Emily called them, which had found an unusually spry Max barreling up the stairs on their return trip home.

*Caught by surprise at the rare burst of energy from the otherwise lethargic sausage dog, Eli accidentally dropped the leash which, in turn, allowed Max to hurtle his fat little body up the few remaining steps and right into the legs of the grocery-laden neighbor in 3B. With a shout and more than a few choice words, the next thing a stunned Eli saw was a box of quinoa and a package of cookies hurling down at him. Twisting to avoid being hit in the face with the flying dry goods, he heard a loud thump and then saw Max's happy little face as he peered down on the prone figure of one Hunter Mathews. Shit!*

*Grabbing for the leash, Eli attempted to pull Max off Hunter before he licked the poor guy to death. When that failed to work, he frantically tried to pick up the groceries that now lay strewn about the hallway, shoving them back inside the canvas bags they had unceremoniously been dumped from just moments before. Huh? Go figure Mr. Macho of 3B using recyclable bags. That was the last thought Eli had before the sacks were torn from his hands and a semi-terrified bundle of Max was shoved into them, along with a muttered curse and a growled directive to "never mind." Recoiling as though he had been physically slapped, Eli felt his cheeks pinken to a deep red as he listened to his neighbor rant on about how he was irresponsible and should have kept a firm hand on his dog. On and on the tirade went, listing all the grievances against Eli, who according to Hunter, was nothing more than a "simpering party boy" who liked "loud music" and had "no regard" for anyone but himself. With one last insult of "You're nothing more than a vapid little twink" hurled at his face, it was all Eli could do not to lunge at the overgrown ape.*



*Eli was in shock, as he stood listening to Hunter spout insult after insult. All this from someone who barely knew him. So what if some of the accusations were correct, how dare this barrel-chested asshole accuse him of being vapid! And a vapid twink no less! Anger began to churn inside him as he picked up the end of Max's leash dangling at his feet and turned away from the asshole who was his next-door neighbor. All this because of a few fallen groceries and a collision with the cutest damn puppy in the world, weight problem be damned! Without giving Hunter the satisfaction of even a backward glance, Eli stepped across the hall and knocked on Miss Emily's door, slipping inside the moment she opened it in response.*

Eli remembered her curious expression, that eagle eye of hers taking in every hitch of his breath and the wild look on his face. He recalled how she had clucked and tried to smooth over his frustrated anger by reminding him “Poor Mr. Mathews had suffered a tragic loss, and we must do everything to be kind to the poor lost soul.” Lost soul, my ass, Eli thought as he finally reached his front door, his arms nearly yanked free of their sockets. Why in the hell had he allowed that cute boy at the Shop and Save to pack the bags so damn full? Sighing, he snagged his keys from his left pocket and inserted the correct one into the hole, turning it to the right and... nothing.

“Goddamn it.” Eli kicked at the door as he swore impotently at the key that refused to budge. Risking a near heart attack, he wrestled with the door handle in a vain attempt to free the now fully lodged key from the rusted tumbler. Why, oh why, had he put off calling the management office about his faulty door lock? Now it was Saturday, and there was no way in hell he was going to get anyone here to fix it without paying a fortune. Kicking the door in frustration, Eli dumped his bags to the side and put his shoulder to the door while fumbling with the handle, pleading for it to open. But no. No, once again, the door from hell had shown its mastery over him.

Sighing, he turned toward Miss Emily's apartment, stopping midway when he remembered she was at her weekly lunch with friends. Most of her “girlfriends” were older than her by a few years but still somehow managed to drive to the local Panera Bread three blocks away, where the group gorged on tea and pastries. While there, they never missed the chance to flirt with the manager—that “nice young man” who had just turned fifty-eight this year. The discovery of Mr. Garrison's birthday became the cause for an extra outing and a fresh dozen or so of those notorious oatmeal cookies Miss Emily was so fond of baking. Eli had been told all the details as his own batch had been pressed into

his hands just a few weeks before. Somehow that breathless giggle Miss Emily had emitted while talking about that “lovely Mr. Garrison” had seemed just a bit creepy when it was accompanied by that slightly lascivious look in the old lady’s eyes. God spare him from geriatric love. So going to her house for any kind of assistance was out. Which meant...

Slowly Eli turned, his gaze falling on apartment 3B. “Great, just great,” he muttered under his breath. Almost hoping the surly occupant of what may be his best hope at opening his stupidly stuck door was not at home, Eli swallowed his pride and knocked. He paused, listening for any sign of movement, and upon hearing none, nearly sprinted away before the telltale creak of an uncoiled hinge whispered across the air. Turning back toward the door, Eli winced at the rumpled appearance and bloodshot eyes of his nemesis. Someone definitely had a rough-ass night for sure. Seeing the sneer slowly rise on Hunter’s face, Eli reminded himself it was nearly ten a.m. and most people would be out of bed and enjoying the weekend by now.

Squaring his shoulders, Eli was about to chirp out “and a happy good morning to you, too” when a low gravelly voice interrupted his unuttered enquiry.

“Whatduhyawant?”

Eli quickly tried to decipher the slurred question, but before he could respond, another followed it up.

“Jesuschristareyagonnastandthereallday? Just spit it out!”

Now that last part Eli understood, and he leapt in to do as requested.

“Well, see, my lock is rusted, and I’m really sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you could, I mean it is ten a.m. for god’s sake, anyway, maybe you could just come next door, and well, you might want to put on some pants first, I mean I don’t mind you in boxer briefs, not at all, but some might look askance at you in your skivvies, of course, Miss Emily wouldn’t, between you and I, I’m pretty sure she watches gay porn most nights, but that’s a discussion for another time, ’course it’s not likely we’re going to have another chat anytime soon, but...”

“Oh my god, SHUT UP!”

The shout caused Eli to momentarily blanch and fumble, blushing at his verbal dump, but anger came right on the heels of his fleeting embarrassment at rambling on like an idiot.

“No, you SHUT UP, you Neanderthal! I have just about had it with your rude behavior, Mister. Just who put a bug up your ass? Huh? Cat got your tongue? No snappy comeback for the ‘twink’ from next door?”

Eli rolled his eyes and shoved his sleeves up, trying not to clench his fists as disgust and anger at Hunter rolled over him.

“Look, I need a little help with my damn door, and I was trying to avoid calling a locksmith, which by the way, would cost me an arm and a leg. Now are you going to try and help me, or stand there and be the asshole I had you pegged for all along?”

Eli paused, chest heaving, and gasping for air, and damn if his hands weren’t clenched. And why did he suddenly want to punch the crap out of Mr. Hunter “3B” Mathews? Standing there so smug, so indifferent. His lips pursed in that sour expression. Those fucking lips. Shit... those damned-near-perfect lips. How did he not notice them before? He must have been blind not to see how hot Hunter was in just about every way. All this time, he’d been so angry and offended by Hunter’s sour attitude that he failed to recognize what a damn gorgeous man he really was.

Eli couldn’t seem to tear his gaze away from Hunter’s mouth, and suddenly, instead of a smack down, to his horror, Eli found himself pushing forward and grabbing the man by the shoulders and laying a big fat kiss right on Hunter’s understandably shocked mouth. With thoughts of “What the hell am I doing?” running through his head, it took a minute or two for Eli to realize Hunter was actually responding. Expecting a rebuff at the least, and a swift kick to the ass at the worst, little did Eli even think he would feel a tentative kiss in return. A kiss that deepened exponentially, with tongues pushing between lips and bodies molding against each other, and hips thrusting and grinding.

Unfortunately, all too soon for Eli’s taste, reality came crashing down around his ears, and suddenly he felt himself flailing backward, arms spinning hopelessly in the air as the man in 3B emitted a growl that would do any grizzly bear proud. Stopping just short of falling on his cute derriere, Eli watched as Hunter bared his teeth and spit out the words, “Don’t you ever fucking knock on my door again!” With that, the furious man stepped back and slammed the door so hard the wall actually reverberated with the aftershock. However, just before Hunter disappeared from view, Eli took note of the rather apparent tenting in his otherwise boring boxer briefs. Weaving slightly from the whole delicious moment, Eli raised a hand to his lips and was stunned to realize his

baggie shorts were not quite so loose fitting as they had been earlier that morning. *Interesting*, he thought to himself, *who knew a Neanderthal could be quite so... arousing?*

With a calculating look in his eye, Eli pulled his cell from his pocket and prepared himself to part with a hundred bucks or more in order to gain access to his apartment. Thank god he had forgone the ice cream this shopping trip—the heat of that kiss alone would have melted it instantly.

\*\*\*\*

### Chapter 3

Hunter leaned against his door, his breath coming in short, sporadic bursts like he had just run a marathon. What the hell had just happened? That guy, that Eli, had kissed him. He raised two fingers to his lips, still feeling the pressure of that soft mouth on his and groaned out loud. His felt his dick harden even further as he relived that tongue jamming into his mouth, delving deep and sparring with his own. He pressed a hand against his wayward prick and heard himself moan again. The moment he'd felt that heat, that spark of lust, his knees had nearly buckled. That sweet feeling of euphoria at being mastered, the thought of just sinking into the strength of another person had swept over him and left him breathless. God, that kiss. He hadn't been kissed like that since...

Like an ice-cold shower, the thought of Stephen rushed over him, and he felt his heated body go limp. Anger began to slowly resurface and cause his heart to begin to pump a different rhythm altogether. Fucking, interfering neighbors. He'd meant it when he'd told Eli not to knock on his door again. Despite the fact he may have momentarily remembered what it was like to feel anything other than empty inside, he certainly did not need a simpering party boy to give him a pity fuck.

*Whoa, Hunter said to himself. Where did that come from? Jesus, it was just a kiss. Get a grip.*

Hunter rubbed his face with both hands. A wave of exhaustion rolled over him, and he eased himself down the door till he slumped onto the floor. He blamed his overactive imagination on the disastrous trip to Players last night. Why he ever thought he'd fit in with the party crowd was beyond him. And even though the night had stopped just short of a real horror show, he'd never felt more stupid in his life when, after one too many shots of liquid courage, he let himself approach that guy at the end of the bar. Hunter groaned as the embarrassment from last night washed over him again.

*The moment he stepped in the bar, Hunter knew it was all wrong. He watched couples moving together on the dance floor, touching and grinding, swaying and kissing. He very nearly left right then, and later he'd wished he had. Instead he gritted his teeth and set his resolve, making his way to the bar. Although crowded, Hunter managed to find a stool and sit, signaling the hunky bartender and ordering a shot of Southern Comfort and a beer chaser.*

*Downing the first with a slight wince at the heat that coursed through him, Hunter quickly tapped his glass for another and, while he waited, turned to take a look around him, slowly sipping his beer.*

*He watched the crowd, his eyes searching for someone who seemed approachable, who seemed well, nice. Hunter rolled his eyes at his naïve thoughts and turned back to his fresh shot on the bar. As he lifted it to his lips, his eyes caught sight of a man staring at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Slowly, drink still poised at his lips, Hunter stared directly at the other man and gave a slight nod. Raising the shot glass ever so slightly, he saluted the guy and watched as the man did the same. Contact. Hunter's stomach did a small flip, and a trickle of sweat rolled down his back.*

*What the fuck was he doing here?*

*Before that thought could take root and propel him out the door, Hunter was effectively trapped as his admirer came strolling down the length of the bar and took the seat that had just been vacated next to him. Tossing back his second sip of liquid courage, Hunter managed to let out a rumbling, "Hey there" before taking a quick gulp of his beer which caused him to choke and then set off a sputtering cough. His newfound companion pounded him on the back and asked him if he was all right, making some comment about the beer "going down the wrong pipe" that made Hunter want to crawl under the bar in embarrassment*

*Real smooth, Mathews, real smooth.*

*"Hi, I'm Jake, Jake Rodgers."*

*Hunter stared at the outstretched hand and swiped his own sweaty palm on his pants leg before reaching out to shake the man's hand. Simmer down, Hunter, he thought to himself; he's just being friendly, doesn't mean you have to end up in bed with him. But Hunter knew that is exactly what was going down at the bar this moment—first contact and, if all were lucky, later some down and dirty sex. He just wasn't so sure he was ready for that, for any of this.*

*"Hi, my name's Hunter, Hunter Mathews."*

*"Well, it sure is nice to meet you, Hunter Mathews. I haven't seen you in here before. Are you waiting for someone or here alone?"*

*And there it was: the invitation, the beginning of that age-old dance where two men sniff each other out and either end up fucking or walking away. Hunter knew if he replied he was here alone, Mr. Jake Rodgers would happily*

*see to it that he did not leave alone. There was that subtle knowing glance that said he was looking for someone to end his night with and was hoping Hunter might fill that ticket. Licking his suddenly dry lips, Hunter briefly closed his eyes and then without a second thought blurted out:*

*“Yep, all by my lonesome and looking for some company. You offering?”*

*The hand that moments before had been pounding him on the back now slid into place and slowly moved down to cup his ass.*

*“I sure am, Hunter. I surely am. My place is just up the street a bit. What do ya say we take the rest of this conversation there?”*

*Hunter swallowed and felt the first flare of panic light in the back of his mind. What was he doing here? He never did one-night stands, ever. Even before Stephen, he wouldn't have been caught dead in a bar being picked up by a stranger for a night of casual sex. Hunter felt himself begin to stammer out a denial, an apology. Rising to his feet and throwing a twenty on the bar, Hunter felt himself turn and nearly run from the bar, his last fleeting glimpse settling on Jake's shocked expression at his near lunatic behavior. Outside, Hunter never stopped moving until he reached his car and managed to get himself inside, locking the door and collapsing back onto the headrest. He felt like such an idiot, a scared, stupid idiot. He sat there feeling tears of frustration well up in his eyes before dashing them away with the back of his hand and starting home.*

And now here he was, nearly undone by some stupid kiss given by a guy he barely knew. Pathetic. He was pathetic. Rising to his feet, Hunter trudged toward the shower, hoping some hot water would rinse away the taste of failure that clung to every inch of him.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 4

Eli couldn't help glancing at 3B as he hurried past, late for his weekly Saturday lunch with Teddy. He mentally paused to ask himself once again why he had done the unimaginable and kissed his surly, combative neighbor. It had just felt so right to take control, shut Hunter up, and show him who the boss was. So often people assumed Eli was some pushover, when in fact, he was a top in all senses of the word. He most certainly liked to take over in the bedroom, especially if the guy was big and tough looking. In Eli's experience those were the guys who really liked to have somebody take control. Maybe that's why he had pushed at Hunter; maybe he just gave off that vibe that hit Eli just right? Whatever the reason, Eli couldn't get that kiss out of his mind. It was just so perfect. Checking his watch, he swore under his breath and ran down the stairs. Late again. Teddy would never let him hear the end of it.

Teddy had been Eli's best friend since the pair had been in diapers, having grown up just three houses apart on a quiet little cul-de-sac outside the city. Their moms had been best friends and inseparable, even getting pregnant within weeks of each other twenty-seven years previous. So it stood to reason not a week went by without the two young men checking in with one another in person while daily phone calls kept them fully immersed in the gossip of the day.

Whereas Eli was slight and shorter in stature, Teddy resembled Hunter more in shape and bulk. Big and muscular from visiting the gym daily, Teddy was a study in contrasts, his voice high and breathy while his body reminded one of a linebacker. Plus Teddy was, well, rather obvious. One might even use the word flamboyant when discussing Eli's dearest friend. But Eli loved Teddy fiercely, and they had no secrets, so it was quite the norm for him to spill all the details about the occupant of 3B and that incredibly hot kiss while Teddy gasped and clutched his multi-colored "That's right I'm GAY, Bitches" T-shirt in mock horror.

"Oh my GOD!"

Teddy's high-pitched squeal made every dog within a two-mile radius stand at alert and howl in pain.

"Jesus, Teddy, you're going to pierce my eardrums one of these days."

"You forget, Elijah James Miller, I have been the recipient of some of your better kisses, and darling, they are divine!"



“First off, do *not* call me by my full name, Theodore Erasmus Cummings! And secondly what delusion are you operating under where I somehow kissed that ugly puss of yours?”

“Oh ye of limited memory! First off, the no-full-name rule has now been invoked, and no more snippy attitude either, little mister! And you so did kiss me. Does New Year’s Eve 2009 ring a bell? How could you forget the infamous last kiss of the decade?”

Eli paused, trying to recall that night. It would have been their senior year at college and right after Teddy had been dumped by that guy in his accounting class. What was that jerk’s name? Randy, Ricky, Rory—that’s right, Rory “asshole” Anderson. What a prick that guy was, telling Teddy he couldn’t be seen with a “prissy fag” hanging on him at the New Year’s Eve party where someone might see them. The bastard had made it very clear to Teddy it was fine to fuck him in the privacy of his dorm room, but out in public he wanted nothing to do with the very openly out and proud Theodore Cummings.

It was just Teddy’s luck to land yet another closeted prick who would take advantage of the man’s big, soft heart and then stomp on it without any hesitation. Eli had wanted to punch the guy’s lights out but had settled for escorting a teary-eyed Teddy to the university’s GSA New Year’s Eve party instead. At midnight Teddy was such a sloppy drunken mess that Eli had felt pity for him, and he slipped him some tongue in a rather passionate kiss. How the hell did his friend even remember that night, let alone a one-off kiss?

“Okay, okay, let it go, Theodora, it wasn’t that amazing a kiss.”

“Au contraire, Ellie, it was probably one of the absolute best kisses that has ever graced my fabulous lips! And let me tell you, that is saying something!”

Eli nodded in agreement, knowing what a kissing whore his buddy was. If he could lock lips with any breathing member of the male species, Teddy would.

Eli looked around for the waitress to snag a refill and then glanced back at Teddy who was currently dissecting his grilled chicken wrap with the precision of a world-class surgeon. One thing you had to say for Teddy, he knew what he liked, and once decided, he never looked back. He was, without a doubt, the most loyal friend Eli had ever lucked out knowing, and Eli would do just about anything to make sure Teddy was happy. After all, best friends always looked out for one another.

Finally catching the eye of the perky blonde who was waiting their table, Eli concentrated on reeling her in and only caught the tail end of whatever Teddy was babbling on about.

“So, you just get Tall-Dark-and-Belligerent to come to your party next Friday as your plus one, and you can taste the nectar of his sweet lips once again! It’s the perfect excuse to make a move on ‘Mr. Hunky Pants in 3B.’”

Eli caught Teddy’s air quotes and tried not to choke on the piece of ice he had just popped in his mouth. Was Teddy actually suggesting he invite Hunter to his Valentine’s Day Party? Was he on crack? There was no way he was going to invite the guy whom he had just lip-locked, only to have him slam the door in his face thirty seconds after. No way in hell! As he opened his mouth to say just that, Teddy gave a shout of triumph and shoved an errant piece of cucumber he’d found during his chicken wrap surgery into Eli’s mouth, effectively silencing his protests. Scrambling to chew the nasty portion of crudités, Eli tried to explain why Hunter Mathews was not going to be a guest at any party he hosted in the foreseeable future.

“Tut, such an uncouth lad you are, Ellie, talking with your mouth full! Now let’s discuss what you’re going to wear when you ask that delicious neighbor of yours to the party. The art of seduction is what it is all about. You must make this man want you, crave you, desire you. Oh my god, this is so exciting! You have a boyfriend!!!!”

Eli swallowed with an audible gulp and opened his mouth to tell Teddy he had most definitely lost his mind, that one kiss hardly meant he was going steady, and he had no intention of inviting Hunter only to have a second piece of veg stuffed in his mouth. Sighing with resignation he sat, chewing, as Teddy planned out Eli’s mode of attack on the unknowing Hunter Mathews.

Ninety minutes later, Eli trudged back up the stairs to his apartment, still trying to figure out how Teddy had talked him into inviting Hunter to his party next Friday night. In the end it really didn’t matter because Eli knew it would be a cold day in hell before his neighbor darkened his door for anything, much less an opportunity to spend a night living it up with people Hunter generally seemed to despise. Besides, he had no intention of asking Hunter to join in the fun; absolutely not. He’d just tell Teddy he’d tried, but Hunter had shut him down. It would just be a little white lie, and no one would be the wiser. Eli felt his pocket vibrate, indicating he had a text. Pulling his phone out he saw Teddy’s smiling face on his screen. Punching in his code, he read the text and

shook his head in wonder. How in the hell did his friend manage it? How in the fuck did he know?

*If U R even thinking about backing out, forget it! I will know if you lie! Now go invite him!*

And without responding, Eli groaned out loud and hurried into his apartment to contemplate just whom he could hire to off his best friend before the party next week.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 5

Hunter looked at the rancher-style house nestled in the quiet neighborhood in rural Maryland and wondered for the umpteenth time why he had decided to finally give in and attend Sunday dinner. Just beyond the front door were two people who knew his pain better than any therapist he had visited in the last year. Stephen's parents were just there, on the other side of that door. Heaving a deep sigh, Hunter grabbed the bottle of wine off the passenger seat and eased out of his car. *It's just like ripping off a bandage*, he thought to himself. *Just get to the door and get the "welcome home, son" bit over, and the rest will be a piece of cake.* Somehow, telling himself this over and over again for the last two hours had done nothing to ease the churning feeling he had in his gut.

As he was raising his hand to knock, the door was yanked open, and a small woman came hurling through it straight into Hunter's arms.

"Oh my god, you're here! Oh Hunter, it's lovely to see you."

Hunter held on tightly to the bundle of energy that was Stephen's mother. For one brief moment, he felt overwhelmingly loved, and he tried not to let the reality that no husband stood behind him affect this moment of sweet joy. But all too soon, he felt the rush of sadness and began to pull back from the woman he so casually used to refer to as Mom.

"Hi, Helen, thanks for inviting me."

He saw the momentary flash of confusion and then the swift flare of pain light in Helen's eyes at the use of her first name rather than the title of Mom. Just as quickly, a smile crossed her face, and she was grabbing his arm to tug him into the house where John Crosswhite stood, a huge grin plastered on his face. Soon enough, Hunter was engulfed in a bear hug and winced as he felt his ribs threaten to crack. Stephen had taken after his father, not only in looks, but size as well. Both of them were big men who were known for their ability to be so very gentle when the occasion called for it.

Hunter drew back and softly said, "Hello," then stood, at a loss as to how to proceed. It seemed like years since he'd been in this foyer and even longer since he spoke to Stephen's parents. The memory of their dead son suddenly rose up in front of Hunter, and he had to squeeze his eyes shut for just a second before the tears pushing their way to the surface fell down his cheeks, embarrassing him and the sweet old couple in front of him.

As if reading his thoughts, Helen squeezed his arm and cleared her throat, huskily saying, “How about a glass of iced tea? I’ll go get it, and you go on into the living room with your Da—um, John. I think the Caps are playing the Rangers, and lord knows, if there’s a hockey game on, John is watching it.”

Hunter didn’t fail to recognize the hitch in Helen’s voice. This had been such a bad idea. He should have stayed away. The awkwardness of it all plus his hesitancy was spilling out and making a fucking mess of the afternoon. Nothing was ever going to be the same. There was a gaping hole in all their lives where Stephen used to be, and no amount of iced tea or hockey was going to change that fact.

One more time, Helen seemed to see right through him. Leaning in to whisper, she brushed his hair back with her soft hand.

“It’s okay, honey. I miss him too.”

And that was the final straw. Hunter turned, his eyes now blinded by tears, and grabbed the woman who had been like a mother to him for so many years. He clung to her and wept. Tears for what might have been, for what they had lost, for what had been stolen away from them both. He felt himself being wrapped in a hug from behind and knew John had joined them. Bodies silently shaking with grief and arms holding each other with love, the three figures made a sad tableau standing there in the front hallway. As quickly as grief had set in, the tears began to abate, and Hunter shifted, causing John to let go and Helen to take a step back. For a moment, he felt so bereft at the loss of their comfort. Then, he straightened up and drew in a deep breath.

“I’m so sorry. So sorry that he’s not here. That I’m just a poor substitute for who Stephen was and what he meant to you, to us.”

“Hush, now. I won’t hear that. You are certainly no *poor substitute* as you call it. You are just as much our son as he was, and we are so very happy you came back to us, Hunter. We have missed you so much. Right, John?”

Hunter turned to see John nodding, a slight smile on his face.

“She’s right, you know. Who else would sit through all those hockey games with me?”

And that broke the tension; that silly admission seemed to lift the cloud that had been over them all for so long. Hunter realized how much he had missed Helen and John—how much he’d missed this sense of belonging. For the first time since his husband’s death, a genuine smile broke out on Hunter’s face. Not

a fake attempt to appear normal, or a plastered-on smile to reassure others he was doing okay; no, this was a true moment of happiness, and it felt damn good. He turned back to Helen and asked her if she needed any help in the kitchen.

“No, no—you should know better than that. Go on with you—go watch some TV with John.”

Hunter didn't correct the use of the formal name; he couldn't bring himself to do that just yet. Perhaps one day, he could utter those words, Mom, Dad, again but not today. Today he would just breathe and visit and try to relax. Today he would mourn his loss and see if he could draw comfort from those who mourned with him, and that would have to be enough. Nodding, Hunter turned and followed John into the living room.

Hours later, after a dinner everyone barely touched, Hunter started to make his good-byes. He watched the two people who, next to his husband, had meant the world to him slowly deflate as they realized he would be leaving early and not hanging around. Seeing that fleeting glimpse of disappointment and longing flash in their eyes, Hunter felt the guilty weight of being the one who survived come crashing down around his shoulders once more. They didn't mean it—didn't mean to make him feel bad about being the one left alive, but it happened all the same. It had been a roller coaster of a day, and frankly he was done, emotionally spent, and hurting inside.

Hugging Helen to his chest, Hunter murmured his thanks and a halfhearted promise to come visit more frequently. They both knew it for the lie it was, and they both pretended not to notice. This would be his last visit. He simply could not bring himself to this house again, see Stephen in every nook and cranny, and pretend it didn't feel like a punch in the gut every time. Releasing Helen, Hunter turned to John and extended his hand. Predictably, John ignored it and grabbed him up into a bear hug. Hunter held onto what little self-control he had and managed not to break down into sobs as he had done just a short time before when he'd arrived. He stepped back, his hand on the doorknob, struggling to say something, anything that might comfort these grieving parents. But Hunter's grief was too close to the surface, and so he merely nodded and gripped the bag of leftovers more tightly in his fist. Turning, he stepped out into the cool approaching twilight and tried to not run to his car.

Home was all he could think of, home and a bottle of sweet, sweet oblivion.

## Chapter 6

Sunday was cleaning day for Eli, and he had a love/hate relationship with his dust mop. However, pumping up the music always made the time and the chores move much faster. So with heavy metal screaming out of his stereo, Eli hit the living room with a vengeance. He had no concerns about the wall of sound filtering through to his next-door neighbor because when he'd taken Max for his afternoon "drag along," he'd noticed a deafening silence from 3B. While Hunter was never really loud, you could still hear him puttering about or playing music when he was home. These days, Eli paid way more attention to the comings and goings of the other side.

Since the "kiss"—Eli's mind always put that moment in quotes for some reason—he had timed his own forays strategically so he could avoid running into Hunter. However, Friday was looming large, and he would never hear the end of it from Teddy if he didn't invite Hunter to the party. Eli was pretty sure the invite was going to be turned down cold, but there was this tiny piece of him that really wanted the man in 3B to say yes. Well, if he was really being honest, what he wanted was another shot at that mouth—that hot, sexy mouth. Jesus, the very thought made him spring a boner.

He paused in his mopping to push a hand against his wayward dick. *Down, boy*, he thought and then huffed out a laugh at himself for addressing his hard-on. Eli closed his eyes for just a moment and stroked, rather than pushed, recalling Hunter's mouth and imagining it ghosting down his body. The image of that big man on his knees; Eli guiding his cock into that sexy mouth, and all that heat wrapping itself round him; that tongue sucking and licking. Eli shoved his hand down his sweats and began to stroke in earnest. His body began to sway just a little, his hips gently thrusting, and all the while he saw Hunter moaning, pressing his face into Eli's stomach, deep throating him.

The music swelled around him, crashing in jarring clashes of sound that seemed to encourage his hips to rock faster, his pelvis to tilt upward, and his hand to clench and tug harder at his now-weeping cock. A low murmur escaped from Eli's lips, a singular chant that kept time with each air thrust, "Hunter, Hunter, Hunter, yes, yes, oh fuck, yes." Eli came hard, jets of cum splashing onto his clean floor. The impact of the orgasm sent him to his knees, his legs so wobbly he could no longer remain upright. Panting through his mouth, he gave one last tug on his still-rigid cock and gasped out the word, "fuck" as he shuddered and then bowed his head, spent in more ways than one.

The CD chose just that moment to finish and slid to standby just in time for Eli to hear Hunter's door open and then close. Eli looked at their adjoining wall and wondered if the stolen kiss had left its mark on Hunter as it had on him. Well, there was really only one way to find out, and that was to go next door and ask. Ask Hunter out on a date, to his party, as Eli's "plus one." His eye caught the small puddles of jizz on his once-clean floor, and Eli moaned. Damn if he wasn't going to have to mop the floor again. Best to get it and himself taken care of first and ask later. Yep, a full mopping was in order, no spot cleaning would do. After all, doing a half-assed job might just leave enough time for a visit to deliver that invite, and Eli was damned if he was up for that today. Surely, pinning down the big guy next door could wait another day, right? Not like Eli was avoiding it or anything... right?

\*\*\*\*

A slight breeze rustled the curtains as another breathy moan drifted across the room. The soft exhalation had just a hint of desperation to it as if it had been forced. The man lay prone atop his bed, his cock clenched in his sweaty hand, frantically pumping it up and down. His sighs morphed into slurred words and whispered pleas as the room filled with the enticing scent of a man teetering on the edge of climax.

"Need you, need you," Hunter whispered as he thrust the thick dildo into his ass. Panting through the tiny sparks that lit up his dick, the big man closed his eyes and willed himself to completion. This time it was going to happen. This time his cock would get on board, and the cum would flow hard and fast. He wanted this. Just one orgasm, that was all he was asking for, just one moment when all the loneliness he hid from every day would ease. Just one climax would excise the demons that seemed to haunt him.

Sweat dripping off his brow, Hunter felt his balls draw up tight and hot. He thrust the rubber toy deeper and gasped at the frisson of pleasure that gripped his spine. His hips pushed up off the bed as the name forced its way past his lips and burst into the dark bedroom like a living thing.

"Stephen, oh Jesus, Stephen."

A spasm of pain rocked his entire body as he lost his grip on the slippery phallus and his cock jolted. Hunter froze. Then, slowly, he felt his erection begin to fade, and the sadness rose up and overwhelmed him. The old familiar anger that seemed to be his constant companion these days followed swiftly, and in disgust, he threw the dildo across the room, listening to the thump as it hit the far wall.



He pulled the sheet up over his cooling body and realized he wasn't going to get off tonight. Like so many other times, Hunter's body had betrayed him yet again. He shivered, curling into a ball. Stephen was gone, dead at the hands of a drunken fool who'd had no right to be behind the wheel of a car on a snowy night. On the eve of their first Valentine's Day as a married couple, the love of his life had been stolen from him, and here he was, alone and drunk, and bearing down on the holiday a few short days away.

People would go about their day, hurrying to buy the crap they would use as a token of their affection, returning to their homes and into the waiting arms of their lovers. The rest of the world would use that day to celebrate. But not Hunter. A long, hard year had almost passed since Stephen's death and still his dead lover's parents sent their weekly email to tell Hunter they loved him, missed him, wanted him to remember their home was always open to him. It had been caving in to that email and actually visiting which had been the driving force behind cracking open the fifth of Johnny Walker now lying nearly empty by the side of the bed.

Liquid courage and just a bit of hysteria had prompted Hunter to unearth the dildo that Stephen had bought for him right before he died. It was to be their "special way" of celebrating the beginning of their second year together as a married couple. Christ, what had compelled the pragmatic and sometimes prickly Hunter to ever agree to a commitment ceremony on Valentine's Day? Stephen. The name rolled around in Hunter's alcohol-drenched memory. Stephen, the hopeless romantic, had begged him, gotten down on one knee and pleaded for a hearts and roses ceremony, and Hunter had grudgingly agreed. No, not grudgingly. There had never been a time when the sun did not seem to rise and set on the shoulders of his lover. Even though they had not always seen eye to eye on all things, Stephen had most definitely been the source of all things happy and contented in Hunter's life.

Was. Had been. No more. Now the memory of Stephen was like an ice pick that tore at him, gouging all the way into his soul. God, he was pathetic.

Despite the bile he felt rising in his throat and the pain he knew so well, Hunter closed his eyes and allowed himself to remember his lover. Like himself, Stephen had been tall and big, with a broad chest and narrow waist, but it was there that any resemblance to Hunter ended. Where he was dark and blue-eyed, Stephen was light with blond hair and caramel-colored eyes that peered out from a handsome face that seemed to be perpetually lit with a smile.

Despite Hunter's noted surliness toward just about everyone and everything, he had a few friends but nothing compared to the many Stephen had. At first, when they became a couple, it was a big adjustment for Hunter to let down his guard and embrace all the people who were a part of Stephen's life. Even Stephen's own family had expressed concern for their son's fascination with that "unhappy boy." Hunter had an uneasy alliance with joy of any kind and often reminded Stephen of how foolish he was for taking on the resident "grump." But deep inside Hunter beat the heart of a fiercely loyal and loving man, and it was this that had drawn Stephen to him.

A sad smile graced Hunter's lips as he recalled how their friends would laugh as they questioned how two bears got along so well, often taunting Stephen about Hunter's obvious dominance. Stephen would smile, reticent, and refusing to acknowledge their taunts. But later in the safety of their bedroom, Stephen would tease him about how everyone was so certain that he was the bottom in their relationship. Hunter's ass certainly knew differently. Despite all his antisocial ways, Hunter was ridiculously and completely in love with Stephen James Crosswhite and would have happily followed him to the ends of the earth.

Hunter flinched as the warm memories shifted, only to make room for more. He knew he should stop. He realized that with each advancing thought, more and more of his life with Stephen would wrap around him, causing his skin to tighten and his heart to stutter. Yet he was inexorably drawn to the past, like an addict to his next fix.

With eyes shut tight and fingers clenching the thin sheet, Hunter remembered his lover's way of laughing that never failed to boom and echo when given voice, drawing others in, Hunter included. How often had he heard that low chuckle echo inside him, pulling him from his melancholy?

A quiet sob tore from Hunter's throat. Jesus, he was such a fucking crybaby. But there was no help for it; between the whiskey and another pathetic attempt to somehow escape into the mindless bliss of an elusive orgasm, Hunter had no reserves left. He never should've gone to see John and Helen, but deep down he knew it had to happen eventually. Hunter knew it was time to move on. But how? He rolled over and curled back into himself, giving in to the pain and loss that threatened to tear him apart. His harsh, barking cries were the only noise in the cold, empty apartment.

Eli hitched up the sweats that threatened to slide off his narrow hips. He hated housecleaning; that was a fact. He despised it even more when he had to finish late at night. Okay, so nine thirty wasn't that late, but still, if Max would just learn to take a dump a little bit faster, he would have been done with his cleaning fest by now. Of course he couldn't really blame the fat little pup for the pony-sized dust bunnies he found under the sofa. And just how long had it been since he last mopped his kitchen floor? All this because he had agreed to host that stupid party this Friday. Who in his right mind invited twenty friends over for a Valentine's Day Party? Apparently Teddy did, and Eli had just come along for the ride.

Eli picked up the dust rag and furniture spray and made his way into the living room. He'd had to switch out his heavy metal music for some lighter jazz when Hunter had come back home. There was no way he wanted to spar over the volume of his music—not until Eli had a better grip on his wayward dick and figured out why that damn kiss seemed to have such an effect on him.

With a huge sigh, Eli stepped over and flicked off the stereo. As he turned to begin dusting the bookcases that lined one entire wall, he began to mentally tick off items on his to-do list for Friday night's party. With just a trace of guilt, he slid past the reminder of Teddy calling him today to see if he had invited the “hunk of burnin' love” next door. You had to hand it to his best friend, he knew every euphemism there was to describe a hot guy. And Hunter was decidedly that—a sexy, hot guy. If only he could get Hunter alone for long enough to steal a few more of those incredible kisses. Eli stopped, midswipe, and realized he was going to have to get over himself and invite Hunter or he would never hear the end of it from Teddy.

He was going to have to go next door and tell Hunter he was having a party Friday night, no doubt solidifying that “simpering party boy” view he was certain Hunter held. God, he was alternately desperate to see his irritatingly gorgeous neighbor and irritated by having to invite the surly man at all. Eli paused. Now where the hell did that thought come from? Gorgeous? Well, yes, Hunter was certainly not an eyesore; that was for damn sure. But he was a Neanderthal at best. Always grunting a hello, as if it pained him to be polite, when they occasionally passed each other in the hall. Is that why he had macked on Hunter the first chance he got? So he could show him he was much more than a scatterbrained twink? Eli shook his head and silently told himself to let it go. It was just one stupid kiss, after all, hardly anything to get so worked up over, despite what his libido had to say about it. No, there was no

way out of it, Eli was going to have to go over and invite Hunter, so he may as well just do it right now.

Squaring his shoulders, Eli left his cleaning products on the dining room table, and made his way toward the door, only to stop dead when he heard noises drifting through the wall between his apartment and 3B. Oh my god, did his ears deceive him? Could that be a moan of pleasure? Was snarly man actually having sex?

Eli slid closer to the wall separating him and Hunter, his ears straining to make sense of the muttered words. Hunter was, dear god, Hunter was getting the fucking of his life if Eli's ears were not mistaken. Pushing against the plaster, Eli held his breath as he heard what sounded like the telltale slap of a cock against willing flesh, and the moans rising thick and heady beyond the wall. Although barely recovered from earlier, his own cock began to stir as he listened to the rough voice chant "need you" over and over. He knew he should step away, that what he was doing really was an invasion of Hunter's privacy, and for a brief moment, Eli resolved to do just that, but then came a louder moan and god help him, the man sounded just too fucking hot to ignore.

Eli slid a hand down, stunned to feel his prick struggling to rise. He closed his eyes, the tip of his tongue darting out to lick his lips as he rubbed against his shaft. Just as a soft moan rose to escape his lips, Eli heard the thump of something hard hit the wall he was leaning against. And his hand froze. He stood, ashamed, realizing he had been practically masturbating to the sounds of his neighbor getting some. Jesus, they must be really going at it over there. Eli looked down at his wilting semi. God, Teddy was right; it had been way too long since he'd gotten laid. Pushing away from the wall, he moved back to pick up his dust rag, intent on finishing his chores. He would talk to Hunter tomorrow before he went to work. After all, Eli didn't think busting in on his nighttime activities was really the neighborly thing to do.

Chuckling to himself, Eli walked over to the stereo to put in another CD when a different sound began drifting through the wall. Was that crying? Actually, it sounded like full-on sobbing. What was going on over there? Eli went still, his hand hovering just above the CDs, as the mournful sound grew slightly louder. Was that Hunter? But he'd just been getting what sounded like the fuck of his life just a few moments ago. Why was Hunter crying? Was he hurt? Was there some bastard over there hurting his neighbor? Eli strode toward the wall ready to bang his fist and shout at the fucker who was causing the man

next door to cry in such obvious distress. Just as he raised his fist, he heard Hunter say a name, “Stephen.”

Backing up in confusion, he heard it again, and then a distant memory sparked in his mind. That day when Hunter had been so angry with him and little Max, Eli remembered ranting at Miss Emily about the “nerve of that guy.” He recalled how she’d clucked her tongue at him and then proceeded to tell him all about Hunter’s partner getting killed by a drunk driver a year before. She remarked how his death had changed Hunter from a warm and caring tenant to a reclusive and angry man. Eli could still hear that wistful tone she used when she told him how much Hunter had loved Stephen. She spoke about the two guys like they were soul mates or something. Eli had been so angry that he’d dismissed the notion out of hand. Soul mates? Right, like there was any such thing.

Eli forced himself to turn way from the pitiful sounds coming through the wall. Friday was Valentine’s Day, the day of his party, and also the one-year anniversary of the death of Hunter’s husband. Oh my god. It all came shooting back now. He remembered seeing that vacant look of loss Hunter’d had for so long. The man had barely appeared aware of his surroundings for months, until one day, like someone had flicked a switch inside the guy, the sad, lost look on Hunter’s face was replaced with an angry sneer. That was when Eli had started to avoid his neighbor. Going so far as to delay his coming and going until he heard the safe click of the door closing next to his. Then he’d grab his bag and make a run for it, hoping not to get caught in the crosshairs. He’d been remarkably successful until Max had decided to channel his inner puppy and break free.

Months of avoiding ruined by a chubby wiener dog that just had to relive his glory days as a former speed demon. Weeks and weeks of avoiding all the sadness and pain that seemed to roll off Hunter, making nearly everyone uncomfortable. No, not Miss Emily, she was compassionate and kind about it. Really, it was just him. All that raw emotion had made Eli uncomfortable, no one else. Oh god... Eli dropped his head into his hands as he realized how horrible a neighbor he really was.

\*\*\*\*

Hunter turned his head and cracked open one eye to see the time on his bedside alarm clock. Only ten thirty in the evening. It felt like hours had passed, not just a few. His hand shook as he swept it across his eyes, trying in

vain to wipe away the fog that seemed to float just inches in front of his face. As he turned, he heard the empty bottle that lay nestled by his side fall to the floor and roll slightly, clinking into another. The room spun around him, and his head swam as he groaned in pain, trying to recall just how many bottles of booze he had needed before collapsing into a drunken coma.

He lay, curled into a ball, a dull aching pain in his ass reminding him once again of his failure to climax. It had been months since he had felt that satisfying rush of release. He just couldn't seem to finish or to bring himself off. Every time he even came close, it would trigger the painful realization that Stephen was gone and guilt about surviving, about still being alive, would flood him. This wasn't living, this mindless drag through each day, doing not much more than working and sleeping. Hunter squeezed himself into a tighter position and tried to sleep, tried to forget all the crap that whirled through his head. But his throat was so dry, and he really needed to take a piss, so as slowly as possible, Hunter eased himself upright and headed for the bathroom.

\*\*\*\*

Eli felt awful. Not only had he treated Hunter like a leper for several months, but also, when he'd had a chance to apologize, to make it right, he'd pushed himself on the guy by sticking his tongue down his throat. Granted, Hunter was downright rude when all Eli wanted was a little help getting the damn key unstuck, and yes, okay, maybe Eli should have begun by asking how Hunter was and apologizing for the run-in with little Max. But he'd been flustered, and Hunter was all gorgeous and near naked, and well, Eli had just leaped before thinking. And now the poor guy was obviously really upset, and he should go over there and see if he could help or if Hunter wanted to talk, but it'd been nearly an hour since Eli had heard any noises through the wall, and oh just fuck it!

Eli heaved himself off the floor where he had been sitting for over an hour and headed for the door before he could change his mind. He'd knock just once; if Hunter didn't answer then he'd come back to his apartment and invite him later. Maybe he could just write a note inviting him and slip it under the door some night this week. That was a good idea; right now all he was doing was asking after a neighbor—just like anyone else would have done who'd heard Hunter's distress.

By the time Eli had talked himself into the visit and decided he would send an invite rather than come right out and ask, he was standing in front of apartment 3B. Taking a deep breath, he raised his hand and ever so lightly

tapped on the door. Shaking his head at his own cowardice, he rapped again—this time louder and longer. Then he waited. Silence. He leaned in closer to see if he could hear anything. Silence. He stepped in and rested his ear against the door and scarcely breathed so he could hear any sign of movement, and that was when the door was yanked open, and a semi-inebriated Hunter stood there, once again in his damn boxers.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 7

The smell of whiskey that rolled off of the near-naked Hunter almost knocked Eli on his ass; it was that strong. Although the hallway was not well lit this time of night, he could still see that his neighbor had that “just out of bed” look. Eli almost laughed at the tufts of hair sticking out at all angles and the hangdog expression on Hunter’s face until he noticed the red, puffy eyes that were not the product of a bender, but of a serious crying jag. That, and the defeated look that seemed to radiate off of the man, made Eli step into the breach and once more throw all caution to the wind. Without thinking twice, Eli grabbed the bigger man and drew him down into a hug. He held on tightly, rubbing Hunter’s back and whispering, “I’m so sorry.”

Those three words were once the catalyst to unlocking the world of hurt that had been keeping Hunter prisoner since the day of the accident.

He leaned into Eli’s warm embrace and cried as he had never done before. Tears for all the guilt, the loss, the loneliness came tumbling out, pouring from what felt like Hunter’s very soul. He knew the thought was silly, the idea that his neighbor, a man he barely knew, could somehow provide the way to finally move on. However, even as he mocked the idea, Hunter knew it was true. For the first time in so long, he felt safe, comforted, maybe even loved in some small way. *Loved*. The whole idea that someone could love him again made him want to collapse into the heat of the man holding him. Speaking of which, Hunter realized he was in danger of tumbling Eli on to his backside if he didn’t straighten up, lean back, and let the guy breathe.

Pulling back, but keeping one arm loosely around Eli, Hunter used the other to swipe the back of his hand across his eyes.

“Thank you, I... well, I’m sorry too.”

The words came out almost in a whisper, his tone subdued and his voice rough like fine gravel, but he meant them. He had lashed out at everyone these last few months, and the small man in front of him had been his target on more than one occasion. The thought of how he had dismissed Eli as nothing more than some thoughtless, self-centered twink made him look away in shame, his arm dropping away from Eli’s waist. But Eli was having none of that. Stepping closer once more, Eli reached up, wrapping his hand around the back of Hunter’s head, bringing their foreheads together and sighing.



“Shhh. Tell you what? Let’s just start over. Hi, I’m Eli, your next-door neighbor in three-C. I noticed you’ve been having a rough time of it lately. I thought you might like to get some dinner sometime, like maybe tomorrow after work?”

Eli had said all this to Hunter’s nose and figured it was time to risk looking directly into his eyes to see if he had totally blown the moment or not. Ever so slowly, he peered up at the face that had begun to captivate him on so many levels. Gusting out a huge sigh of relief, he saw a small smile on Hunter’s lips and watched as the big man nodded his head in agreement.

Eli needed no further encouragement to prompt him to lock lips with his lonely bear again. Sweeping his tongue against Hunter’s soft lips, Eli plunged his tongue inside to taste the sharp taste of whiskey. His tongue clashed with Hunter’s, and he felt strong arms wrap around him and squeeze him in a tight embrace.

The two men stayed this way for minutes, kissing and exploring each other with their hands. Eli thrust his hips against Hunter’s thigh and moaned lightly into the warm, wet mouth he was ravishing. Yes, he was ravishing and was not afraid to admit it, his inner jaded critic be damned. Teddy would be laughing out loud right about now at his choice of terminology. Any thought of his friend was brushed away when Eli felt Hunter return his thrust with one of his own. Oh dear.

Breaking off the kiss, Eli took a deep breath and spoke softly into Hunter’s ear.

“As much as I’d like to see exactly what you have for me beneath those boxers, I am pretty sure dinner should be the first thing we do. So, please don’t take this the wrong way, but I am going to step back now and hope Miss Emily does not take this moment to peep out of her door to see my raging hard-on as I walk back to my apartment.”

At the words “raging hard-on,” Hunter’s eyes immediately dropped down, and a small gasp escaped his lips as he took in the rather large bulge tenting the front of Eli’s sweats. Without moving his gaze one bit, Hunter responded.

“As long as that is on the menu for dessert tomorrow you can go wherever you like.”

Eli laughed out loud and grabbed Hunter back into one last hug. His lips brushed against Hunter’s ear, and he spoke a few words that made both men smile.

“Dessert for two, my cock in your mouth and then in your ass.”

Drawing back, Eli gave Hunter a quick peck on the cheek and sauntered to his door, turning back right before he went in, to wink at the wide-eyed man standing in the soft light of apartment 3B.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 8

Hunter checked the clock on his office wall one more time. Only three forty-five p.m., over an hour to go and then Eli and dinner and maybe... sex. That idea made him swallow hard and maybe even tremble a bit. Was he ready for sex? What if he couldn't get it up? Or climax? Or both? Jesus. Hunter ran a hand through his hair and blew out a shaky breath. He had to get a grip! After all, sex was not a guarantee! Oh, who the hell was he trying to kid? That tongue Eli had been forcing down his throat was certainly not asking him to just hold hands.

He paused for just a second and recalled the night before and how he had shamelessly ground his dick against Eli's and felt him harden in response. It felt so good, so right. For those brief minutes in his doorway, with Eli wrapped around him, Hunter hadn't thought about Stephen at all. He felt a momentary pang of guilt and then nothing. Was that okay? To finally not feel like the world was going to fall apart if he went on a date? If he kissed a guy? If he had sex? Was that really all right?

Hunter sat at his desk and thought for the first time in so long that maybe it was—maybe it was just fine to have all that again and not have to worry he was somehow betraying the memory of his late husband. Stephen really would have wanted him to move on, and it was his own guilt that had kept him locked in grief and anger for so long. He wanted this date. He wanted to get to know Eli, and he wanted to see just how far this obvious attraction they had for each other could go. And if the way Eli kissed was any indication, then just maybe he was as forceful in the bedroom. Hunter hoped so. He needed Eli to take control, wanted him to do that. Perhaps tonight he would find out if his neighbor in 3C was more than met the eye, stronger than Hunter had pegged him to be.

Glancing up at the clock one more time, Hunter was pleased to see he had just an hour to go. Now, if he could get his head back in the game, perhaps he could finish up the new contract that had hit his desk this morning before he went home to shower and change for his date. His date. He, Hunter Mathews, had been asked out to dinner, and he was actually looking forward to going. That was okay, wasn't it, Stephen? It was time to try and move on, right? Hunter squeezed his eyes shut against the sudden feeling of loss. There would be no psychic communication from the great beyond for him. No Stephen whispering in his ear that it was okay to do this. Instead, he knew he had to try

to move forward and finally make it this time. He wanted this so badly, and he thought Eli might be just the person to help him take this first step. But first, work. He had to get at least one round of review in on the new contract before he left for the day.

Hunter picked up the binder containing the contract and began to make notes on the legalese needed to make this new venture the company was planning a reality. First finish the job, and then go on the date. He put his head down, determined to make both work. Sixty more minutes and he could get home and get ready for his date. Hunter smiled and returned to the papers in front of him once more.

\*\*\*\*

Eli caught the bus home and was in his apartment by four o'clock, standing in a hot shower, lazily stroking his cock, and thinking of his dinner date. He closed his eyes and stepped under the water, spraying his head and shoulders with near-scalding cascade. He groaned out loud as he felt the tension of the day ease. Sometimes running his own business was exhausting. But he couldn't complain, he now had nine bike couriers on his books, and if business kept growing, it looked like he would have a full dozen by the end of the year.

Twelve couriers meant he would no longer have to bike himself—something that left him both a bit forlorn and happy all at the same time. He loved the freedom of riding, even in the city traffic. There was that element of danger that was always present when you were dodging traffic and going upward of eighteen to twenty miles per hour. Eli had clocked more miles than he could remember usually doing—around forty today. He loved the job and would miss the chance to be out in the city if and when his little company grew bigger.

His hand continued to slowly tug at his semierect cock, and his mind drifted to dinner and what might happen after. He knew he had to take things slowly, rushing would just scare Hunter off, and Eli didn't want that to happen. There was something about the guy that went beyond Eli's attraction to bigger, beefier men. Eli was not one to feel the need to "save" a person; in fact, he was a bit surprised at his own guilt in treating Hunter's grief so callously. But he was pretty sure it wasn't guilt spurring on his growing desire to get to know his neighbor better.

It wasn't that Eli was oblivious to the needs of others; it's just that he had been taking care of himself for so long and, at times, expected everyone else to

grow a pair and not complain about their lives. Wow, that sounded like he was a real shithead. But he wasn't, was he? Granted, it was hard for him to have compassion for people who claimed to have such a hard life, but being kicked out at the age of seventeen and disowned for being a "faggot" was no picnic. He hated that word; it was so filled with hate when it was uttered in anger and disgust, and that is exactly how his parents had said it. If it hadn't been for Teddy and his folks, Eli would have a very different life today.

But Hunter wasn't a whiner, and he certainly didn't seem to want pity when, even by Eli's narrow standards, he deserved it. So if it wasn't pity or guilt, just what was it about Hunter that made Eli want to wrap him up in his arms and make him feel better? Eli usually ran far away from these types of feelings, but he was doing just the opposite. Abandoning his waning erection due to the heavy thoughts running through his mind, he bent and turned off the water. Giving his hair a shake, flinging wet droplets everywhere, Eli grabbed a towel from the rack and wrapped it round his hips, heading toward his bedroom. Time to get dressed and pick up his dinner date. It's just a meal, that's all, no need for anything else to happen tonight. Eli grinned at that thought, as if he was going to be able to keep his hands off the gorgeous man next door.

He opened his closet and surveyed the choices. He was taking Hunter to this fantastic steak house located just a few blocks away, and while the dress code wasn't formal, it did call for something a little more than jeans and a T-shirt. Running his hands over the few dress shirts he owned, he finally settled on a dark-red button-down and a pair of black, formfitting slacks. Slipping into a black jock, he tucked himself in and stopped to survey his body in the full-length mirror hanging on the back of the door.

Turning first to the side and then glancing over his shoulder, Eli was pleased with his reflection. Between biking and his metabolism, he was still trim and fit. He used to despair that he would never reach six foot, but over the years he had come to terms with the fact he was a solid five feet nine inches. Unlike Hunter, who seemed to tower over him, Eli was always going to look like, well, like a twink. Even though he winced at the term, somehow Hunter thinking that might not be so bad after all. Jesus, what was wrong with him, a few kisses, and a date yet to happen, and he was almost as mushy as Teddy normally was on his best days.

Shaking it off, Eli finished dressing and strolled into his living room, picking up the remote to the stereo and putting on some soft jazz. Laying the control on the coffee table, he went into the kitchen for a drink of water and

checked the time. It was just a little after five p.m., which meant Hunter should be home by now and hopefully almost ready to go if he'd found the note Eli had slipped beneath his door this morning.

By the time he'd stopped by to fill Hunter in on the dress code for the evening he was already gone. So, Eli did the next best thing: returned to his apartment, hastily scribbled a few lines, and shoved the note under Hunter's door on his way out of the building. Hopefully, Hunter got it and was just about ready. The other thing Eli had written was the time, and he would be waiting in the lobby so they could walk to the restaurant together. He thought he'd heard some movement through the wall a few minutes ago.

Pulling on his jacket, Eli grabbed his new front door key and headed out. For the first time in a long while, there were butterflies in his stomach. What if this was a major mistake, and Hunter wasn't really ready to date yet? It had been a year now but still; the big guy seemed pretty shattered by the whole thing. And who wouldn't be? Eli paused for just a moment in the midst of locking his apartment door. He was definitely going to have to be careful. He needed to remember that Hunter had experienced a pretty overwhelming loss, and unless Eli was mistaken, this was his first time back in the dating game. *Slow, man; you have to take it very slow.* Eli nodded to himself and finished locking his door. Straightening his jacket, he stepped toward the stairs beyond apartment 3B to wait for his date.

\*\*\*\*

Hair still slightly damp, Hunter stood in front of his closet, the note he'd found under his door clenched in his fist.

*Hey You! Tonight it's smart casual dress. Meet me in the lobby of the building at five thirty. Don't be late.*

He turned and looked at the clock on his nightstand and felt a brief moment of panic when it read five fifteen p.m. *C'mon Mathews, make a fucking decision already.* Hunter grimaced at the voice in his head and grabbed an indigo-blue shirt and a pair of black slacks from their hangers. Swiping his armpits with some deodorant, Hunter shrugged on the soft cotton blend and began buttoning it. How many buttons to leave undone? One? Two? UGH! What the hell was he doing going on a date? He wasn't ready for this, not by a long shot. Hell, he couldn't even pick out his clothes without breaking into a sweat.

Hunter stopped and bent in half, dropping his head between his knees, gulping in air as the panic attack began to hit him. He forced himself to breathe

deeply. He could do this. He could go on a fucking date without having a stroke. It was just Eli. Sure, he barely knew the guy, but he was an amazing kisser. They'd both apologized, and now this was just a simple date to test the waters. No big deal. Easy does it.

Slowly Hunter stood upright, the room spinning for just a second till it righted itself, and he could think clearly again. Doing up all but one button, he slid into his pants next and then sat to put on his shoes and socks. Glancing at the clock once more, he saw he had three minutes to spare. He stood and glanced at himself in the mirror, turning to one side. He'd lost some weight this past year but had stopped before he began to look too gaunt. A few good meals and he'd be nearly back to his college weight. As he tightened his belt by one more notch, his gaze rested on the picture he kept on his dresser of him and Stephen, the one taken at the lake where they both loved to vacation. For just one moment, Hunter closed his eyes and let all the love he had for Stephen wash over him.

*I'm really doing this, baby. I'm taking that first step, the one that's going to take me away from you. No, that's not right, is it? I'm not stepping away so much as doing exactly what you would want—what we both always talked about should one of us die. It's time for me to get back to the business of living, isn't it, Stephen? Wasn't that what you called it? After the grieving, we had to move forward and learn how to live again. But, baby, what if I can't? Oh god, what if I haven't taken enough time to say good-bye? I miss you so much, baby, so damn much. But this Eli? He seems like a nice guy, you know? Maybe he could be somebody I could learn to like, somebody I could spend time with. Is that okay, Stephen? If I find somebody to be with? I'm so lonely... I'm sorry but I'm just so damn lonely.*

Hunter choked back a sob and picked up the picture. He looked at his husband's smiling face and knew that what he was doing was right. It was time. Swiping at the tears pooling in his eyes, he raised a finger to his lips and captured a kiss, pressing it to Stephen's face in the photo. Everything was going to be okay. It was time to go meet his date. Shrugging into his jacket, Hunter took one more deep breath. He was ready for this; after all, it was just a simple date. Nodding to himself, he stepped out into the hallway and made for the stairs leading to the lobby.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 9

“And?”

Eli ignored the blatant plea for more information and took a bite of his burger, which was amazingly good. He looked around the café to see if he could catch the eye of their waitress so he could get a refill on his iced tea, and he refused to acknowledge the snort of disgust he heard from his irritating best friend. Teddy had been pumping him for information about his date with Hunter for the last thirty minutes. Eli wasn't going to share anything about their time last night even if that meant Teddy continued to screech like a howler monkey every time he said no, much like he was winding up to do right now.

“For god's sake, Teddy, stop it. I am not going to give you any of the 'dirty details' about last night, as you so richly call them. It's private, and I am keeping it that way.”

“Oh my god. I never thought I would live to see this day. Oh. My. God! You LIKE him! You really like this guy. Eli, 'I can't be bothered to shack up with guys more than once,' is into Mr. 'Gorgeous Hunk of Burning Love' Mathews!”

Teddy sat back in shock, his mouth still hanging open after uttering what was so close to the truth it had Eli's sensors going on full alert. How in the hell did Teddy do that? How could he possibly know Eli was more than a little taken with Hunter, especially after their dinner last night? Oh god, that dinner. Three and a half hours of sitting across the table from the sweetest man Eli had ever met. By the end of the evening, Hunter was smiling and laughing and telling Eli stories about his life with Stephen. And the wonderful thing? It wasn't awkward or stilted at all. At that moment, it was just two friends talking and then later holding hands when sadness threatened to steal the good mood of the evening.

Then there was the look in Hunter's eyes, the one that was so grateful for letting him talk about his husband and for understanding he had to do it or the whole date would have been a disaster. The walk home was so much lighter than the tense one to the restaurant. Eli had charmed Hunter, and he had responded by telling Eli how nervous he was, and how he felt this was the beginning of a new chapter in his life. So Eli let him talk and saw firsthand the love, and yes, the sorrow, Hunter had bottled up over the last year. He was sure



there would be many more memories Hunter would share over time and that was just fine with him. Stephen was a part of the man who Eli found so captivating. And he was happy the big guy trusted him to understand. But how could he possibly tell any of that to Teddy? It was far too private to be bandied about in casual conversation.

And for god's sake, was Teddy actually psychic just like he often told people he was? Damn, now Eli was going to have to be very cool and calculated in his response if he hoped to keep the little shit at bay. Eli pretended to ignore the sweat that was now forming around the collar of his work tee and hoped to god Teddy didn't recognize his silence for what it was—proof Teddy was right. So it was no surprise that what came out next was one, long, run-on sentence as he backed away from the table preparing to sprint for the exit.

“Listen I gotta run, Teddy; one of my couriers called out sick, and I'm going to have to take his route this afternoon, and this was really great, ya know, catching up and all, but I gotta dash now, so I'll call you tonight or maybe tomorrow 'cause I'm going to be pretty bushed after biking all afternoon, so here's a twenty toward lunch, and I'll see ya later; bye!”

Eli turned, gulping in air, and started moving as fast as he could toward the exit when he was pulled up short by something tugging on his shirt that nearly jerked him off his feet.

“Not so fast, Sir Speedy! Sit back down and dish—NOW!”

Teddy was surprisingly strong for someone who liked the color pink in every item he chose to wear. Eli let out a bit of a girly squeak of his own as his ass hit the chair, and he found himself staring at the disgruntled face of his best friend. Shaking his head, Eli knew defeat when he saw it, and it looked like a vision in chiffon sitting directly across the table from him. And how in the hell Teddy could pull off a fluffy blouse like that and still look a little butch was beyond him. With his lunch companion still glaring daggers at him, he said the only thing he knew would shut Teddy up, at least until Eli could make his escape.

“Hunter is... sweet and lonely, and, well, I like him. And, yes, Teddy, I think I could like him a lot, given some more time to get to know him.”

“Is that ‘know him’ in the ‘biblical sense’?”

Teddy leered as he said the last two words, which he accompanied with air quotes. Eli rolled his eyes and cleared his throat. He was just about to tell

Teddy exactly where he could stick his air quotes when he was interrupted by Teddy dramatically heaving a huge sigh.

“Don’t say it! I know that look. That’s the patented ‘you’re being an ass’ look. Okay, I get it—this guy is something special. You can’t blame me for having a little fun though, El. I mean when was the last time you hung around for anybody beyond a one-night fuck?”

Eli was about to protest that he was not a fuck ’em and leave ’em kind of guy, but then the truth of Teddy’s observation made his mouth snap shut at the last moment. Was he really that kind of guy? When was the last time he’d had a repeat night with any of the guys he had fucked? Not that he made a habit of picking up random guys a lot, but still. Eli honestly couldn’t remember the last time he had even been on a real date like the one last night with Hunter. He just hadn’t had the interest lately, not when it was so easy to find a receptive bottom to just drill and—holy shit he *was* that guy. Oh my god, Teddy was right. Eli was the king of one-night stands. His face must have given away how he felt about that little revelation because he heard Teddy rush in to reassure him.

“Hey, Eli, I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. Dammit, when will I ever learn to filter? Listen, I’m sorry, really.”

“It’s okay, Teddy, when you’re right, well, you’re right. I guess I just never really wanted a relationship before. I liked being able to dictate when and how often. It was less messy that way. I’ve been a real ass, haven’t I? But with Hunter it’s different, Teddy. He makes me want things I never did before. I’m not positive, but I think I’m ready for a bit of mess. I can’t believe I am actually saying this, but I’d like to try this dating thing with him, get to know him and figure out if we have a chance of, well of having something more than a one-night stand—not that we even got that far last night.”

Almost reverently, Teddy whispered his next question.

“Did you at least kiss him good night?”

Did he kiss him good night? Well, yeah, there certainly had been that and then some.

*Eli watched Hunter unlock his apartment door and turn to say good night, but before he could utter a word, Eli leaned in and softly kissed him. Every thought he might have had vanished from his mind with that kiss. All he could focus on was how soft and full Hunter’s lips were and how they made him want more of this gorgeous man who was currently moving in closer and wrapping*

*his arms around him. Just like the day before, Eli felt his dick harden and the urge to hump the taller man's leg rose up like an insistent command.*

*Eli deepened the kiss, pushing his tongue against Hunter's closed lips, demanding he let him in. Finally with a little moan—and wasn't that so fucking sexy—Hunter's lips parted, and Eli's tongue slipped inside, tasting the sweet bear in his arms. Eli insinuated himself between Hunter's legs and ground his hardening cock against the deliciously hard thigh he felt pushing back at him. God, he wanted to bury his cock in Hunter's firm ass so badly. But just as quickly as that thought rose up, Eli squashed it back down and eased his body back slowly while bringing the kiss down a notch as well.*

*He wanted this man, no doubt. This time, though, he was going to take his time, woo his gentle bear, and treat him as he deserved: tenderly and, yes, respectfully. No hurried fuck would do for Hunter. He wanted this man to be completely on board with the idea of Eli filling his ass, and that meant taking things slowly so as not to scare Hunter off. Heated kisses notwithstanding, things needed to move at the right pace for this to become something more than a one-night stand. And Eli definitely wanted more than a single evening with Hunter.*

*Breaking the kiss ever so gently, Eli stepped back just a hair and looked at Hunter's slightly dazed and confused expression. Leaning in to give him one more peck on the lips, he stood on tiptoe afterward and whispered in Hunter's ear.*

*"I want you so much, but I want the time to be right, okay? I don't want to rush this, rush you. I want us to take our time and savor the moment when we both are ready to go to the next step."*

*Eli held his breath as he moved back to see how Hunter was reacting to Eli's request. When he saw the man smile, he knew he had done the right thing. Darting in for one last kiss, Eli eased away and started moving toward his own door. Stopping midway, he turned and threw out another invitation for the next night, this time a place of Hunter's choosing if he liked. Hunter smiled again and said he'd enjoy that, and would leave a message under Eli's door with specifics when he left for work the next morning. With that, he said good night and closed the door, leaving Eli standing there, fist pumping the air like a fool.*

*"Earth to Eli? Hello, anyone home?"*

*Eli snapped back from la-la land to see Teddy waving a hand in front of his eyes. Batting it away, he pushed his chair back once again, intent on escaping any further cross-examination.*

“Aww, c’mon, El, you gotta give me something here!”

Eli paused and smiled down at Teddy. Then he leaned in so just his friend could hear his response.

“He has a nice long tongue.”

While Teddy stared in near apoplexy, Eli waved and made for the exit, wondering about what else Hunter could do with that tongue of his.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 10

Hunter put his cell back in his pocket and began to plan just how he could manage to entice Eli into his apartment after their dinner at Codori's. He hadn't been to the little Italian restaurant in quite a while. Yet it felt right to take Eli there, to the place that had once been like a second home to him during his single days. Stephen had enjoyed Codori's but had always complained the food was too rich for him, and he'd need extra gym time to work off the calories, so they rarely went there. It just felt good to share the place with Eli, and he hoped sincerely that his date didn't fixate on the heaping platters they passed off as dinner plates.

Speaking of which, Hunter needed to write his note and slip it under Eli's door. He was fairly certain he'd heard the man leave earlier. Since Hunter had taken the day off to prepare for their second date, and what he hoped would be a nightcap at his place, he'd waited a little extra time before writing the note. Codori's was definitely a "come as you are" kind of place so casual dress was the order of the day.

Hunter swallowed audibly, nearly salivating at the thought of seeing Eli in those tight jeans he sometimes wore when Hunter had passed him in the hall or on the stairs. God, that ass was something else when encased in denim, not to mention the lovely package it showcased under the zipper placket. And Hunter had felt just how nice and big that bulge was last night.

As turned on as he'd been by their good night kiss, he was really touched by the fact Eli had pulled them both back from what surely would have been a mistake. Hunter just wasn't sure he was ready for sex with Eli yet. What would happen if things went like they had been of late? What if Hunter couldn't follow through, if he lost his erection again, this time in front of Eli? God, that would just be awful. No, he was definitely not ready for that to happen yet. Plus, what if Eli was a bottom? Sure, he had been the aggressor thus far every time they had kissed, but that didn't mean he liked to top—not at all.

Which led to the next big problem and one Hunter was going to try and head off tonight. Hunter was going to tell Eli he liked, no, he preferred, to bottom. He sincerely hoped he'd pegged this guy right and that he didn't get a response that left him feeling like an idiot. After all, how often had people taken one look at his big, broad body and decided he was a full-on top all the way? Far too often. He hoped Eli could at least be versatile. He would be okay

with taking the lead sometimes, but he really did love to get fucked; there was no doubt about it. He knew he might be rushing things, but for some reason, he really wanted Eli to know right off the bat that in the bedroom he wasn't a take-charge kind of guy.

God, he hoped Eli understood. Maybe he should wait, just take it slow like Eli had suggested. Torn between this strong desire to bare all his needs and desires to Eli and just taking things as they come, Hunter growled in frustration and decided he would think about it later. Right now he had an apartment to clean, and looking around the messy living room, he decided he better get started before he ran out of time.

\*\*\*\*

Eli picked up the note after he stowed his backpack and kicked off his sneakers by the door. Codori's. That name rang a bell. He closed his eyes for a second, scrambling to remember. It was a little, mom-and-pop, Italian place down on 88<sup>th</sup> Street. God, he hadn't been there in ages, but if he remembered correctly, their Bolognese was a work of art. All of a sudden, Eli's mouth began to water, thinking of having a heaping plate of Italian food. God, he could eat a horse. With Peter, his best courier, still out with a vicious chest cold, Eli had picked up the slack and had been running his route for the last two days. He was bone tired.

As much as he wanted to see Hunter, he was going to definitely make sure he was home early tonight so he could get some much-needed rest. Of course, should Hunter decide he was ready to push things along... But hold on. No. Down boy! Wasn't it him who just last night had said they needed to take things slow? No grabbing Hunter and pushing him up against the wall, well, if he *could* push that hulk against the wall. Eli laughed silently to himself, no doubt it would be the other way around, until they hit the bed that is. Then Eli would be the one doing the pushing, of that he had no doubt. But enough of that! Time to shower and get ready for some Italian, and Hunter, and that lovely mouth, not to mention that sweet tongue.

Hunter stood in the lobby, trying not to pace back and forth. Eli was ten minutes late. For one terrible moment Hunter was afraid he wasn't going to show. Then there he was, looking damn near edible. Hunter smiled and motioned for Eli to follow him. As they walked through the parking garage, they chatted lightly about their day, and Eli told Hunter he was a lucky dog for having the day off. He explained his current courier shortage, which meant he'd

biked nearly twenty-three miles today and was feeling it just a bit. When Hunter showed surprise at the mileage, Eli laughed and told him that some couriers rode as much as forty miles in one day, depending on the season and time of year, December being the busiest time.

When they arrived at Hunter's car, he opened the door for Eli and then scrambled around the back of the car to get in on his side.

"Nice car! I don't think I've ever seen a Tesla, much less ridden in one before. Did you have to wait for delivery very long? I hear they can take some time getting to the buyer."

Hunter smiled as he watched Eli play with the touch screen, one of the coolest features in a Tesla—it was a great car, and he was happy he'd spent the money on it.

"It only takes about a month from start to finish—a few years ago they had slower production, and it took quite a bit longer, but these days they have a better feel for their customer base and the supply and demand."

Eli stared at Hunter as he continued his nervous babbling about the merits of an electric car and the impact it had on the environment. When Hunter stopped to draw a breath, Eli leapt into the conversation.

"Who'd have thought discussing the green factor of alternative power sources could be so fucking sexy?"

Hunter felt the blush creep up his face. Eli thought he was sexy? Well, yeah, that was, well, that was really nice to hear. The trip to Codori's took about thirty minutes due to the evening traffic. Once there, they were shown to a table by the window overlooking the park next to the building. It was a clear, crisp winter night, and the sky looked brilliant. Eli commented on the number of stars, and his eyes lit up as the moon came out from behind a wandering cloud. Hunter tried not to stare at Eli's face, but the way his eyes seemed to shine and the obvious joy he saw there made him feel so good, better than he had in a long time. He was glad he'd called ahead and asked for a window table; the look on Eli's face was so worth it.

There was something so right about having Eli sitting across from him, talking about his day as if they'd known each other for far longer than just two days. Well, Hunter supposed they actually did know each other much longer but not like this, not as friends. A swift feeling of shame washed over Hunter. He'd been so unfair to Eli. In his anger and grief, he'd almost thrown away this

chance to get to know him, and what a waste that would've been. The waiter disturbed his line of thinking by showing up with the menus. Hunter laughed as Eli dove into his, smacking his lips with obvious glee.

“My god, the menu choices for death-by-carbohydrates are endless. Now, just have to decide on the extra large platter of Bolognese they normally serve, or the mammoth one! I'm betting, big guy, that you're going for the *gigantic* portion. From the looks of that shirt you're wearing, you could stand to gain a few pounds.”

Hunter looked down at his chest. It was true, he was about twenty pounds leaner than he'd ever been, but he still had some bulk. He looked up to see Eli grinning at him like a cat that stole the cream.

“What? So I may be a bit leaner than usual, but I'll get it all back, so you can just wipe that shit-eating grin off your face, Mr. Miller.”

“Oh so it's Mr. Miller now, is it? Pretty sure, Mr. Mathews, it was ‘oh please, Eli please,’ just last night.”

The two were leaning across the table, attempting to appear threatening until Hunter erupted in laughter, and Eli started to giggle in a very unmanly way. Hunter reached across the table and grabbed Eli's hand, still chuckling away. Eli's laughter suddenly trailed off as he looked down at their hands clasped together. Hunter's gaze was drawn there as well until he looked up with a question in his eyes.

“I think you look pretty damn perfect just the way you are, Mr. Mathews. And I am so very glad you asked me out tonight.”

Hunter clenched the smaller hand in his just a bit tighter.

“And I'm glad you said yes.”

The drive home from Codori's seemed to take no time at all, and before Hunter knew it, he and Eli were standing outside his apartment once more. But this time, before Eli could move in for a kiss, Hunter cleared his throat and motioned toward his now-open door.

“I was hoping if you weren't too tired, you might come in for a drink before you go home.”

Hunter watched as Eli hesitated for only a moment before brushing past his outstretched arm and entering the living room. He could almost hear the gears working in Eli's head, reminding him to take it slow—at least he hoped that



was the reason the man hesitated to enter the apartment. Then again, the way his date was now staring at his yacht-sized sofa seemed to indicate something altogether different.

“Man, that is some sofa! Is everything else in this place supersized?”

Eli looked over his shoulder with a leering grin on his face and deliberately dropped his eyes to Hunter’s crotch. Hunter blushed and watched as he flopped down, smack in the middle of the sofa, hooking his arms over the back and spreading his legs, the look on Eli’s face suddenly changing from joking to a blatant invitation.

Hunter swallowed hard. That was definitely not a “taking it slow” look on Eli’s face.

“Um, would you like a glass of wine? I have a Riesling in the fridge. Sorry, I know it’s probably considered gauche or whatever the hell you call it, but I like my wine chilled, so sue me!”

“Whoa, big guy, simmer down! I like my wine that way too—no sweat!”

Eli laughed and winked at Hunter whose expression was partly “don’t fuck with me” with flashes of “I am so confused” mixed in. When Hunter caught on that he’d made too much out of justifying how he liked his wine and that he was being mocked, he growled, threw himself on the sofa and began tickling Eli. Gasping for air, somehow the slender man managed to flip Hunter onto his back and ended up straddling him, their hands locked together to prevent any further bodily contact. Except, of course, this position brought about an interesting meeting of body parts that already seemed to be quite excited from the tussle that had just gone down.

“Well now, isn’t this a curious turn of events? Now that I’ve got you here, whatever shall I do with you? Hmm, Mr. Mathews? Cat got your tongue? Now that won’t do since I am pretty taken with your tongue as well. I’d better check to make sure everything’s still in good working order.”

And with that, Eli leaned forward and began kissing Hunter, pushing against his sealed lips, seeking entry. Moans accompanied lips parting and clashing, tongues jockeying for position, and kisses deepening until Hunter felt Eli grinding against him. Without a second thought, Hunter returned the pressure and felt his cock respond. Before either man could even think to remind the other about taking things slowly, their hands were fumbling at buttons and zippers, and clothes were coming off at an alarming pace.

Flesh—warm, hard flesh was what both of them were seeking. So what if a few buttons popped and went ping-pong to the floor? Hunter could always sew them back on. With each passing moment, their hands moved faster, divesting each other of their shirts first and then arching their hips to pull down the slacks that kept them from touching what they both were after, skin—lots and lots of skin.

Finally, with his pants down at his ankles, and his shirt somewhere on the floor, Hunter lay panting beneath Eli whose own clothes had magically disappeared. He leaned back now, slowly stroking his cock and gazing down at Hunter with pure lust in his eyes. For one moment there was no movement save that of Eli's hand lazily working his dick. The two of them stared at each other, one holding his breath, the other checking out the body that lay beneath him, a smirk on his face. And when *that* look—the one that made Hunter feel like little more than a piece of meat—crossed Eli's face, and Hunter saw it, everything seemed to go wrong.

*God, he's just like that guy at the bar. Look at the smug grin on his face. He doesn't want to know me, I bet all he wants is a piece of ass for the night. Fuck, did I really get this wrong? Is he only after a quick fuck and nothing more? I can't do this. I just can't do this.*

Hunter jolted upward with a muttered, “get off of me” and pushed Eli to the side, causing him to fall off his lap on to the floor. Swinging his legs off the sofa, nearly hitting Eli in the head, Hunter scrambled to his feet and nearly tripped over the pants pooled at his ankles. After struggling with them, he finally pulled them up to his hips and zipped them, not bothering with the button or belt. Eli, meanwhile, was searching for his own clothes and failing to find much more than Hunter's dress shirt and scattered buttons. His clothes had apparently gone over the other side of the piece of furniture they'd been wrestling on seconds before.

Standing up to make his way to the other side of the sofa, Eli was shocked when Hunter grabbed him and pushed him against the wall, pressing his face and chest against it. Towering over him, Hunter leaned in and grabbed Eli's head, pulling it back to his chest so he could whisper in his ear. His words came out tumbling over one another, barely making sense, but harsh and almost angry.

“You need to know, I don't do this shit, this casual sex. I tried but I can't. I just can't. I know that's fucked up, that I'm fucked up, but Stephen left such a

big hole, and I can't seem to get around it. Every day I tell myself this is it, that it's time to make a fresh start, that I need to fucking move forward because staying where I am is killing me. I just couldn't seem to do it until you pushed your way in, and you kissed me, and oh Christ, Eli, it was so good, and it made me want more. You get under my skin and make me want so many things. And that—that right there—makes me afraid I might never get to be with you, to feel you, to try and see if there could be something more between us.

“I want you so much. I do, Eli, but it can't be like this. I can't be the guy you fuck and then leave, or worse, someone you avoid seeing in the hall every day. And you should know, when I say I want you, I mean I want your dick up my ass. I'm sorry, I know that's pretty blunt, but you have to know I like to catch, to bottom, to whatever in the hell you want to call it. So if you can't deal with that and the fact I am pretty screwed up but trying really hard to make my way back, well then you should go now and not come back. Do you understand what I'm saying, Eli? I can't be your fuck buddy. I don't do that, I never have. I need more.”

During Hunter's entire confession, the grip he'd had on Eli was growing stronger. Eli had tried twisting away as soon as he'd been pushed against the wall, but the longer Hunter had gone on and on, the tighter his hands got and the more difficult it made it for Eli to wriggle free. All the while, all he could think of was what the hell had he done to get this type of crazy reaction?

Eli tried a different approach and went slack in Hunter's arms. Once he did that, he actually started to listen to what was being said, and in that moment, he realized what part he'd played in causing such a violent reaction just a few short minutes before. With each ragged sentence that was uttered with such painful expression, Eli realized just how badly he'd fucked up.

Yes, he'd been the aggressor, and yes, Hunter liked that, if the bulge in his pants had been any indicator. But not once had he stopped to ask Hunter if he *wanted* it—wanted Eli naked, pinning him down and pushing at Hunter to have sex. Per usual, he'd just gone full steam ahead and taken what he wanted, without a thought as to whether Hunter was emotionally ready to willingly participate. From the sound of it, the answer would have been a resounding no. Now, all manner of nasty thoughts were racing through Eli's head. *Way to go, you fucking idiot! Good job, showing him how much you like him. Hey, yeah wine, sure. On second thought, nah, I don't think so but how about my cock in your mouth instead, and shut up because nobody really was asking you anyway?*

Just that quickly, Eli realized what he had to do next. He had really messed this one up. It was painfully obvious Hunter was still working through some serious shit, and he needed a friend more than a lover right now. Even though the revelation that the big guy was a solid bottom made Eli's heart speed up and his errant cock take notice, he knew it was important to focus on what Hunter needed rather than what Eli wanted. It was time for him to stop being such a selfish shit and take care of this guy if he ever really wanted to see him again other than to say a stilted hello while passing in the hallway.

"Tell you what, big guy. How about we just talk? Relax a bit. I promise I can be a really good listener. I think it'd be best if you let go of me, and I get dressed, and we can start this whole after-dinner-drink thing over. Okay? 'Cause, honestly? Some chilly wine sounds real good right about now, don't you think so?"

As if he'd been burned, Hunter released Eli and stepped back quickly; both of them shook just a bit at the sudden movement. Eli shook it off first and began to gather his clothes, finally sitting bare-assed on the edge of the sofa to slip them on. Hunter took one look at his ruined shirt and disappeared into his bedroom, only to reappear with a black T-shirt on and his slacks done up properly. Stealing a quick glance at Eli's progress, he went into the kitchen and pulled the wine from the fridge, grabbing two wine glasses off the counter where he'd placed them earlier in the afternoon. When he reentered the living room, Eli was seated, fully clothed, and smiling. It was the smile that made Hunter feel even guiltier than he already did. He hesitated just for a brief second until he saw Eli pat the sofa space next to him. Hunter crossed around and sat, putting the wine and glasses on the coffee table.

Carefully, he poured two servings and turned to hand one to Eli.

"It's okay, big guy, the glass isn't going to break just 'cause you and I had a bit of a moment back there. Now, settle down and talk to me."

"I don't know what to say, Eli. I mean I just blurted out all that shit, and now I feel like a fool, to be honest. Listen, I've got all this baggage I can't seem to get rid of—you'd be better off just finding somebody else to hang out with. I mean, you're an amazing guy, you could have your pick."

Eli raised a hand the moment Hunter stopped to draw a breath. He took a sip of the sparkling cold wine. He smacked his lips and sighed afterward, then grinned with obvious pleasure and motioned for Hunter to take a drink as well. Hunter, now slightly confused, lifted his flute to his mouth and drank deeply,

his hand trembling ever so slightly. When he'd finished, Eli took both glasses in his hands once more and returned them to the table, then he made a circular motion with his finger to indicate Hunter should continue his speech.

"What? You want me to go on? I mean, I guess I could, except I don't really have anything else to say. I, um, I'm not sure what just happened there. Did you agree with what I just said, or were you just thirsty or, uh, okay I give, what the hell is going on?"

Hunter, now completely flustered, stopped talking and looked at Eli.

"Are you finished, big guy? I'll take that nod as a yes. Okay, let me get this straight. You lost the man you loved a year ago this Friday. You have been struggling with anger, loneliness, and just a generally shitty life since. Up until a few days ago, you pretty much hated me on sight."

Hunter began to protest, and Eli raised his hand again.

"Uh, uh, uh. I listened, now you have to. Let's see, where was I? Oh right, hating me on sight. But ever since I macked on you the other night, you pretty much want to see me without my pants. But the idea that somehow it may betray your love for Stephen has you all tied up in knots even though you really want to move on and get it on with me because I am the handsomest devil you have ever seen! That about sum it up?"

Hunter felt his mouth hanging open and snapped it shut even as he realized he was nodding away like one of those bobble-head puppies you see on car dashes. For some reason, the way Eli described it wasn't belittling or rude, but completely true and straightforward. He had to hand it to the man; he really was listening and obviously not running away—yet.

"My god, I can hear the wheels grinding. Any minute now there is going to be smoke pouring out of your ears, Hunter. Listen... carefully, please. I like you. I like you lots and for many reasons, and one of them is that you have this loyalty to the man you loved enough to walk down the aisle with and make a life together. It's terrible that he's gone, but I can't help but point out I am here now, and I don't scare easily, buddy."

When Eli paused to draw breath, Hunter knew he had a slightly dazed expression on his face. He truly wanted to believe everything Eli was saying. But he was going to need to spell it out even further in order to be convinced that Eli was the genuine article. Too often Hunter had tried to let go and trust his instincts only to realize a guy was into nothing more than a one-night stand.

Suddenly Eli leaned in close and Hunter thought perhaps he would kiss him again. But that couldn't happen—not until Eli said something to assure him that he really was committing to more than a mutual one-off.

“Look, what I'm saying, Hunter, is that I want to get to know you too. I don't intend on taking Stephen's place, I'm going to be the second act. You're about to come back to the land of the living, my friend, and I'm going to be right there beside you all the way. Now, is that okay? Do you think you could give that, give us, a try?”

Hunter eliminated the remaining distance between them and pressed his mouth to Eli's in a soft kiss. Before he could respond, Hunter had drawn back again. Eli then opened his eyes since they had instinctively closed at the simple brush of Hunter's mouth on his. He looked directly at Hunter and smiled, feeling a huge sense of relief course through his body when Hunter returned the favor. Reaching up, he cupped a cheek and leaned in, resting his forehead against Hunter's.

“I'm going to go now, big guy. I'll be back tomorrow night to finish off that chilled bottle of wine you have there, and I'll tell you all about the party Friday night that you are going to attend as my plus one. Now, now, now, before the panic I see rising in your eyes takes root, breathe deeply, and think happy thoughts until I see you tomorrow night, okay?”

Eli leaned back just a bit and kissed Hunter's lips lightly.

“I'll keep you and that heart of yours safe, Hunter, I promise.”

He rose to his feet and crossed to the door. Once there, he paused and looked back at the man on the sofa, the one who was coming dangerously close to making Eli yearn for something he'd never had a desire for before: a relationship. Just a few days ago, the very idea would have sent Eli running away as fast as he possibly could. But not now. More than anything, he definitely wanted to stay. Smiling at Hunter once more, Eli let himself out and gently closed the door behind him.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 11

“So you’re positive that super-sized hunk of man love is coming?”

Eli rolled his eyes and continued laying out the various snacks. The hot stuff would come out of the oven a bit later, and he wanted to get everything else set out before guests started arriving. Teddy, dressed in a rainbow T-shirt, red and white striped skinny jeans, and a hot pink scarf with hearts all over it, was not only an irritating sight to the eyes but also grating on Eli’s last nerve.

“For the fourth time, Theodore, yes, as far as I know he’s coming. And by the way, his name is not ‘hunk of man love,’ ‘gorgeous hunk of burnin’ love,’ or my personal favorite, ‘keeper of the giant cock.’ It’s Hunter!”

“Now, now, Ellie, don’t get your panties in a wad for heaven’s sake. I was just confirming that the delicious eye candy from next door was going to be here. My, my, my, someone is just a wee bit nervous about his ‘*amore*’ showing up tonight, isn’t he?”

While Teddy’s use of language on most days was, at best, colorful, when he started using foreign languages, Eli knew it was time to just throw in the towel and let him prattle on till he ran out of steam. Of course, Teddy could give lessons on how to talk for hours about essentially nothing. However, calling Hunter his “love” was going a bit too far. Since the slightly awkward intimate moment on Tuesday night, Eli had gone out of his way to include Hunter in everything he did except his day job. From grocery shopping for the party, to fat little Max’s daily “walkies,” the big guy had been dragged along on every outing.

Speaking of the fat little sausage, Max seemed to go out of his way last night to show Hunter just how much he liked him. Well, maybe liked was too strong a word.

*“Now Maxie, you be good for Uncle Eli and Uncle Hunter you hear? Now, boys I’ll have a nice treat for the two of you when you get back. Mind how you go!”*

*And with that, Eli grabbed up the rotund little hound, tucking him under one arm, and made for the stairs, his other hand firmly clasping Hunter’s rather sweaty one. Such a nervous boy his guy was! That was going to change. Before this week was out, Hunter Mathews was going to know one thing for sure and that was that Eli was a sure thing. He may not have had the best track record to*

*this point, but he was going to from now on. Of course, Eli knew the other reason for the rather moist palm was due to the fact that the big bad Hunter Mathews did not like dogs—correction—he was actually scared of them. This news had made Eli nearly chortle with glee when it had been offered up to him as an excuse for not joining Eli on Max’s walk.*

*“Let me get this straight...”*

*“Eli.” Hunter shook his head, his face resigned to what he knew was about to follow.*

*“You’re what, six foot three? Four? And you’re scared of...”*

*“Don’t say it.”*

*“Strike that—terrified of a fat little dachshund who rises maybe a foot off the ground and whose main activities are eating and sleeping?”*

*“They have teeth, and the Achilles tendon is right at their height.” Hunter realized he’d just shouted that last statement and done so in such a high register that he may have sounded just a bit like a girl.*

*“Right, and Max here is a real vicious type, what with all the licking and stopping to pant, not to mention those killer eyes that beg to be picked up and held. Yep, he’s one ferocious bundle all right.”*

*By the time Eli managed to get out the last mocking word, he was nearly wheezing from laughing so hard. Despite Eli’s still holding the hefty animal under one arm, Hunter grabbed and wrapped his man in a bear hug and then kissed him in order to make him shut up. Hunter knew he should be mortified, but when he made Eli laugh like that it made his heart swell just a little. Eli continued to chuckle even as his lips were assaulted and a warm tongue pushed into his mouth. Nearly dropping Max, Eli wound his free arm around Hunter’s shoulder and deepened their kiss. Both men completely lost awareness of their surroundings and would have carried on had Miss Emily not peeked out to see what all the laughing had been about and gently reminded them that the fat pup Eli had in his arm desperately needed a wee.*

*“Oh, boys? It is so lovely to see you two getting on so well, but poor little Maxie is fair to bursting. You may want to save that for later, and get my little boy outside before it’s too late.”*

*Eli chuckled again and grabbed a mortified Hunter by the hand and started down to the dog walking area outside their building.*



“Earth to Eli, hello? Come back to us, Dorothy, you’re not in Oz anymore.”

Teddy tapped lightly on Eli’s cheek until Eli pushed his friend’s hand away. Slowly he realized he’d been caught up in daydreaming about his favorite neighbor, again. Some days it seemed that was all he ever did, think about Hunter and how much fun this last week with him had turned out to be. Admittedly it had gotten off to a rough start, but after Eli realized that taking it slow was more than a catchphrase, he’d embraced that slow shit with both hands. Plus, kissing that Mathews mouth was a tiny bit of heaven he looked forward to each day.

Tonight he was going to take the next step with his big guy and ask him to spend the night. He hoped to god Hunter was ready to move forward just a bit. While the dating this past week had been lots of fun, he really wanted to be more intimate than just a few kisses good night. However, since Hunter’s meltdown on that second fateful date, Eli had deliberately not pushed.

“So, how many are you expecting tonight? Is, um, your new courier, David, coming?”

Teddy’s deliberately nonchalant tone didn’t fool Eli one bit. Last week when Teddy had picked up Eli at his office for their weekly lunch, David had just been coming back in from a job. Eli watched his friend nearly pop a vein, not to mention a boner, when the very handsome biker strolled past them with his bike hefted up on one shoulder. Since Teddy’s usual approach to men he ogled was to go full out vamping and flirting, Eli was shocked when Teddy could barely stammer out a hello. Somebody was quite taken with his newest courier, and by god, if that was not cause for some torturing, er, teasing, then he didn’t know what was.

“Which courier was that again, Teds? The short, balding one who sports that wicked handlebar mustache? I did put in a good word for you with him, by the way, he’ll be here tonight.”

Teddy’s eyes went wide, and he nearly began to hyperventilate.

“Oh my god, you did not! Eli, I specifically told you it was the new guy I wanted to meet. What have you... oh my god you’re playing me, aren’t you? Stop that laughing—Jesus, you nearly gave me a heart attack.”

Teddy tried to slap Eli away, as he grabbed him into a hug and nearly collapsed in laughter. Eli clung to his friend, hugging him and chuckling away.

“If you weren’t such an absolute disaster at throwing parties, I would leave right this minute and let you host this on your own. It’s only my regard for all the poor souls you invited that is keeping me here, I’ll have you know!”

“That, and the sight of David’s ass in spandex!”

“Oh my god, do you think he’ll wear his bike shorts?”

Eli raised an eyebrow, his mouth twitching as he attempted to hold back the laughter. Teddy stopped and groaned out loud.

“Fuck, I just fell right into that, didn’t I? You are incorrigible, Eli Miller!”

“But you love me anyway. Admit it, Teddy.”

“Oh dear, is that the oven timer? Out of my way, satan, I have crab puffs to warm up.”

Teddy pushed Eli away and sashayed into the kitchen, leaving a very amused best friend to finish laying out the rest of the food.

\*\*\*\*

Hunter sat in his living room as it began to grow dark. It was that time of night where the day was just fading. Stephen had always called this time of day “the gloaming.” There was many a night when the two of them would sit in the living room, looking out the balcony doors that led to their small patio space and watching the sun go down. Being on the third floor meant they had little more than a fire escape, but they called it a patio nonetheless. Those were some of the most peaceful moments Hunter could remember and the happiest as well. With no need for words, the two of them would sit holding hands and simply relax together. Hunter missed those times most of all. But then last night, while walking the dog with Eli, he’d felt something so similar. Eli had slipped his hand inside Hunter’s and remarked on the sunset and how he loved this time of day best. For just that one second, Hunter remembered what it was to feel at home with someone, and it felt so good.

He really liked Eli. So much so that it scared him just a bit. Starting over was harder than he thought, and when he was alone, like now, it was easy to brush aside the thought of being with another man. Then Eli would laugh, or wink at him, or make any of the many simple gestures that told Hunter he was thinking of him, and all of his doubts would melt away. He should get up and go next door. He could hear the sounds of the party at Eli’s place coming through their adjoining wall. There was quite a bit of laughter, and he wondered if the louder voice he heard above the din was Eli’s friend, Teddy.

He'd heard all about his flamboyant best friend from Eli, and it had left him both intrigued and a bit scared. Most of Stephen's friends were pretty conservative, and while they were out and proud, they tended to be more quiet and reserved. Teddy sounded like a real spitfire, and the thought that someone could actually flummox his coolheaded boyfriend made Hunter laugh. Hunter paused and rolled that word around in his head for a second—boyfriend. It sounded so foreign, at times, but somehow it also seemed right. He wondered if Eli thought of him that way.

So much had changed since that second date when Hunter had lost it and nearly hurt Eli. He'd never been in danger of losing control, but he'd been so upset, so overwhelmed. He'd forgotten he outweighed Eli by a good forty pounds. That alone meant that when he grabbed the smaller man he'd exerted a force which had left a bit of bruising on Eli's arms. Hunter had been mortified when he saw Eli in his workout clothes the next day. Small black marks on his upper arm had Hunter begging Eli to forgive him. Of course he had, and that had been the end of it, but Hunter would never again touch Eli like that, no matter how panicky he might feel.

More laughter seeped through the wall, as well as some music. He could hear furniture shifting so they must be making space to dance. Oh goody. Hunter didn't dance—ever. He had absolutely no grace or sense of rhythm—none. He really should go next door. He had no doubt that if he didn't make a move soon, Eli would come knocking. Hunter jumped at the banging on the door. Well, that didn't take long. He got up and opened the door, prepared to meet a frustrated Eli.

“Hello, Big-Tall-and-Handsome, mind if I come in?”

Hunter barely had time to move out of the way before his guest—check that—the stranger walked into his apartment. Without thinking, he closed the door and turned to look at the man now standing by his bookcase, looking at the framed photos he had lining the top shelf. Taking in the rainbow T-shirt and striped pants, Hunter was pretty sure this had to be Eli's friend, Teddy. But why was he here and not next door at the party?

“This must be your husband. He was very handsome.” Teddy turned to Hunter, a picture in his hand of the two of them on their honeymoon. “I'm really sorry for your loss. Must have been hell losing him, huh?”

The mention of Stephen's passing snapped Hunter out of his fog. He crossed to Teddy and snatched the photo out of his hand.

“Give me that! Who do you think you are, coming in here and touching my stuff? Just because you’re Eli’s friend doesn’t mean you have the right to just waltz in here. I suppose Eli sent you over here to get me?”

Hunter put the frame back in its place and stood, breathing heavily, trying to push down the surge of anger that had just flared when Teddy had touched his things. It was unreasonable, and Hunter knew it, but he couldn’t stand for just anyone to do that—touch anything remotely connected with his memory of Stephen. Particularly a perfect stranger, which was exactly who Teddy was as far as Hunter was concerned. Even though Eli had talked quite a bit about his chatty friend, he and Hunter had never met—till now. But all that was about to change as Teddy moved into Hunter’s space and began to fire questions at him.

“I bet you hated that, didn’t you? Hated me touching the picture of your dead husband. Do you have his clothes still hanging in the closet, Hunter? Got his favorite mug in the kitchen cupboard? Still sleep with some piece of his clothing or his old pillow? Eli’s never going to be good enough to take his place is he? This is just an experiment for you, isn’t it, Hunter? You don’t care if Eli gets hurt; all you want is somebody to hold your hand while you work through your grief. And then what? Will you toss him aside when you’ve gotten strong enough to actually date for real? Are you going to break my friend’s heart, Hunter? Well, are you? ’Cause I’m pretty sure, for the first time in a long time, Eli actually likes someone. You. He likes you, Hunter. So what’s it going to be? Are you going to man up and let go of your dead husband and give Eli a chance? Or are you going to use him until you figure out you are happiest playing the martyr?”

Hunter was speechless, his mind reeling from all the sarcasm and insensitive remarks Teddy had just thrown at him. He didn’t know whether he wanted to punch Teddy in the face, or just throw him out the door. He stood there, so angry, so mortified, with his fists clenched. How dare this little bastard assume he knew what he was feeling, what he wanted? No way was this fucker going to get away with questioning his intentions toward Eli. No way in hell. He was going to give this asshole a piece of his mind, and right now. Hunter opened his mouth only to snap it shut again as Teddy went on.

“Gotcha! Didn’t expect that, did you? Admit it. I made you think. That, my friend, is a good thing because, you see, there is only one person in this world I care more about than myself, and that is Elijah James Miller.” At Hunter’s blank stare, Teddy rolled his eyes and spat out, “Eli.”

Hunter tensed and tried to speak again, but Teddy was on a roll.

“Ergo, I have a responsibility to protect the one person I care about. So, what’s it going to be, Hunter? Are you really ready for a relationship? ’Cause honey if you aren’t, I’m begging you to please leave my friend alone. You are the first person he has liked in a long time, and under that wiry, tough exterior of his beats the heart of a pussycat, and you, big guy, have the ability to crush it without even thinking about it. So again I find myself saying, please, cut Eli off now if you aren’t strong enough to see this through.”

Teddy heaved a huge sigh and ran his fingers through his mop of hair. He looked Hunter in the eye, and his voice came out softer this time, with a hint of apology.

“Look, I didn’t mean to insult you just now. But I had to get your attention. What you guys have is pretty rare these days. I think you both genuinely like each other and maybe even feel a little bit more than that. So do yourself and Eli a favor, and be sure before you take this any further, for both your sakes.”

Teddy turned and walked to the door. He hesitated for just one second then squared his shoulders and turned to flash a huge grin at Hunter. His eyes held a look of warning, belying the friendly expression.

“And if you breathe one word of this little convo to Eli, I swear I will come back here and redo this horrific décor of yours with every shade of pink I can find!”

The door closed none too gently behind Teddy, leaving a stupefied Hunter looking dazedly around his living room. What had just happened? He felt as though he’d been beaten up—and by a flaming queen no less. Hunter sat down heavily and closed his eyes. A part of him knew Teddy was right, even justified in what he’d said. Up until a few weeks ago, there had been some of Stephen’s things still hanging in the back of Hunter’s closet. It had killed him, but he’d gotten rid of the last bits except for the photos. Then Eli had come along and turned his world upside down, and drew him out of the shadows he’d grown so fond of lurking in and literally let the sun in.

For almost a solid week now, every day had been spent together, hours each evening, eating together, laughing and talking and kissing, and oh, how nice the kissing had been. Every time Hunter felt like he wanted more than just that, alarms had gone off in his head, making him doubt himself. What if he couldn’t do it? What if he got into bed with Eli and fell to pieces? Would he understand? Or would he just be disgusted with Hunter and walk away. God, please don’t let him walk away. And that was exactly what held Hunter back—the idea he

might lose Eli before he ever had a chance with him. That was the very reason he was sitting here by himself and not enjoying the party with Eli.

\*\*\*\*

Eli saw Teddy reenter his apartment and wondered what his friend had been up to. He looked decidedly guilty as Eli made a beeline for him.

“Where were you, Teddy?” Teddy jumped and turned to face a rather hostile Eli.

“Oh you know, just out in the hall getting a breath of fresh air. Its stuffy here in your tiny palatial abode, darling.”

Eli narrowed his eyes and took in the flushed appearance and slightly nervous glances Teddy was throwing his way. Teddy never left a party without some piece of man candy on his arm, and even then he was more likely to make out with said candy in the kitchen before taking it to a more public place. Therefore, the idea that he’d needed air was a lie, plain and simple. If Teddy wasn’t getting air then where had he been? Eli closed his eyes, hoping against all hope that the feeling of dread closing in on him had nothing to do with the fact Teddy had probably just been next door at Hunter’s place.

“Teddy,” Eli growled through clenched teeth, “what have you done?”

“*Moi?* Why not a thing, *mon cher*. I was simply checking out the boyfriend and seeing if he was coming over, that’s all.”

“I swear Teddy, if you spooked him in any way, I’m going to—”

“Tut, go see for yourself, if you don’t believe me! I declare, Ellie, you most definitely get your panties in a wad whenever we talk about Mr. Hunter Mathews.”

And with that, Teddy flounced away, leaving Eli staring after him with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 12

Although Teddy's questions were difficult for Hunter to hear, they also became the impetus for him to finally make the decision to get off his ass and make his way to the party. He wanted to see Eli, to be with him, tell him that he was ready no matter what the outcome. Feeling surer than before, Hunter moved to the door and had the knob in his hand when a loud knock broke the silence. Before he could open the door, he felt it shoved inward and stood face to face with an obviously upset Eli.

Simultaneously both men began to apologize.

"I'm sorry. I know I'm late—"

"I'm so sorry Teddy came over here—"

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why are you sorry Teddy came—"

"What do you mean? You're not that late—"

"Wait, what did you say?"

"Wait, what did you say?"

Suddenly, Eli raised his hand and shouted.

"Stop!"

Hunter went dead still, looking a bit shocked at the near deafening roar that had just come from Eli. He'd never heard him raise his voice like that.

Realizing he'd shouted much louder than he'd intended, Eli reached for Hunter's arm and began to apologize.

"Oh my god, I'm sorry, Hunter—I didn't mean to yell. It's just we kept talking over one another, and I wanted to make sure you were all right and Teddy hadn't scared you off or anything. Listen I'm not sure what Teddy said, but you have to know he's an ass—a well-meaning ass, but still. You just have to ignore him. Honestly, I tune him out most of the time, and he doesn't even notice. So you just focus on us, and forget about him. 'Cause you and me? We're good, real good, okay? Hey, are you all right? Dammit, did Teddy upset

you? Because, so help me, if he said anything to hurt you, I'm going to beat his—”

Eli got no further because this time it was Hunter who moved in, grabbed him round the shoulders, and kissed him nearly breathless. When he finally let Eli come up for air, he'd wrapped one leg around Hunter's hips and was grinding into him with abandon. While both of them tried to catch their breath, Hunter leaned back in and began to pepper Eli's cheek and throat with kisses while murmuring a breathy plea.

“Stay with me. Don't go back to the party. Please, baby, I want you so much.”

Eli tilted his head to give Hunter more access and shuddered slightly. He tightened his embrace and ground his hardening cock into the thick strong thigh it was wrapped around.

“Yes, god yes. Just let me go tell Teddy I'm staying here. I promise I'll be right back.”

“Don't you have your phone? You could just call him.” Hunter murmured between kisses.

Eli fumbled in his pocket, never dropping his leg from Hunter's hip. Holding it up, he keyed in his passcode and dialed Teddy. Between kisses, he told Teddy he wouldn't be back to the party and to please lock up after. He'd clean up tomorrow. After disconnecting and dropping the phone to the carpeted floor, Eli moved, pushing Hunter back toward the bedroom door, removing clothing as he went.

When the back of Hunter's knees hit the edge of the bed, he couldn't help but sit down, pulling Eli with him. In one swift move a ninja would applaud, Eli had Hunter on his back and was straddling him. Then their eyes met, and the need that was shadowed in near desperation in Hunter's eyes made Eli pause. Leaning down, his hands pressing against warm flesh, he asked the question that could either derail the entire night, or make it fly.

“Hey there, big guy, you sure about this? You ready for me? For... us?”

Hunter hesitated for a fraction of a second and Eli tensed, motionless, atop him. He watched as Hunter's eyes flicked to the right to the dresser where Stephen's picture stood and Eli followed his gaze. Perhaps this had been a mistake. Eli felt his heart drop and began to shift his body off of Hunter's. It was suddenly painfully clear that Hunter might never be able to make room for



anyone else in his life. Hunter felt Eli move, and he reached out with both hands to clutch Eli's thighs, holding him fast.

"Where do you think you're going, little man?"

Eli stopped, a small spark of hope firing inside him, and then he spoke, his voice laced with a challenge.

"Did you just call me 'little man'?"

"I did. What are you going to do about it?"

"Oh my, my, my. You're going to be sorry you ever said that, big guy. Oh, yes you are."

Hunter leaned up, forcing Eli to cling to his shoulders or fall off onto the floor.

"Oh yeah? Care to put your money where your mouth is, little man?"

Eli pushed Hunter back down and raised up on his knees, unzipping his jeans and pulling them down to display a hard smooth cock and a set of balls. No briefs, commando all the way. He fisted his cock in one hand and leaned over Hunter, sliding the tip across his lips.

"No money here, mister, just a nice fat cock for that smart mouth of yours. Now open the fuck up and suck me good and hard. Then we'll see about fucking that fine ass of yours if you ask me real nice."

Hunter opened wide, and Eli slid right into that nice warm, wet hole. When he felt his man's tongue press against his slit, he nearly howled with delight. My god, that mouth was a work of art, wielded by a master. Before he could stop himself, Eli pumped his cock in and out of Hunter's mouth a few times. He was already so turned on it wasn't going to take much more to shoot his load right down that pretty throat. He'd better slow things down, or he'd embarrass himself right out of the gate. Pulling back gently, he felt the length of his shaft slide out till nothing but the tip remained inside. With a slight pop, he withdrew completely, silencing Hunter's protests with a kiss. When it ended, Eli said just three words, "Clothes off now," and slid off Hunter's lap to remove his own.

Having already removed their shirts on the way into the bedroom, both men made quick work of their pants and, facing each other, paused to take in the picture that stood before them. Hunter was one solid wall of muscle, a nice broad chest that tapered down in a luscious vee to narrower hips and well-muscled thighs. Eli nearly swallowed his tongue and decided right then and

there he would take all the time in the world exploring every inch of Mr. Hunter Mathews.

Meanwhile, Hunter was enjoying his own visual tour of the slender man in front of him. Strong, toned arms hung alongside a narrow chest and waist. The long, surprisingly fat cock that hung between gorgeously muscular thighs was now pointed straight out in front as if waiting for Hunter's mouth to finish what he'd started moments before. Eli was perfect, lithe but strong, and exuding a strength that belied his stature. Hunter felt his own cock harden at the sight of the gorgeous man in front of him.

“Ooh, somebody's very happy to see me.”

As Eli spoke, he reached out and grasped Hunter's cock in his hand, giving it a few rapid tugs and then gently holding on, using it to pull the bigger man to him. He heard the breathy moan that escaped as he took the final step to close the distance completely and slowly pumped the cock in his hand a few more times.

“Is this what you want, baby? You want me to jerk you off while I fuck that gorgeous ass of yours?”

Hunter shuddered out a response. “Oh god, yes, Eli, please.”

“Now how could I possibly turn down such a sweet request? Where's the lube and condoms, Hunter? Get them and then get on the bed, I want to watch you stroke that dick of yours for me.”

Hunter moved rapidly, yanking open his nightstand drawer to grab the brand new bottle of lube and box of condoms he'd purchased only a few days ago. He tossed them on the bed, and he climbed aboard, lying on his back. Eli stood at the end, watching him with an expression that gave little away, save that he was intent on seeing what happened next. Hunter spread his legs and lifted one, tucking his heel in to his ass cheek, spreading his hole wide open and putting it on display. His action was rewarded by a small gasp that quietly escaped Eli's mouth.

That was all the encouragement he needed to throttle back and draw out each motion that followed. With deliberate intent Hunter reached for the lube and opened it, squeezing a small bead onto his fingertip. Other than his quickening breath, there was no other noise in the room as he began to massage the sticky oil into the puckered skin that would soon give way to his lover's thick cock. Hunter wasn't sure if it was his moans or Eli's that drifted in the air,

but it no longer mattered for he was now performing for only one man—and he was now stalking the bed like a predator about to consume him.

“Stop.”

The word sounded like the crack of a whip in the near silence. Hunter froze, his finger resting on his slick and loosened entrance. He looked up at Eli, a question in his eyes that was rapidly dissolving into a fear he’d done something wrong somehow.

“Sorry big guy, I can’t seem to stop shouting at you. But you see, well, it’s just that I changed my mind. I want to be the one prepping you.”

Hunter reached for the lube, offering it to Eli. When the other man grabbed it, Hunter put his hands on the back of his thighs and raised them in the air, offering his ass with no hesitation. Once more, he heard Eli’s breath catch, and a quiet moan fill the air.

“Jesus, you are so fucking sexy, Hunter. Listen. We’ll go real slow, and if you need me to stop just say the word. No questions asked. But right now, I need to touch that sweet ass, okay? I’m gonna make this so good for you, baby. So good for both of us.”

Eli climbed onto the bed, kneeling in front of Hunter. The snick of the lube bottle opening was the only sound in the room. He squeezed a healthy dollop onto his fingers and rubbed his thumb over it in a circular motion to warm the lotion, then pressed his finger against Hunter’s hole and began to slowly push in. The murmurs of “God, yes” and “More, please, Eli, more” were enough to tell him he was on the right track. Leaning forward, Eli swiped his tongue over a soft brown nipple. Plunging his finger deeper into Hunter, he began sucking on Hunter’s nipple, gently biting it and then soothing it with his tongue.

By the time Eli had inserted a second and then a third lubed finger into Hunter’s tight ass, he was alternating between both nipples and driving the man beneath him crazy.

“Please, oh god, please, Eli. I need, oh fuck, I need—”

“What do you need, baby? Tell me. Tell me what you want, Hunter.”

“Fuck me. Jesus, please fuck me.”

Eli removed his fingers and heard Hunter whimper.

“Shhh, big guy, just give me a second to glove up here. I got you, not gonna let you hang for long.”

Hunter shifted beneath him, grabbing at the blankets, as if mindlessly begging for Eli to shove his cock inside him. Eli fumbled getting the rubber on. He was so hard he was worried he would blow his load before he even got inside Hunter. By the time he was ready and had slicked up his cock, Hunter was nearly yelling at him to “stick it in me right the fuck now.”

Taking his time, Eli lined up his cock and began slowly pushing in. He felt a slight resistance and then, absolute heaven. It was so tight and warm, and Eli’s eyes nearly rolled back in his head as he bottomed out, his balls slapping lightly against the soft mounds of Hunter’s ass.

“Fuuuuck, that is so good, baby.”

Hunter whimpered and arched his back, seeming to chase Eli’s cock with his ass. The pace was set and now the only noises that broke the night air were the slapping of balls against warm flesh and the accompanying grunts and moans made by both men. Eli’s cock slid in and out of Hunter’s wet hole, and when he finally found just the right angle, he watched as Hunter’s ass rose in the air and felt him clench around his shaft. Determined to nail that sweet spot as often as possible, Eli thrust in again and again, while Hunter slowly came apart. Pushing his legs back even further, Eli drove in, relentlessly fucking the sweet ass under him. Hunter’s cock was trapped beneath Eli’s weight and every time he tried to grab it and begin to jerk off, Eli slapped his hand away with a rough, “not yet, big guy.”

Finally, when Hunter was driven right to the edge and begging for permission to touch his cock, Eli wrapped his hand around it and began to jerk it in time with his thrusts. Hunter’s neck arched, and his fists shook around the mounds of blankets they held, all the while begging Eli to “please, please more, deeper, faster, fuck me, please.” He grunted out each word as Eli continued to pound his ass.

“Stay with me, big guy. I gotcha, I promise. Come back to me, Hunter. I want you to focus just on me, on my cock in your ass. C’mon baby, stay with me.”

Hunter opened his eyes and looked at Eli. He liked this man so much. He wanted him, needed him. He watched a smile ghost across Eli’s face and felt him thrust hard up inside him. His cock pulsed and filled again as his hand slid up and down, finishing with a little twist at the end that made Hunter groan aloud.

“That’s it, baby, Gonna make you come, now. Come on Hunter, give it up for me. Fucking blow for me, right now.”

Hunter felt his body convulse and his cock swell as he shot his load all over his stomach and chest. Nearly sobbing in relief at the incredible orgasm rocking his body, he barely realized that Eli's rhythm had begun to stutter as he pumped in and out erratically, filling the condom. Then he felt Eli's weight cover him as both of them gasped for breath. Hunter held Eli tightly and felt tears begin to tumble down his cheeks.

“Hey now, shhh it's okay. Hunter, I'm here, I have you, not going to let you go, not ever.”

Hunter held on tighter as Eli did his best to reassure him everything was going to be just fine. He heard every word Eli said and knew in his heart it was all true. He'd been alone so long; been trapped in fear and sadness for so long and now he held the future in his arms. His tears all spent, Hunter stroked the back of Eli's head—brushing aside the hair that had fallen down around his face—and kissed him, murmuring, “Thank you,” over and over again.

Later, after Eli had disposed of the condom and gently washed Hunter's chest and stomach, the two of them fell asleep in each other's arms.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Epilogue

Teddy pushed back the pink turban he'd wrapped around his head earlier that morning and brushed imaginary dust off his bright neon green T-shirt. Using his purple marker to write "Eli's Kitchen Shit" on the last box, he slumped against the stack behind him and began to bitch again about being used as slave labor.

"Are you really sure about this, Ellie? I mean, five short months ago, you were calling the man a Neanderthal and sneaking around to avoid him, and now you're moving in with him? How do you know he's not an axe murderer or something?"

In sync as usual, Eli and Hunter both responded to the whiny diatribe coming from outside the room they were currently cleaning.

"He's not an axe murderer, Teddy."

"Not an axe murderer, Theodora."

Teddy jumped at Hunter's deep booming voice, ignoring his friend completely.

"Who are you calling Theodora, mister? Why I oughta come in there and give you a piece of my mind! Introduce you to Smith and Wesson here."

Teddy shook his fists toward the bedroom where Hunter had been dismantling Eli's bed. When Hunter's face appeared around the doorframe, Teddy yelped and shoved his fists behind his back, schooling his features into a sickly grin. Hunter shook his head in mock disgust.

"If you weren't as tiny as a Chihuahua, you'd be dangerous. Now get back to work. Those boxes aren't going to pack themselves, Theodora."

Hunter chuckled lightly and disappeared back in to the room. The moment he was out of sight, Teddy shook a fist at him and sighed heavily. It was no use pretending that he didn't absolutely adore the big goon. Teddy had spent the last few months falling in love with Hunter. He'd watched as his best friend grew happier, each day he spent with his "big guy," and god only knew, whatever made Eli happy was aces in Teddy's book. Now with their signatures fresh on the newly leased apartment across town, they were moving in together.

Teddy sighed happily and patted a box next to him. To think, all this had started with his pushing Eli to ask Hunter to the Valentine's party, the very

soiree neither one of them had actually attended, thank you very much! Teddy smiled and contemplated his pink nails just peeking out of new open-toed sandals he'd worn just for this occasion. So what if they were women's sandals? Teddy liked them, and neither Eli nor Hunter minded that he tended to dress just a little girly. In fact, Hunter had spotted his toes earlier and told him how pretty they were. Yes, the big guy was a keeper, and Teddy intended to make sure his friend Eli kept the man for a long, long time.

“Those boxes aren't going to pack themselves, Teddy!”

“And just who was your bitch last week, Ellie?”

Teddy turned to grab an empty box and rose up off the floor with it in his hand. Just as he was about to turn, a voice whispered in his ear.

“That would be me, ‘the hunk of burnin’ love.’”

Teddy shrieked in surprise as both Hunter and Eli laughed out loud. Oh yeah, this one was a keeper.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Dividing her time between teaching music and writing, Sammy enjoys connecting with her friends and making new ones on Facebook and various other social media. She is the owner of one very fat cat, Bennett, and happily resides with the boy she has loved for over 30 years. Yes, she was a child bride. Ahem.*

## **Contact & Media Info**

*You can find Sammy at:*

[Email](#) | [Facebook](#)