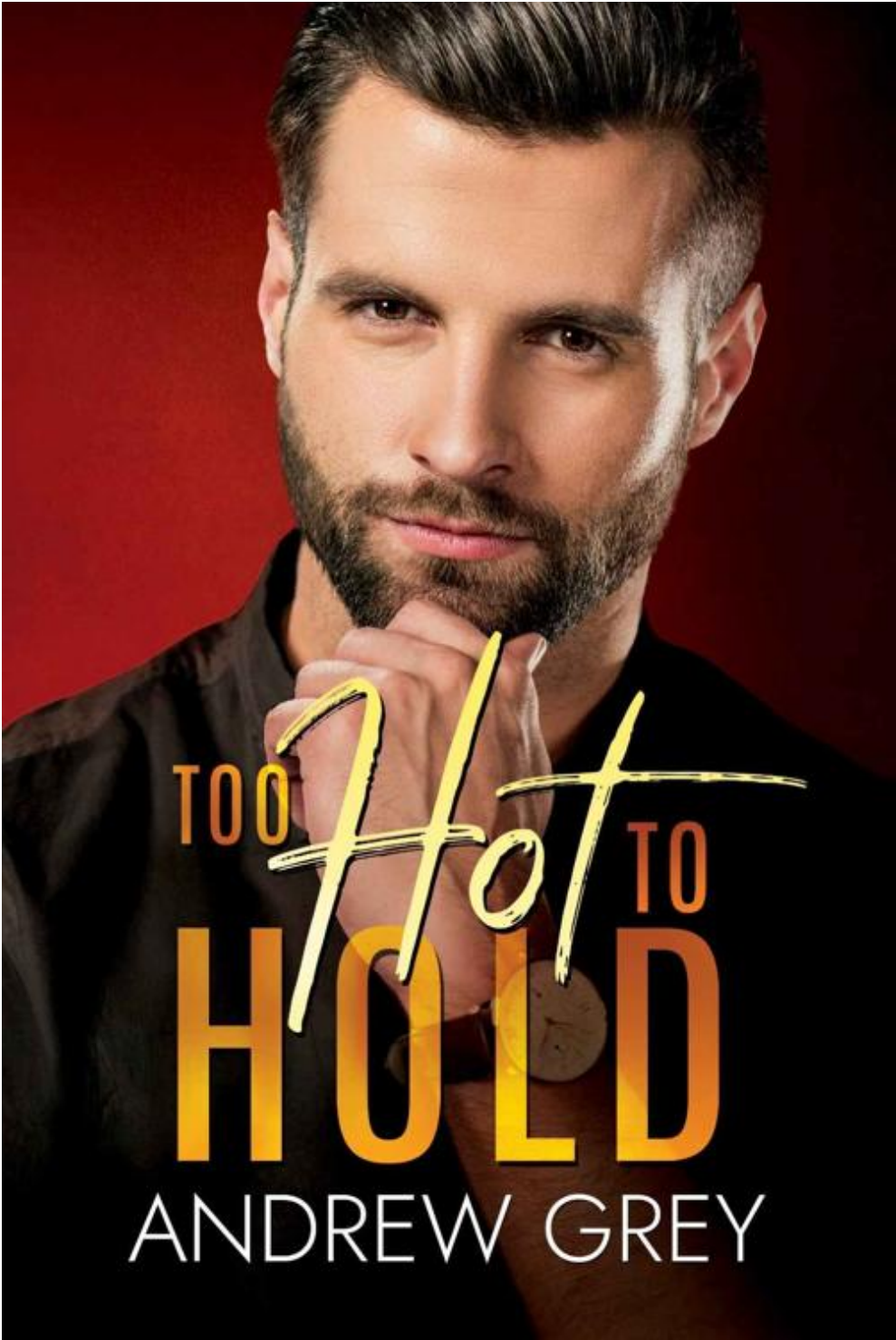


TOO *Hot* TO  
**HOLD**

ANDREW GREY



TOO

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By Andrew Grey

Gay burlesque performer, Noel West, had dreams of dancing professionally, but an injury sidelined him. He's wary of other people, largely because of his profession. When David offers him a ride in a blizzard, he cautiously accepts, expecting a come-on. David is a gentleman, however, and that quickly gets past Noel's defenses.

David Hunter is a trust-fund kid and a lawyer. Seeing Noel, he offers a ride because no one should be out on a frigid night. He has no idea what Noel does until he refers to it in a snappy comeback, which leads David to return and see the show. He's captivated by Noel in a way he never thought possible and decides to try to get Noel's attention... the old-fashioned way: he woos him.

When Noel's club is raided on trumped-up charges, he calls for help, and David answers. But even as Noel starts to realize that David might be everything he appears to be, he's still skeptical. Especially when he learns David's father has political ambitions that Noel's relationship with David seems to threaten. David will need to navigate family drama to prove to Noel that his feelings are true and that he really is his Prince Charming.

To Tricia, Rebecca, Dominic, and Reese,  
and everyone who helps make my books possible.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Epilogue](#)

## Chapter One

“Night, Noel,” a figure in the sliver of light from the theater door said as he passed.

Noel West waved and then pulled his long coat closer around him as he stepped out into the wee hours of the morning, wisps of snow swirling around him. “Night, Frankie,” he told the security man at the door as he took his first steps down the passage at the side of the building. The wind picked up, and Noel tightened his scarf around his neck, glad for all the layers he was wearing.

“Hey,” a gruff voice said. “How about you come over here and suck my dick.”

Noel sighed. “Like that’s something I haven’t heard before.” He turned as a man stepped out of the shadows. He was middle-aged, short, and dumpy. His hard life was written all over his face, and he probably had enough alcohol in his system to pickle his liver for the next decade.

“Come on. I know you like cock, coming out of that place.”

“Yeah,” Noel snapped. “And I’m sure as big a pig as you are, you think your dick is going to taste like bacon.” He pulled back his lips to show his teeth. “How do you know I won’t bite that little cocktail wiener of yours?” He snapped his teeth, and the man took a step back. Noel drew himself up as tall as he could before walking a little faster to the main road and turning to the right.

“Are you okay?” another man asked. Noel didn’t want to stop. He was tired and just wanted to go back to his tiny apartment and go to sleep. “That guy didn’t hurt you, did he?”

Noel whirled around. “No. I’m fine.” He narrowed his gaze at the tall, broad man who stood about two feet from him. He was “climb him like a tree, lick him all over” gorgeous, even in the gray overcoat that must have cost as much as Noel made in a month. A stunning head of dark hair speckled with snow topped off a face that deserved to be carved in granite. “Thank you.”

“Can I give you a ride home?” the man asked.

Noel rolled his eyes. “Look, if you’re going to proposition me, try something original, okay? I’m tired....” Suddenly his mind began playing the Lili Von Shtüpp song from *Blazing Saddles*, but he refused to smile. “And if you want to see my act, you can pay the admission like everyone else. I don’t do private shows.” He was so over guys thinking he was some sort of plaything. “And just so you know, I’m a person. I’m not some piece of meat because of what I do. And dancing on stage does not mean that the rest of my time is for sale. Okay? I’ve already had three Prince Charmings, a Tarzan, two guys take running dives at me, and a half a dozen fall-down drunks in the last three hours. I think my fellow man could just give me a break and let me go home... alone.”

He turned away and continued walking. The snow picked up, and what had been wisps floating lightly in the air turned into curtains of white that coated everything. He pushed his shoulders up and did his best to nestle into his coat as he walked as quickly as he could down the sidewalk. He only had four blocks to go to his building.

“Are you sure I can’t give you a ride?” a now-familiar voice said. Noel turned to say no, thank you, as the huge guy with eyes that sparkled in the light from above stood next to a limousine. Warmth poured out of it, and Noel was tempted. “I promise, I’m just offering a ride home with no strings attached.”



Noel reached into his pocket and wrapped his cold fingers around his can of pepper spray. Then he took a step toward the car, ducked down, and tucked inside the warm interior. For a second, he wondered if the cold had turned him completely stupid.

The man climbed in after him and closed the door.  
“Please... give Antoine your address.”

“Buffalo and Jefferson,” Noel said, not wanting to give his exact address, but it was the closest intersection. The car rolled forward. “Thank you,” Noel said, his hand still in his pocket. “This is just a ride home.”

“Of course,” the man said from next to him, having settled comfortably into his seat. “You know, you have a real mouth on you. Do you always wield it like a sword?” He smiled a perfect smile without any heat or menace behind it. Doing what Noel did for a living, he got to know the crazies, and this guy gave off none of those vibes. If he didn’t know better, Noel might have put him in the nice category, except those kind of people did not go around in limos and take exotic dancers home from work at two in the morning.

“It usually works, and it’s a lot less messy than the alternative.” The car turned and continued slowly down the narrow street. Noel recognized the area near his home, and as the car slowed, he let himself relax just a little.

“Here you are.”

Noel half expected the door not to open, but as he pulled the latch, it swung out, and he stepped back out into the wind and snow. “Thank you.” He flashed a smile because the man deserved it and then closed the door, stepped back, and walked across the street behind the limousine. It pulled forward and slipped away into the night, leaving him truly alone on the silent street. He scratched his head slightly, watching as the black car turned left at the corner and disappeared from sight. Maybe it was Christmas and the guy in the limo had been Stripper Claus—who knew? He hurried down the road to his building, used his key to unlock the outer door, and then stepped inside where it was warmer. He made sure the door

was closed securely before quietly heading up the stairs to his back of the building apartment.

After releasing a large sigh, Noel unwrapped his scarf and then hung up his coat near the door so it could dry. He kicked off his shoes, unzipped the Harvard sweatshirt he had on underneath, and hung that up as well.

A soft meow sounded from the floor as Wiggles wound his way around his legs. Noel picked him up and carried him along into the kitchen. He gave the big tabby a little food and made himself half a sandwich before drinking a couple glasses of water. When they had both eaten, Noel showered quickly to get the smell of the theater off him before climbing into bed. Wiggles jumped up to claim his own spot at the crook of Noel's knees as soon as he was settled.

Noel usually fell asleep easily, and tonight was no exception. His days and nights were long, so sleep came quickly. He didn't usually dream, or at least he never remembered them in the morning, but this time he woke with the image of the stunning man who had given him a ride home. Wiggles blinked up at him with his big eyes.

All Noel could think was what the hell had he done. Getting into a car with a stranger had to be one of the stupidest things possible. Granted, the guy had taken him right home, but Jesus, he could have locked the doors and transported Noel to his sex dungeon or decided to reenact his own version of *House of Wax*.

Wiggles jumped off the bed and meowed loudly. Noel got up as well, pulled on his robe, and padded barefoot to his tiny kitchen, where he fed the cat, then flopped down onto the sofa and turned on the television to see if the world had fallen apart.

“YOU WHAT?” Dean asked the following evening. “You actually got in the car with him?” His usually pouty lips hung open in abject surprise. “You slut.”

“It was cold, and I was freezing. Besides, I don’t know. I got a vibe off him, and he was just being nice, and I was right. His limousine brought me home, and that was all there was to it.” Noel thought about sticking his tongue out, but in this place, that could get you into a ton of trouble, so he scrunched his face and shot Dean ocular daggers. “And you’re the slut and we all know it.”

“Amen to that,” Jesse echoed from where he was checking out the way his butt looked in the mirror before making sure everything in front was lying to its best advantage. “Does everything look right?”

“Except for that big pimple on your left cheek,” Dean said.

Jesse whirled around to look at his face as Dean smacked him on the ass. “Oh, do that again,” he crooned, shoving his backside close to Dean, who shook his head and went back to his preparations. Noel was just pleased their attention was elsewhere.

“How about we just get ready?” Noel said with a chuckle. These guys loved having fun—it was what they seemed to live for.

Jesse got into his naughty elf outfit, and Noel groaned. He hated that damned thing, though the crowd seemed to love it, especially given the time of year. Noel was known as the stripping hipster, so he carefully pulled on his costume, making sure all the rip-away panels didn’t come undone. Then he checked himself in the mirror.

“Do you think your Good Samaritan will be in the audience tonight?” Dean asked with a wink.

Noel didn’t want to think about that sort of thing. It was Saturday night, which meant the crowd would be big, hyped up, and rowdy as all hell. What he really wanted was to just get through the night, and then he could go home and not have to return to this place until Tuesday. This was a job, and it paid for his apartment and fed him and Wiggles. It also paid his college expenses. “It doesn’t matter. He was a guy who was

nice enough to give me a ride home when it was snowing like hell. That's all."

"And did he make a play for you?"

Noel shrugged slightly. "He might have, but I shut him down quickly. Though he could also have been genuinely nice, and as jaded as I am, I assumed what he said was a line. Who knows. It was one ride on a snowy night, and I'm grateful for it." He met Dean's gaze. "Not that fucking grateful, so save that sex look for the crowd out there who will buy that act. I know better." He shooed Dean away and helped him into his Officer Randy outfit. Of all of them, Dean was the only one who had the build to pull off that act. Jesse, like Noel, was smaller, more willowy, and slight.

At one time, Noel had dreamed of being a ballet dancer. He took classes for years and was danged good. He'd even had interest from various companies. But all that changed with an injury when he was seventeen. In an instant, the dreams for his future were gone. Then, at eighteen, he'd found himself on his own and needed a way to make a living. He understood how to express himself through movement, so this job had been a breeze to get, especially with his lean body and angel face.

"Well, I took a peek out front, and I must say, there's a man standing in back who could give me a ride home any time he wanted." Dean glided away in his most dramatic fashion.

Noel was tempted to check for himself, but the music started and Jesse the Naughty Elf took the stage. Noel was next, and he knew he needed to be ready.

**JESSE RAN** off stage in his thong, his little butt bouncing as he hurried back to the dressing room. He flashed a thumbs-up as Frankie followed him, handing Jesse a wad of cash. Clearly the guys were out tonight, and they were in a spending mood. Noel closed down the part of his mind that wondered if he was doing the right thing. He needed the money, and he could

make enough tonight to last him through the rest of the month and pay part of the rent.

“Gentlemen, it’s time for a favorite of ours, and we know he’s one of yours as well. So give a great welcome to our favorite hipster, and he’s no coward—Noel!”

He hated that introduction, but the crowd roared as he sauntered on stage like none of this mattered. It was part of the schtick and how he made it through each and every show. Noel reached the center of the stage and cocked a hip to one side, then dramatically shifted to the other, spreading his legs, flashing a hint of what he had underneath. He brought a finger to his lips as though he were wondering what to do next.

The music began, and Noel did a back flip, easily landing on his feet. The crowd applauded and whistled as he spun on his toes to the rousing beat of the music, his shirt flying off as he did so that when he came to a stop, his golden skin glistened and glowed under the lights.

“You want some of this?” Noel asked with a wry grin he had perfected months ago, running his hands down his chest and belly before returning to his toes and into a pirouette before once again coming to a stop. The crowd was breathless, and Noel loved this moment. The beat of the music came faster, and Noel spun with it, lowering a hand to his waist. He tugged on his tear-away pants, and they came off. He held on to them, raising his hands above his head, the faded-jeans-colored material flying above him like a flag that he twirled and bobbed before letting the fabric fly to the side of the stage just before he came to a stop with his back to the audience.

In his usual flourish, he turned and put his finger to his lips, like he was wondering if he’d been bad. “You know what Mama always said. Make them beg for more... and then don’t give it to them.” He grinned wickedly, which brought down the house each and every time. “Thank God I’m not my mother.” He turned toward the audience, rolling his hips, and cash rained down on the stage.

He gave them his biggest smile, his arms over his head, and was finally able to see out into the audience. The huge

man from last night was there in a suit that hugged him like a glove, standing in the back, his gaze locked onto Noel's.

Noel had long ago forgotten to be shy or embarrassed by a room full of men looking at him on stage nearly naked. It came with the job, and Noel worked hard on his body to keep it in shape and the cash flowing in. But in that moment, with that pair of incredible eyes watching him, it took all his willpower not to run from the stage. He swallowed and kept his smile in place, slowly moving along the front to give each person a good view. Letting them look was the way he got paid, and the money seemed to fall like the snow from last night.

Once the show ended, Noel sauntered off the stage the same way he had when he was fully clothed, racing to the dressing room as soon as he was out of sight of the patrons.

Noel pulled on his jeans and a T-shirt right away and turned when Frankie entered with his costume and his money. "Thank you," he said.

Early on he had offered to tip Frankie, but he always shook his head. The man was honest as the day was long. Noel supposed you had to be, running this kind of business in Milwaukee. "I run this place to be safe for everyone, and that means that you all get all your money. Those men out there pay me enough to get in and drink like fishes. I do really well" was all Frankie had ever said, and Noel had never heard of him misbehaving with any of the guys. Stories went around about owners taking advantage of the entertainment, but that never happened here. "You got your *Beauty and the Beast* number with Dean in half an hour."

"I'll be ready," Noel said. "You know that." He was always prepared and didn't believe in holding up the show.

"You always are." He turned to leave, but paused. "There's also a man out front who has asked to see you. I explained that no one gets backstage during a show, and he asked if you might be available afterward." Frankie took a deep breath.

“Is it the guy from the back in the fancy suit? I saw him,” Noel added after Frankie nodded. “Tell the guy I’ll join him once the show is over. And no, I don’t know what he wants, but at least out there, the bartenders and you will be able to make sure he doesn’t pull anything.” Though honestly, if he were going to, he would have done something last night when they were in the car. Instead, he had been kind and—dare Noel even use the word—a gentleman.

Frankie nodded. “All right, but if he tries anything, he’s out of here.” Frankie left, and Noel began getting ready for his next number. It was always a crowd-pleaser. But even as he went through his familiar routine, he couldn’t help wondering what the man from last night wanted.

## Chapter Two

DAVID KNEW the moment Noel came out of the door beside the stage. Every eye in the room gravitated toward him, including David's. Since he'd sent his message, he had watched the various performances for most of the evening, surprised by how cheesy many of them were. Yet every time Noel came out from behind the curtain, David couldn't take his eyes off him. There was something in the way he moved. He seemed to glide across the floor as he came closer.

Even last night, when Noel had been wearing all those layers and looked like the kid from *A Christmas Story*, all bundled up, he still carried that grace with him. Not that David had known last night who Noel was or what he did for a living. He had been on his way home from an event and had been passing when he saw Noel. He had asked his driver to stop, and when he got out of the car, those first sharp words about cocktail wieners made him smile. And as bitter as it was, he had only offered a ride on a cold snowy night to be kind to someone who seemed to be freezing. It wasn't until Noel snapped about buying a ticket like everyone else that David understood.

Men stood and tried to get Noel's attention. He smiled and continued forward, acknowledging them, but kept moving until he reached David's table. "You asked to see me," Noel said. "And thank you for the ride last night."

David motioned to the chair across from him, and Noel sat down. He wore jeans and a simple T-shirt, but they hugged him perfectly. "I'm glad you made it home okay." David was



never tongue-tied. He made his living with his voice and by using his words. It was what he excelled at, but this man had him sitting at a table in the back of a small club, not sure what the hell to say. “I don’t even know why I’m here.”

Noel’s incredible eyes widened. “That’s something I don’t think I’ve heard before.” He lifted his gaze toward the bar, and one of the men came over. “A sparkling water, please,” Noel said in a gentle voice that belied the sharpness David had heard last night. “So what do you want? Why are you here? You don’t look like the usual kind of guy who comes in here.”

“I don’t suppose I do,” David said. He had already watched the men in the room, noticing their ages and demeanor. The place reeked of unending want and desperation for something they couldn’t have. “But I only came in here because you invited me.”

Noel sat back as the bartender put down his glass. “I did?”

David nodded. “You said that if I wanted to see you, I should buy a ticket. Or something to that effect. So I did what you asked.” David lifted his glass. “Are you done for the evening?”

“Yes,” Noel answered, to David’s surprise. He would have figured Noel would be performing later into the evening. “The others will come back on stage, but I’m off for the rest of the night.”

“Then would you like to have dinner?” David asked. “I’m hungry and I haven’t eaten yet.”

Noel set down the glass he’d been holding. “I don’t think so.” He began to stand.

“Why not?” David asked, though if he thought about it too much, he’d wonder why he was doing this. Lord knows his father would throw a fit. But at the moment, David didn’t care. There was something intriguing about the man sitting across from him, like an onion that he needed to peel away the layers of.

“Like I said last night, I don’t do private shows,” Noel said.

David shook his head. “I’m not asking you to strip for your supper. I’m asking if you want to go down to Water Street with me and have dinner. I’m hungry and I need something to eat. You’ve got to eat as well....”

“And that’s all?” Noel asked.

David nodded. “And my family thinks *I’m* skeptical.” He contemplated finishing his drink, but it was awful and the whiskey was cheap and bit on its way down, so he left it.

Noel snorted, an undignified sound that fit the surroundings. “You’re skeptical. Have a look around,” he said, leaning over the table. “Look at where I work. Okay? Every eye in this room is on me right now. Half the men are wondering why I’m sitting at your table and not theirs, while the others are trying to figure out if they have enough money to get me to sit with them... or go home with them. Which I never do. And you wonder why a guy I met for, like, five minutes—granted, you were very kind to offer me a ride home last night... but still—why is a guy like you here?”

David blinked, because all of that came at him so fast that he could barely parse the words. “First thing, you’re sitting at this table because I issued an invitation and because you’re curious as to why I offered that ride last night. Second, and for the record, I don’t make it a habit to visit places like this. Third, I have access to more than enough money to have most anyone I want sit at a table with me, but no, I have never paid anyone to spend any amount of time with me... and I don’t intend to start now.” David stood and lifted his coat from the back of the chair as Noel sat still, his mouth hanging open. “Are you ready to go to dinner?”

Noel nodded. “I need to get my coat. Meet me around the side in fifteen minutes.”

“Okay. Give me your number, and I’ll text when I’m out front.” David got an assessing stare, and then Noel wrote down his number and passed it over. Then he turned and

headed back toward the stage, the other heads in the room following him like they were watching a game of tennis.

David reached into his pocket and passed the bartender a couple of twenties to make sure his bill was well covered. He left the club, returned to his car, got inside, then pulled out of the lot and drove to where he had seen Noel the night before. He got out the scrap of paper and texted that he was out front. Noel came from around the side of the building, bundled up like last night. David lowered the window, and Noel came over. “Get in before you freeze.”

Noel opened the door while David raised the window. “I was looking for the limousine.”

“Antoine has the night off, so I thought I’d drive myself.” He pulled away from the curb and out into traffic, his Tesla Model S making no sound at all.

“Who are you?” Noel asked as he settled back into the seat. “Last night you were in a limo—today you’re driving an expensive car. And let me guess, you’re only driving this one because the Ferrari is in the shop.”

“I’m driving this car because I like it and because I care about the environment. And no, I don’t have a Ferrari. But the Lamborghini is at home in the garage.” David grinned, and Noel rolled his eyes.

“Really?”

David chuckled. “No. This is the car I use when I drive myself.” He made his way south before turning into a parking garage. David parked, and they got out of the car, exiting onto Water Street before walking together.

“Do you usually drive yourself places?” Noel asked.

“Not a lot, no. Antoine does most of the driving. I tend to work in the back seat while he makes sure I get where I’m supposed to be going. There never seems to be enough time to do what I need to, so I make the most of what I have.” He paused and smiled. “This is the place.”

Noel looked through the window and then went inside. The Havre was a classic French-style bistro, and David loved

it. The place always reminded him of what he got eating on the Left Bank in Paris. It wasn't so much fancy as hearty, delicious, and approachable. David loved it here and thought Noel would be more comfortable than at one of the snootier restaurants.

They were shown to a nice table right away, and Noel took off his coat and sat down. He had put on a sweater that seemed at least a size too big over his shirt. David wondered if he had borrowed it, but said nothing. Good manners involved making sure others were comfortable.

“Have you been here before?” David asked.

Noel shook his head as he looked at the menu. David easily chose the duck. It was his favorite, and he got a salad to go with it. Noel ordered the steak frites, and David got a bottle of wine. Once their orders were placed, Noel watched him. “I keep trying to figure out why you're doing this.”

“What does it matter?” David countered.

“Because what if you want something I don't want to give you?” Noel asked as the server uncorked the bottle of wine. David tasted it, and then the server poured them each a glass.

David smiled and shrugged. “Are you going to give it to me if I ask?” Noel shook his head. “Then it doesn't really matter, does it?” He loved winning an argument. It was kind of his thing, and David was very good at it. “We're here, and we're having a nice dinner. There's no need to ascribe something nefarious behind it.”

Noel took a sip from his glass and set it down. “So you make a habit of picking people up off the street at two in the morning to give them a ride home and showing up later to take them to dinner.”

“Actually it's something I have never done before. I'm usually in a hurry to get where I need to go. But that weather yesterday was dreadful, and you looked half frozen with how you pulled yourself into that coat of yours. Besides, there's nothing wrong with helping someone else out.”

“But what if I had been crazy—or worse?” Noel asked.

“Antoine is more than capable of handling just about any situation. It’s what he does,” David said, telling Noel the truth. In the years he had known him, Antoine had never seemed to encounter any kind of situation where he didn’t know exactly what to do. David had met some of the most famous people in the world, and Antoine was always ready with information and exacting advice on behavior. There had also been the time when a group of young men had decided that David was an easy mark with the way he was dressed. The three men ended up on the ground, moaning in pain, before they got within three feet of him.

“So he’s a bodyguard and a chauffeur,” Noel said. “What kind of man needs someone like that? Are you a mobster? The son of a mobster?” He set down his glass and made a show of looking closer. “I know, you’re an international spy like James Bond, and Antoine is your version of Pussy Galore.” Noel had to snicker a little.

“You really have an active imagination. Why would an international spy be in Milwaukee? This city is many things, but it isn’t a hive of international espionage.” He smiled brightly at Noel, and damn, if only for a second, Noel smiled back. It was like the sun finally coming out after three days of rain. “Just enjoy your dinner.” The server brought their salads, and David ate slowly. “Can I asked what you do besides...?”

“Taking my clothes off?” Noel supplied. David knew he was trying to get a reaction from him, but kept his features neutral and didn’t rise to the bait. After all, it was, in a way, how he’d met the spitfire that was Noel. “I’m a junior at UW Milwaukee. I’m studying business and marketing.”

“So you’re doing this to put yourself through school.” David had heard of people working as entertainers and escorts to pay for college. He’d just never met anyone like that before. Granted, David met a lot of people every day, but guys like Noel didn’t usually intersect with his social circle.

Noel swallowed another sip of wine. “I do what I do to make a living. It’s something most people have to do.”

“What about your family?” David asked.

Noel set down his fork. “Like, do they know, or are they ashamed of me?”

David shook his head. “I’m not accusing you of anything. I just asked about them.” He was not in a position to cast aspersions on anyone else’s family, especially when he thought about his own.

“I have relatives out there somewhere, I suppose. My father was never really in the picture, though I have met him a few times. He showed up every few years and would fight with Mom over child support or something... and then he’d disappear again, and she would turn him in to child services for nonpayment, and they’d go after him again.”

“What’s your mom like?” David asked.

Noel set down his glass. “She worked, and eventually died of cancer when I was a senior in high school. Mom had dreams for herself and for me, but none of them came true.” David wished he hadn’t asked, because it was clearly something Noel was still dealing with. “She worked two jobs to make ends meet and so I could dance. All that ended when I got injured and my professional hopes went up in smoke.” Noel’s vulnerable expression lasted only a few seconds and then it was gone. “After that, I had to make my own way.” He returned to his dinner, eating deliberately. “What about you? What’s your family like?”

“Let’s see. My mother passed away, and my father, Jackson, tried to replace her... badly. My stepmother....” God, how did he describe her. “My stepmother is one of those people who decorates part of the house in August to take a fake picture for her Christmas card so she can send it to all her friends who send out their own fake and posed cards. When she gets them, she looks them all over for any sign in the background of when they were taken. It’s hilariously stupid and incredibly fake, but that’s my stepmother. Everything is about appearances.” David downed the rest of the wine in his glass. “Not that I’m much better.”

Noel snorted. “How so? I mean, this dinner certainly can’t be for appearances. I’m not going to win anyone any popularity points.”

“No. This dinner is actually fun. Something I haven’t had in quite a while.”

“Why not?” Noel asked. “Everyone needs to have a little fun sometimes. Even James-Bond-acting potential international spies. And since I don’t know what you do, when the guys ask me about tonight, that’s what I’m going to tell them.”

“I see,” David said, smiling. “I trained in school as a lawyer.”

Noel rolled his eyes and mock shivered. “Then I’m definitely going with international spy.”

They finished their salads, and the server brought their main courses and refilled their glasses.

“What I actually do is even more boring than that. I work for my father.”

“Now that sounds dysfunctional,” Noel said. “Let me guess. He wants to do things the old-fashioned way, and you want to modernize and streamline.”

David couldn’t help grinning. “You’ve been watching too many television movies. And it’s nothing like that. I work for my father, but it’s....” He leaned over the table. “You know how your mother had dreams for you? Well, my father has ones for me, and he’s the pushiest bastard you’d ever meet in your life.”

“So tell him to sod off and go do what you want to do,” Noel said.

David had thought of doing that so many times. “I wish it were that simple. There are moments when I want to do just that, but it isn’t that easy.” Walking away from Jackson Hunter was something no one just did on a whim. “My father....” He searched for the words and came up empty. “He’s groomed me to take over from him since I was eight years old. Sometimes he would pick me up, not to take me to basketball or an after-

school club, but so I could go to the office and start meeting the people in his world.”

Noel sat back. “Jesus. It’s like a cult. Got to indoctrinate the young as soon as possible.”

He had never thought of it that way, but Noel was probably right. “Anyway, let’s talk about something more pleasant.”

“Like what?” Noel asked, his eyes twinkling. “And just to remind you, I still don’t do private performances.”

David shrugged. “Hey. I was thinking about movies or hobbies, but since you brought it up....” He had no intention of asking Noel for any such thing. “And for the record, you keep bringing it up.”

Noel sighed. “Well... you would too if you got asked at least a dozen times a night, sometimes by guys hauling around enough cash to pay my rent for three months. To them I’m just a body, someone they see on stage and somehow want to continue the fantasy. I’m not a real person to them. Tonight was the first time in months that I’ve been out in front of the stage.”

David swallowed hard. “Because of the offers you don’t want?”

Noel shook his head and then drank some more wine. “Because I’m afraid that someday the temptation will be too much, or I’ll need the money so badly that I’ll agree to do it, and once that door is open....” He pulled his hands on his lap. “It’s hard to put the genie back in the bottle. And besides, if I did do something like that, Frankie would have my tight little butt out on the sidewalk so fast, it would make my head spin.”

“Is Frankie the owner?” David asked. “I think he was the man I spoke with.”

“He was, and yes, he is. Frankie has rules of conduct, and he also watches out for us. No one gets away with anything when Frankie is around. If you want to see how fast he can move, try to touch one of us. There are times when I swear the



guy knows how to fly.” He grinned, and David was relieved to know that Noel had backup.

Watching Noel on stage had been a transportive experience. Noel was gorgeous and sexy, especially when he was wearing next to nothing, but what really took his breath away was how he moved. Every motion was graceful and thought out. He didn’t clunk around the stage, grinding his hips. Noel didn’t have to. When he moved, there was no way David could look away. The man was sex appeal personified, and he didn’t need overt gestures to capture attention. Even now, he ate slowly and kind of gently, with small bites.

David enjoyed his duck, the dark blackberry sauce incredible. Their server inquired if they wanted dessert, and David asked if Noel was interested, but he demurred, so David requested the check, which he paid when the server returned. There was still a small amount of wine in the bottle, but David had had plenty and knew he needed to drive. He could always call for a ride, but he wanted some time alone with Noel, who was already bundling himself up. David pulled on his coat before they headed out into the cold night air for the walk back to the car. Once inside, he got the heat working before pulling out.

“Thank you for dinner. It was very nice of you.”

“You’re welcome,” David said. He could feel tension building in Noel as he headed toward where he had dropped Noel off last night. David was pretty sure that Noel was wondering what came next. David drove, thankful the roads were clear, crossing the river into the Third Ward, then turned off Water Street and pulled up to Noel’s corner, where he stopped. “Good night,” he said gently, and Noel reached over to open the door.

“Thank you again. It was a very nice dinner.” He paused, and David expected him to get out. But Noel leaned across the seat and kissed him quickly on the lips before leaving the car. He closed the door and hurried across the street, his form illuminated for a second in the headlights. Then he was gone, swallowed by the darkness, and David pulled away and went

around the block before heading back north and out to Lake Drive.

Fifteen minutes later, he turned right into the drive that led to his Italianate-style home. He pulled into the garage and lowered the door before getting out of the car. David went into the house that had once belonged to his grandparents. Then he went through to the kitchen, where Antoine sat at the table with Oscar underneath it. The white-and-black cat stretched, but didn't deign to come over to greet him. "I made it back in one piece," David said when Antoine raised a single eyebrow.

"I would have felt better if you had let me drive you." He set down his mug. "Did you go to that club to see the young man from last night? You know your father will not be happy about that sort of thing." He finished his coffee and poured a refill from the pot nearby.

"I'm aware of that. But my father isn't happy with anything I do other than go to his fundraisers and look good standing next to him on the podium." David opened the refrigerator and filled a glass with juice.

"If I may ask, did you have a nice dinner?"

David sat down across from him. "How did you know where I went and how I spent my time? I told you not to use the tracker on the car. Can't I at least trust you not to snoop into my life? I know my father does, and my stepmother is like a bloodhound." He hated how small his world really was.

"I only checked to make sure you were okay, and now that you're home, I'll forget everything I saw and go to bed." He smirked, and David rolled his eyes. "But I take it you did have a good time."

"It was a nice dinner. Strange in some ways, but nice." He couldn't help smiling, which he knew Antoine would try to read plenty into. "He's different from what I expected... sassy, and his tongue is..."

"Sharper than yours?" Antoine finished for him.

"Most definitely." There was something that intrigued him, an honesty that David rarely found. Noel was forthright

about what he did and what he expected from it. He didn't shy away from... well, anything, and David liked that very much.

"I see...." Antoine drank some more of his coffee, those intense eyes watching him. Sometimes, David hated that Antoine seemed to see everything and knew way too damned much. "You like this young man." He took his mug to the sink, pausing to drink the rest of the coffee. "I know better than to try to tell you what to do. But be sure you understand what will happen if your father so much as gets a hint of where you were tonight and what you did."

"Having dinner?" David knew he was being a smartass, but he couldn't help it.

The cup *tinked* loudly as Antoine set it down. "You know exactly what I mean. Your father won't see that Noel is doing what he needs to in order to make a living, or that he's funny, or any of the other things you see. He'll look at him and see nothing more than a stripper." He turned around. In some ways, Antoine was his best friend. At least he was the one person in the world that David knew would always be honest with him.

"And what do you see?" David pressed.

Antoine huffed a second before rolling his eyes in an "oh, dammit" way. "Someone who makes you smile."

## Chapter Three

“DID YOU all miss me?” Rafe asked as he pulled on fatigues. He’d been gone for a few weeks.

“Sure,” Dean said, “but you missed all the action last weekend.” He was dressed and ready to go on, which only seemed to make his tongue wag faster. “Apparently our little Noel here got a ride home in a limo, and then the next day, tall, dark, and handsome showed up after the show and whisked him away.”

“You know, you have a big mouth,” Noel scolded.

“Yes, and all the boys just love what I do with it,” Dean retorted. “Have you heard anything?”

Noel decided to ignore him and get ready. He took off his clothes and began redressing from the inside out, getting into the costume for his hipster ballet number.

“Come on.”

“Jesus, you’re a real pain in the ass... and so not in a good way,” Noel snapped. “He took me to dinner, and that was all. We talked, had a nice time, and then he took me home. That’s the end of it.” Noel had been trying to make sense of that evening all week. “Sometimes, dinner is just dinner.”

“In my experience, when a man buys you dinner, he expects you to be the dessert,” Dean added.

“Hold on. He took you to dinner, then just took you home and didn’t ask for anything,” Rafe said. “Jesus, if I didn’t know better...” He looked toward the door. “The man is

either in love with you, or this is one of those fatal attraction moments. Either way, run.”

“You’re both asses....” Noel smacked Rafe’s hard backside. “It hardly matters.” He finished getting ready and couldn’t help taking a peek out front, his belly doing a little flip just in case David was out there. He wasn’t. Well, it had been worth a shot.

“Ten minutes,” Frankie said as he passed through the dressing area. “Have a good show.” He left, and the activity increased as they all checked themselves in the mirror, and Jesse got ready to do his elfing best number.

“Police,” men said as they hurried inside.

“Get Frankie,” Noel told Jesse, who hurried off.

“Everyone stay where you are. This show is shut down, and all of you are coming with us,” a huge officer said as two others fanned out through the room.

“What’s going on?” Frankie demanded as he and Jesse returned.

“This establishment is closed. We have had reports that it is being used as a cover for prostitution. You’re all coming to the station.”

Noel looked at his shaking friends, huddling together, with police officers looming over them. He was standing next to his dressing table, so he grabbed his phone and pulled up a recent text. David had said that he had trained as a lawyer. Noel had no idea if he’d help or not, but he sent a text message that the club had been raided and the police were taking them in. *I need your help, please....*

“Put the phone down,” one of the officers snapped at him. Noel met his gaze with as much fierceness as he could muster and held it tightly. “Give me that.”

Noel shook his head.

“Pay attention, Jack,” one of the other officers said, and the guy stepped back, getting out of Noel’s face as his phone vibrated. He waited while Frankie spoke with the officers and

made a few phone calls of his own before checking for a response.

*On my way* was all it said, but hopefully it would be enough. Noel watched one of the officers and Frankie get into a heated argument, and then he turned Frankie around and slapped cuffs on his wrists. The rest of them stood close together, and Noel assumed that the patrons out front were probably being hassled as well.

“What kind of shakedown is this?” Noel asked as one of the officers approached.

“You be quiet. We’re waiting for a car to take you all down to the station.”

“Really?” David strode in, dressed to kill in one of those coats that made him look like a prince. “What sort of evidence do you have?” David slipped off what had to be alpaca or vicuna and draped it over his arm. “If you’re going to take these men in, then you need to have specific evidence against each of them. What is it?” Man, he sounded amazing.

“And you are?”

“David Hunter. I’m the attorney for Noel, here. He texted me as soon as you arrived. I came down here to see that my client’s rights aren’t being violated, and from the looks of things, I’d say this entire raid is questionable.”

“We are acting on a tip about this establishment,” the biggest officer said.

“Really?” David asked. “And this tip, it didn’t happen to be anonymous, did it? Were specific people mentioned by name? Have you seen anything illegal yourselves?” He stepped closer, and Noel wanted to cheer when the officer began to look at the others for support—a sure sign of weakness. “Just what I thought. This is harassment, and it isn’t going to look good for the department. You know that.” David held himself tall and straight. Noel had been attracted to David’s kindness since that first night, but this was something completely different. David had Noel’s heart pounding and

blood coursing through him to the point that he could barely think.

“We need....” The officer looked like he was going to cry.

David cleared his throat. “What you need is to have hard evidence before you pull a stunt like this. This club may not be your cup of tea, but as long as they abide by the law, you are to do the same.” Man, the way he schooled them was so awesome. Noel wanted to cheer, but he was too stunned. “Why is this man handcuffed?”

“Yeah, why?” Noel finally found his voice. “Frankie was trying to protect us.”

“Is this true?” David never raised his voice, but the command in it was unmistakable.

“He resisted....”

“What? A questionable action by the department that could very well be illegal?” He motioned, and one of the officers removed Frankie’s handcuffs. “Excellent. I will be contacting the superintendent of police so he can sort out this mess.” David motioned to the door, and three now very subdued officers left the club, the door closing behind them.

“Thank you,” Frankie said once they were gone.

David nodded. “You’re welcome. I’m assuming I didn’t get here in time to save your evening, but at least I saved you all a trip to the station.”

“How did you know all that stuff?” Noel asked.

David met his gaze, and Noel wanted to swim in those eyes. “The department has a certain reputation when it comes to the LGBTQ community, and I used that to my advantage. They tend to overreact to certain kinds of complaints. Bias exists everywhere.” David slowly put on his coat once more.

“Will you really do all that stuff you said?” Noel asked in a bit of a hero daze. “For us?” He was so used to being stepped on.

David nodded. “Now, please excuse me. I have to return to a dinner with my father and stepmother that I’m expected for, and they’re probably going to be angry.” He paused right in front of Noel. “You did the right thing by messaging me.” He smiled, and Noel nodded his thanks, and then David was out the door, which banged closed behind him.

All the guys started talking at once.

“That was the guy who took you home?” Jesse asked.

Hunter fanned himself. “Jesus. And he just took you to dinner? If he asked me out, I’d give the guy anything he wanted.”

“That’s enough, boys. Noel’s friend saved us all from a very unpleasant evening. I suggest you all change and then go home. We’ll reopen tomorrow night, and Noel, do you think you could shift your act from the hipster to a Prince Charming? Come up with something a little new?”

“Yes. Because we all need a Prince Charming,” Noel agreed. He knew he could put something together. Maybe take a few moves from the production of *Swan Lake* he had danced in years ago.

“That’s very true. Now, all of you change and get ready to leave. I’ll close up after you.” He left their dressing area, and Noel dressed in his street clothes before going to find Frankie out front, sitting at the bar with a glass of whiskey.

“Everything is going to be okay.”

“I sure as hell hope so.” Frankie downed the liquor before seeing him out, locking the doors behind all of them. It was still early, and Noel wondered what he was going to do.

“Let’s go dancing,” Jesse offered. “Dance, Dance, Dance is down the street. We could make quite a show.”

“How about we go to the diner down the street and have pancakes?” Dean offered.

“And get fat?” Jesse countered.

“You are not going to put on weight with one plate of pancakes,” Noel snapped at him. “Let’s go drown our sorrows



in some bacon and maple syrup.” He headed that way, and the others followed.

They took a seat toward the back of the diner near one of the windows. Snow began falling once again, this time with light and fluffy flakes that fluttered toward the ground. The server bustled over, handing out huge menus that detailed everything from burgers to breakfast. Each of the guys ordered a Diet Coke as they looked over the menu.

“I heard that Frankie is thinking of closing up,” Dean said as he leaned over the table like he was sharing some secret.

Rafe shook his head. He’d been quiet for most of the time. “I doubt that. Frankie does pretty well, I think, and he knows what he’s doing. The place is packed on the weekends, and during the week, it’s open as a bar and gathering place.”

Noel shrugged. “It’s not that. It’s shit like tonight. He makes money, but he lost everything from tonight, just like we did. And you know that was the whole idea. Shut the place down so none of us can make anything, and then Frankie will eventually close, and the prudes will win just like they always do.” He harrumphed into his menu, knowing what he wanted, so he set it on the table, watching the snow and the cars as they passed.

“Hey...,” Rafe called out to a guy walking past their table, positioning himself like he was on display, with a cocky smile.

Dean smacked him on the shoulder. “What do you think you’re doing?” He narrowed his gaze. “You doing some sales on the side while you were gone?”

“No,” Rafe said, but Noel knew he was lying. Rafe had a history, and Noel was pretty sure none of the other guys believed him either.

“Frankie will can your hard ass if he finds out,” Jesse warned. “You know the rules.”

“I never cruise at the club,” Rafe defended, but he must have known he was on thin ice. “Besides, who’s going to tell him.”

“I will.” Noel wasn’t afraid of him. “The only way we stay open is if the club is clean. Then we can all dance and get paid, and no one ends up in jail.” He had just two more years and then he’d have his degree, and hopefully he could find a job that didn’t involve him standing mostly naked in front of a room full of guys. Not that he was ashamed of what he did, but he wanted more out of life, and he was working hard to get it. “You put us all in danger... and remember, I saved all our butts tonight.”

“You mean your Prince Charming did,” Jesse said, turning to look out the window. “And speaking of the hunk who came to our rescue....” He batted his eyes. He pointed out the window where a limousine stood right out front.

Rafe slid out of the booth, straightening his clothes. “Maybe I’ll see if I can thank him properly.”

Noel got up and pushed Rafe back down. “You keep your claws and other wiles away from him. You hear me?” He headed to the door and peered outside. The door to the limousine opened, and David got out. “What are you doing here? Are you following us?”

“I wanted to make sure you were all right,” David said. “I asked Antoine to return and saw you all go into the diner.” He stepped out of the way as Noel hugged himself against the cold. David stepped back, and Noel got in the car, knowing he had an audience. David climbed in as well and closed the door.

“I’m fine, David. But we all want to thank you for helping us out.” Noel soaked in the heat.

“You’re welcome.”

“I only messaged because I didn’t know what else to do, and I didn’t really expect that you would drop what you were doing... but I’m grateful you did.” He sighed, trying to calm the butterflies in his belly. “I didn’t relish the idea of spending the night in jail. Frankie has strict rules about what’s allowed, and, well....” He didn’t want to blow the whistle on Rafe, and he figured he’d let Frankie handle that particular situation.

“I thought you’d end up closing up the club tonight.” David seemed anxious. “But you’re out with your friends, and I don’t really want to interrupt you.”

“You could join us if you want. We’re just having pancakes and stuff.”

David sighed. “No. But thank you. I should probably get on.”

Noel took that as his cue to get out of the car, but he leaned closer, inhaling David’s rich, clean scent. “Thank you again.” Noel kissed him, this time harder than he had before. Why, he had no idea. Maybe he just wanted to know if those lips were as sweet as he thought they were, or maybe he just wanted to say thank you. Either way, what he ended up doing was kissing David hard and full without really thinking about it. Fuck, in an instant he was hard and tempted to straddle David and give them both the ride of their lives right here in the damned back seat.

But Noel remembered himself and pulled away, breathing deeply, his head more than a little light as he opened the car door and climbed out. The cold air snapped him back to reality, and he hurried back into the diner as the limousine glided away into the night.

“Was that him?” Rafe asked.

“Yes. That was the guy who has a thing for our little Noel here.” Dean batted his eyes. “So, did he get any sausage?”

Noel ground his teeth at him. “Sorry. I’m not you... the sixty-second man.” He rolled his eyes and sat back down as the server brought their plates.

“So you do like him?” Jesse chimed in.

“You are like teenagers.... And don’t forget he was the one who made sure we aren’t sitting on our pert little butts in jail. He just came back to make sure we were okay.” He hit each of them with his best glare. “So you should all be nicer, or next time I’ll let the police take you.” He grinned. “Maybe Dean could share a cell with Bubba, and Jesse could get paired with Moose... or Lecter.”

“We were just kidding,” Rafe said. “And you know it.”

“Maybe, but lay off.” Noel ate his pancakes and tried not to think too much about David. There hadn’t been too many people who came when he needed something, especially that quickly. Noel lived by one simple rule: learn to do things for yourself. He had come to realize that if he wanted something, he had to get it himself, and relying on others only got him hurt and dumped out in the cold. But David gave him hope that maybe that wasn’t true... at least not for everyone.

The guys chattered away, talking about ideas for numbers or what they intended to do after they ate. Noel was already tired, and his semester hadn’t even started yet. He had one more week and then it would be classes, work on the weekends, and him trying to study any time he could.

“Where are you?” Jesse asked. “Rafe was just asking if you thought you’d be able to do what Frankie asked and put together a new routine in a day.”

“Not sure. But I think I can come up with something. It shouldn’t be all that hard, and it would be fun to come up with something different.”

“And what if he shows up?”

Noel shrugged, but the truth was he was more than a little nervous about that. Noel had long ago stopped being shy about his body, yet the thought of David being out front watching him made him nervous as all hell. “Then I’ll do the show like I normally would.”

“No. I mean will you go back to his place? Thank him personally for his help?” Sometimes, Rafe was a real pain in the ass.

“Is that what you’d do?” Noel challenged.

“Well. He did us a favor, so I say he needs to be repaid. After all, no one does anything for free, and we all need to pay our debts. And I’d think the price would be well worth it.” He leered at Noel, who wanted to smack him.

“Thank goodness not everyone thinks that way.” Noel had made things very plain on that score, yet David continued

to not only show up, but make sure he was okay. Maybe there were truly good people in the world, and it pissed him off that Rafe acted this way toward someone who had been nothing but honorable. “There are a lot of ways to thank someone that don’t include lying on your back.”

“Maybe, but nothing says thank-you better than....”

Jesse smacked him on the shoulder. “We’re dancers, remember that.” The others glared at him as well, and Rafe seemed to pull in a little. He clearly wasn’t getting the support he was expecting. “And you need to behave. If you want to charge for your favors, that’s up to you, but don’t do it at the club. Didn’t you learn anything about what nearly happened tonight?” Jesse held Rafe in a glare. “What would have happened if you’d have been taken in? What sort of things would the police have been able to dig up on you once everything about you popped up on their computer screen?”

Rafe paled under his olive skin. “Okay, I got it.”

“Are you sure about that?” Dean pressed. “We all do this to make money, and we do really well. Frankie runs a clean place, and he makes sure no one touches us. There are worse places to work and you know it.”

“All right. I’ll keep my nose clean... and stop making cracks about Noel’s love life.” He grinned.

Noel finished his drink and sat back, full on carbs and eggs. “I should get on home. I have some work to do before the show tomorrow.” He pulled out enough money to cover his bill as the others did the same. And once they had all paid, they pulled on coats and headed out into the wintry night.

Thankfully, Noel had only a few blocks to go, and he walked home, doing his best to keep the wind at his back or side, but it was difficult. Finally, he reached his building and went inside and up to his apartment.

Wiggles was happy to see him, winding around his legs and mewling like he was hungry, even though there was still food in his bowl. Noel moved it around to cover the bottom, and Wiggles dug back in, silly cat. He petted him before

settling in front of the television with a blanket over his legs. Only then did he start to shiver. David had saved all of them, and he'd come because Noel had asked.

He might have been angry with Rafe, but he couldn't help wondering if that was because he had hit closer to home than Noel wanted to admit, even to himself. He was a kid who had finished high school, with no family, and who was working as a stripper. What could he possibly have to interest a man like David? Noel wanted to believe that David might like him for some reason other than how he looked or how he moved, but what else was there? He tried to come up with answers, but eventually gave up, finished his work, and went to bed.

## Chapter Four

“YOU LEFT the fundraiser early,” his father said as soon as David answered his call.

“Yes. I was needed somewhere.” He refused to tell his father that he had gone to help Noel. There was no way his dyed-in-the-wool, rabidly conservative father was ever going to understand that everyone deserved the same protections under the law as he and his stepmother took advantage of as much as possible. “Was it a good evening?”

“It was productive,” his father answered, which meant that he had managed to squeeze as much money out of his donors as he had hoped. “But we answered too many questions about where you were.”

David rolled his eyes as Antoine skillfully guided the limousine through the weather back toward his home. “It’s your campaign for the state senate, not mine. I’m sure everyone there was happy to spend time with you.” He was laying it on thick because no one in their right mind would want to spend time with his father. Jackson Hunter excelled at shaking hands and smiling while plotting exactly how he was going to use any weakness he sensed against the person in front of him.

“This campaign will increase my stature, as well as that of this family and the business, which you are part of.” His father had his eye on a possible run for governor or federal office, and this was just his first big step. David being by his father’s side was also a way to quell rumors of his father’s

intolerance. Jackson Hunter having a gay son out with him on the campaign trail blunted many of the arguments his opponent leveled at him. And David's father was accepting of his orientation as long as it made him look good and David didn't make him actually deal with it in any way. Jackson Hunter had his own version of *don't ask, don't tell*, and that included *don't know* and definitely *keep out of sight*.

David was tired of being his father's gay poster boy. "I do my job, and I do it well. You know that."

"You'll have the chance to make it up to me." How typical. His father paid no attention and simply went ahead with what he wanted. "There is a gala next Saturday for the Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce. A lot of influential people will be there, and I have been invited to address the gathering."

David suppressed a sigh. "I hope it goes well." He fully intended to play dumb.

"I requested tickets for you and Rachel." The last thing David wanted was to go anywhere with his stepmother. She took the power behind the man to a whole new level.

"I'm sorry, but I already have plans for Saturday that I can't break. I really hope it goes well and that you and Rachel have a great evening." He glanced out the window. "I have another call coming in that I have to take." He ended the call and tossed the phone onto the seat next to him. Antoine snickered from the front seat, and David shook his head. "Why can't he be happy and just leave me out of his and Rachel's ambitions?"

"That was some fast talking, though," Antoine said. "But I have to ask, since I manage your schedule, what are you doing on Saturday? You know your father is going to check your calendar."

David peered out the window as they passed the various mansions on the lakefront. "I don't know. But please add something that looks good. I'll figure it out, because I sure as hell am not going to be anywhere near home or my folks' place in Shorewood. Maybe we can find something to do in



New York. I know, Chicago. Get tickets to a show or something. Just make sure that I'm busy."

"As you wish," Antoine said before slowing and then turning into the drive.

David got out, and Antoine took care of the car. Instead of going inside, he wandered through the snow-covered gardens and wondered if he should get someone in to trim the hedges and make something of the place again. The covering of white made everything seem clean, but underneath, the beds all needed tending. His grandmother had been a matron of the garden club, and while she'd had help, especially toward the end of her life, the garden was her baby. Since she passed, everything had gotten overgrown and needed attention, though the bones were still good. That was a lot like how David felt right now. His own garden had been left untended for quite a while.

"Are you going to come in before you freeze?" Antoine asked from the terrace. "I put on some coffee and set out a snack for you."

"Thanks. I'll be in soon."

"Then I'm going to my room," Antoine said, and David waved before continuing down the path to the fish pond filled with snow.

David pulled his coat closer around him, the wind off the lake bracing against his skin. What he needed was a real life of his own. His father and stepmother had their own agendas, and they felt that he should be the person standing on the dais beside them, waving and smiling while they were in the spotlight. Not that David had political ambitions, but he didn't like the idea of forwarding his father's closed-minded and antiquated thinking either.

Everything was a show, a spectacle, with his father the center of attention. Everything had to be perfect, with each word scripted and each appearance vetted and planned to within an inch of its life. David didn't care about all that, and he didn't want to be part of his regressive social agenda.

His grandmother had been a force of nature, and standing in her garden, David could feel her presence. He knew what she'd tell him. "Screw your father—you go your own way." Then she'd add something like, "I don't know how I ever raised such a prudish stick-in-the-mud." David smiled at the memory. Grandma had also hated Rachel on sight. She said she was a power-hungry gold digger, and Grandma was right about most things. She'd pegged his stepmother full-on. Maybe that was why she left him everything and left his father a dollar. That had sent Rachel into a tailspin.

David looked around and nodded. "Yes, Grandma, come spring, I'm going to tend your garden," he said out loud. But right now he needed to figure out what he was going to do with his own.

DAVID CHECKED the time on Saturday—just before six—as the doorbell rang. Antoine had the weekend off, and David was on his own, which was just as well. He had been in a down mood, and Antoine had been avoiding him as much as possible, not that David could blame him. Tonight, Antoine was out with Gretchen, and this was their third date in as many weeks. For Antoine, that was saying something. Usually the women in his life seemed to tire of him quickly, but Gretchen seemed to have staying power.

He opened the door and stifled a groan.

"I knew it. You told your father you were busy, but I knew it was a load of crap." Rachel hustled herself inside. "Go on upstairs, and get your tuxedo on. We can leave for the Chamber of Commerce dinner in half an hour."

"I'm just getting ready to dress to go out," he answered, then narrowed his gaze. He was sick of explaining his life and his decisions to her or his father.

"You need to be at that dinner tonight. There's a whole contingent of gay business people who are going to be there, so you need to come." She took off her coat and draped it over

the back of one of the chairs, her Chanel resplendent with a diamond brooch that David recognized.

“I said I had plans, and I do. Now, you need to go if you’re going to get there in time to slink and schmooze your way around the room before dinner.”

“You need to be there, and....” Rachel was getting more and more pushy as the special election got closer.

He stepped closer and held out his hand. “And you need to give me the brooch.” He knew he was being petty.

“Your father gave me that last year,” she said, placing her hand over it.

“It was my grandmother’s. You know very well what her will said, and that brooch is worth more than a dollar.” He continued holding out his hand, and Rachel huffed and took it off.

“What are you going to do with it?” she snapped. “It isn’t like you have a woman you’re going to give it to.” Her eyes shot daggers at him.

“I’m not going to give it to you, that’s for certain, and I don’t think my father gave this to you, since it was in my grandmother’s jewelry box upstairs last spring.” He smiled at her.

She whirled around and grabbed her coat. “We’ll expect you at the dinner.”

“Then you’ll be disappointed. Something you should be used to by now. I know I am.” He held the door open, and she swept through it like she was the Queen of Sheba. He closed and locked it behind her, making a note to have the locks changed. God, he was really coming to hate that woman.

He checked the time again and hurried upstairs to change into a tight T-shirt and a pair of jeans that threatened to cut off circulation to his nuts. He was going out with the guys, and the plan was clubbing. David still had to pull on his shoes and socks when someone pounded on his door. He hurried downstairs to let in Teddy.

“You always had the patience of a two-year-old,” David chided.

“The door was locked,” Teddy complained.

“My stepmother was here, and I didn’t want the Wicked Witch to make another surprise appearance. And besides, with the door locked, my liquor cabinet was safe.” He hugged Teddy and went upstairs, knowing he’d make himself a drink.

“Where’s Antoine?” Teddy called up the stairs.

“Night off. So we have to do the driving.”

He could almost hear the groan. When he went out, Teddy loved to drink. His husband, Giles, was probably home with their three-year-old, Archie. Teddy was a great father, but every now and then, he needed to kick loose, and that meant lots of dancing and plenty of drinking. Teddy’s best trait was that he loved his husband and kid, so men weren’t his vice, just a chance to really let go for a few hours.

“So are you driving?” Teddy asked as David came down the stairs, dressed and ready to go as soon as the others arrived.

“Clive has the SUV, so he agreed to be the DD as long as we buy him a nice dinner.” Clive was always a sucker for good food. “I made reservations at Lake Park Bistro, so there will be plenty for him to choose from.” David slipped on his shoes and set out his coat as Clive came in with Jake. They all hugged, and Teddy finished his drink before they all piled into Clive’s Navigator.

They talked during the ride and while they were being seated.

“I hear you went out the other night,” Jake said as though he were sharing national secrets.

“Gossip much?” David retorted. “How did you hear?” If Antoine had opened his mouth, he was going to get an earful.

“Someone saw you downtown. I’m just glad you’re getting out of your hermit phase,” Jake said. “You’ve been

working and staying close to home for far too long. Not every guy acts like that backstabbing skunk Reggie.”

“He wasn’t a backstabber—he was abusive,” David clarified. “That goes way beyond a cheating money-grubber.” He had been in love with the guy, but once the blinders fell from his eyes, kicking Reggie out of the house had been easy. Figuring out the ways Reggie had weaseled himself into David’s life had been quite another. It had taken weeks and plenty of time with lawyers, and after the discovery of forged signatures, the prosecutor’s office.

“Didn’t he do time?” Clive asked.

“Yes. He got six months and a record that will follow him everywhere. He tried to get a job with one of our suppliers, but I was able to put an end to those hopes.”

“At least you aren’t bitter. That’s the important thing,” Clive said, throwing in his own two cents.

“Ass...,” David teased, and thankfully their server interrupted the shadefest and took their orders. David ordered the tartare as a starter, and the steak frites along with a bistro salad. He was hungry, and he knew he’d work off a lot of the energy on the dance floor.

Thankfully, the conversation shifted to the others. Teddy passed around pictures of his little boy, and Jake extolled the virtues of a week in Ibiza, where he’d met an amazing Spaniard with incredible eyes and a body to drool over. He sounded sad that he’d had to leave him behind.

“Are you staying in touch?” David asked.

“Marco is planning to come visit in a few months,” he answered coyly. “He thought about flying in so he could go to Disney World and then drive up to see me. I explained how far it was, so he’s going to just come here.” He seemed excited, and David was happy for him. Apparently, Marco’s family was from Barcelona and had a hand in the work on the Sagrada Familia basilica.

Clive wasn’t seeing anyone at the moment. His last relationship had lasted five years, and he seemed to enjoy

being a free man again.

Once they were done with dinner, they paid the bill and headed out to one of the dance clubs. David paid their entrance fee, and they went inside. The place was packed to the gills, and the tiny dance floor rocked from one end to the other. There was barely any room to move, which was okay as far as David was concerned. Guys moved in and out of his sphere, but he didn't make a play for any of them. Teddy mostly sat on the sidelines and watched tonight. David kept an eye on him and was grateful when he seemed to switch to soda. At least he wasn't going to be falling-down drunk like he had been the last time they'd all gone out.

A guy danced up right behind him, and David closed his eyes for a second, letting his thoughts of Teddy go for a second until the guy lost his rhythm. David moved away before turning, glad to put some distance between him and the flailing that seemed to be happening. The guy was so intent and into his dancing, he didn't seem to notice the others moving away, probably out of fear for their limbs.

"I think I've had enough," Jake said as he tugged David away from the line of fire and over to where Teddy had managed to snag a table. Clive joined them. "Let's get out of here."

David figured that was best, and the four of them headed for the door and out into the night. Thankfully, the extremely cold weather had abated, and there wasn't much wind. "Where to next?"

"We could just go to a bar," Teddy offered. "There are lots of them. You could pick up guys there."

"And you could drink until you can't stand up," Jake interjected. "No thanks. The last time you did that, I ended up holding you while you threw up everything except your shoes and then handing you over to your husband, who gave me the stink eye." Jake headed down the street at a good clip, like he knew where he wanted to go. David thought of trying to stop him, but it would only draw more attention.

"Come on... strippers?" Clive asked.

“Giles will kill me,” Teddy grouched.

“Oh, come on. It will be fun, and this isn’t strippers. It’s gay burlesque. They don’t get naked. I went here a few years ago, and it was a lot of fun.” He hurried up and paid their entrances before David could protest. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to see Noel again or that he was ashamed that he knew him. The guys would understand his fascination, he was pretty sure. “Let’s go.” Jake went inside, and Teddy followed, probably because he could get a drink. Clive huffed, and David went in last.

They got a table in the middle of the room. The glittery curtain was closed, and the shirtless servers made their way through the room, getting drinks and providing a little eye candy before the show began.

“Get me a drink,” Teddy asked as he headed toward the restroom.

David sat down, watching the stage while Clive placed orders and got them some chips and snacks, which he set right at Teddy’s empty place.

Teddy returned, and David grew more nervous as the emcee stepped out the side to introduce the first performer, Jesse the Elf. He laughed at his antics and the candy canes on his butt cheeks once he got down to his G-string and jingle bells.

“I told you this was fun.”

David tensed as Noel was introduced, but instead of the hipster, he came out as a prince. The dance was different, captivating, and David couldn’t look away for a second. Each movement was so fluid and graceful. He did look regal, even once his shirt had been twirled away and all that adorned his smooth, glowing chest was a heavy gold-colored prop pendant.

“David,” Clive said from next to him, and he nodded, but didn’t look away. He couldn’t, not for a moment. Noel danced around the stage in tight black pants. Then he leapt through the air, landing beautifully right in front of the stage.

David knew the moment Noel saw him. He paused just a second, his lips curling upward briefly. David wanted to wave, but he could only watch as Noel's foot slid forward. In an instant, he could see what was happening. Noel seemed to regain his footing, but it was only temporary.

Before he could think about it, David was on his feet, hurrying to the stage. Noel stepped again, and this time he caught the very front of the stage. His feet slipped off, and Noel tipped forward. David crossed the remaining distance in a split second, putting out his arms, and before he knew it, they were full of Noel. David came to a stop at the edge of the stage, his arms holding tight to Noel, who looked up at him in surprise.

"Are you okay?" David asked, tightening his hold just a little. Noel was bare-chested, his tear-away pants were partially open, pant legs hanging down, but they were still fastened at the waist. "You aren't hurt?"

Noel blinked a few times and put his arms around David's neck. "No, I think I'm okay." He seemed a little shocked and out of it. "I think you can put me down now."

David smiled. "I know. But what if I don't want to." He was aware that the rest of the room was watching them. Then they burst into applause, and Noel buried his face against David's chest.

"I feel like a fool."

A few guys patted David on the back, and he realized they were applauding his catch, rather than Noel's misstep. "You know, if you wanted me to hold you, all you needed to do was ask. You didn't need to fall off the stage." Noel lifted his head and smiled slightly. "I'm sorry if I distracted you." David realized he couldn't hold Noel forever and set him down on his feet.

"Thank you," Noel said, and then he was gone, hurrying backstage. David went back to the table, sat down, and released tensed muscles he hadn't known he'd been holding since the moment he realized what had been about to happen.



“That was some catch,” Teddy said, holding up his glass. “Was he as hot to hold as he looked?”

“Smartass,” David sniped at him, and Teddy sipped from his glass. The next act was introduced, and thankfully, Teddy’s attention was diverted.

“What went on between you two?” Clive asked. “It looked like you had a moment there.”

“Nothing,” David answered quickly—probably too fast, because Clive continued watching him. “We just spoke briefly.”

Teddy leaned forward. “Even I saw that. What’s going on?”

David shook his head. “I saw that the guy was going to fall and didn’t want him to get hurt.”

Clive leaned closer as the announcer did his warm-up for the next performer. “Bullshit. The entire time he was up there, you couldn’t take your eyes off him, and it had nothing to do with the fact that he was cute as all hell. You were transfixed, and I swear if anyone had gotten in your way, you would have bowled them over to get to him.” Dammit. Clive was too observant for his own good. “So what’s the deal?”

David shrugged. “His name is Noel, and I gave him a ride home last week after one of Dad’s campaign events on the south side. He was huddled against the cold, so Antoine and I offered him a ride.” David couldn’t help smiling. “He thought I was coming on to him and told me that if I wanted to see the show, I had to buy a ticket because he didn’t give private performances.” He chuckled. “I had no idea what he was talking about and was just being nice.”

Teddy threw his head back, laughing. “Only you would offer to give a stripper a ride home and not have a clue.”

“He’s a burlesque performer, and you be nice,” David snapped at Teddy.

“Okay,” Jake intervened from next to him. “Teddy, behave. And David, I take it from your reaction that you like him.”

“I do. Okay? He’s nice and he’s funny. Noel is also cynical and cautious as anything, but....” How did he explain that holding him for just those few seconds, even in front of everyone, had been like magic? “I think we all need to go. Noel is going to need to return, and I don’t think he needs us in the audience.”

Teddy shook his head, and David pulled the glass from in front of him. “I want to see what he’s got.”

David leaned over the table. “And why the fuck do you think I want to leave? I don’t want all of you seeing him. Okay?” Maybe he was being ridiculous. Guys saw Noel perform all the time, and yet the thought of his friends seeing Noel was too much, too intimate for David. Strangers were one thing, but his friends were something else altogether. “Can we just leave, okay?” He was also worried that Noel had misstepped because he had seen David there. That little smile had told him so much.

“But...,” Teddy began as Clive and Jake both stood. Teddy did the same, and David stayed behind to make sure their tab was settled. He paid the bill at the bar and left a good tip, as well as one for Noel, before pulling on his coat.

“David.”

He turned, staring into Noel’s intense blue eyes. “Are you okay?” he asked, and Noel shook his head. “What happened?”

“I twisted my ankle. It isn’t sprained, I don’t think. But I need to rest it.” Now that David looked closely, he could see how he was favoring it.

“Do you need a ride home? I’m here with my friends, but there’s room, and we could give you a lift.” There was no way in hell he was letting Noel walk home hurt. Shit, he’d carry him there if that was what it took.

“Are you sure?” He shifted his gaze to the floor.

“Of course,” David said.

“But I don’t want to ruin your night. I know you and your friends were out to have a good time.” He bit his lower lip, and David wanted to soothe the bit of worried skin. “I can’t

believe I was so stupid and lost track of the edge of the stage. That's never happened before, and I certainly haven't needed to be caught by an audience member before."

"Come on. Let's get you home so we can get some ice on your ankle." He put an arm around Noel's waist and guided him out toward the door. Clive had pulled the SUV up in front, and Teddy climbed into the third-row seat, stretching out. David got Noel inside and climbed in after him, closed the door, and then he told Clive where to take them.

The guys were surprisingly quiet for the short ride to Noel's corner. David got out, and Clive rolled down the window. "We'll wait here for you."

"No. Just go on. I'm done for the night, and I'll get an Uber for the ride home." David leaned closer. "Besides, Giles is going to love all of us if we get Teddy home, and he doesn't have to pour him into bed." He stepped back as Clive raised the window and drove off. Then David put his arm around Noel's waist once more and let him guide the way to his building.

"I don't know what I was thinking," Noel said as they reached the second-floor landing. He winced with each step, and David thought of carrying him up the last set of stairs. By the time they reached the third floor, Noel was pale, but he unlocked the door, and David helped him into the small but warm apartment.

The room was furnished in compact, basic pieces of furniture, probably because they all had to be carried up the stairs. The one exception was a royal blue sofa against the wall and a massive chair in the corner, covered in the same fabric. He got Noel settled in a chair and pulled over one from the small table to prop up his foot.

"You don't need to do this," Noel said. "I'm sure if you called, your friends will be happy to continue the fun."

David ignored him and helped Noel get his shoe off. Then he went to the tiny kitchen, got some ice, and located a plastic bag next to the sink. He found a dish towel and

wrapped the bag before gently placing it on Noel's ankle.  
"Does that help?"

Noel nodded and shivered, his eyes filling with worry and hurt. All David wanted do was make it go away.

## Chapter Five

NOEL'S ANKLE ached, but he'd been hurt worse. As soon as the ice touched his skin, he tensed, and then as it did its numbing work, he relaxed somewhat. He closed his eyes as David's fingers gently roamed his foot.

"Are you sure you're okay? The ankle is starting to swell a little."

He released the breath he was holding. "I think it's okay. I don't remember twisting it, so I think I must have hit my foot on the way down." At least that injury would be easier to recover from. A twisted foot could take weeks to heal, and he didn't have that kind of time. The final tuition payment for the next semester was due. Thankfully, he had enough money to cover it, but without working, he was going to be existing on mac and cheese for weeks.

David cradled his ankle in his hands and adjusted the ice. Noel sighed as the discomfort eased somewhat. "You are going to need to take it easy, and these stairs up here are going to be impossible for you to climb regularly." He stood and went to the kitchen, then opened and closed the refrigerator door before returning with a glass of water.

Noel drank it and settled back in his old, slip-covered chair. He set the glass on the scarred table next to him. He wondered what his place must look like to David. All the larger pieces of furniture had come with the place. The sofa had probably been there for decades. Noel had slip-covered the ugly thing, just like he'd done to the chair. They were large

enough that getting them out was nearly impossible without a crew of six, so he'd just left them and made the most of what he had. Nothing matched, and everything in his place was practical. Noel imagined David living in a big house that was decorated by a designer, with everything perfect and stunning.

"I'll figure things out. I always do," Noel said. The story of his life. If something happened, he either worked around it or changed plans and continued forward.

"I see. Do you have someone who can help you?" David asked. His hand remained lightly resting on Noel's leg, and Noel's heart raced a little faster with each passing second. He loved that touch but didn't want to draw attention to it in case David pulled away.

"The guys have to work, and I have no family to speak of." Noel cleared his throat. "Don't worry. I can do what I need to." He sat back, closing his eyes once more and just willing his foot to feel better. "I'm not helpless."

"Of course you aren't. But you know getting up and down those steps is going to be tough." David's hand slipped away and then he stood. Before Noel could argue, David had lifted him into his arms and carried him through to his tiny bedroom.

"I can get around on my own," Noel protested, even though he liked being in David's arms. He was solid and strong. Noel knew he was at David's mercy, but he also knew that David would never drop him. He was safe in those arms... at least for as long as David held him.

"Yeah." David set Noel on the side of the bed. "Your ankle is still swelling, and it's going to hurt. Those stairs are going to feel as tall as Everest tomorrow, and there's nothing in that refrigerator of yours. I was trying to find you something to drink. I wasn't snooping, I promise." He smiled, and Noel felt his defenses begin to fall.

"What are you going to do? Stay here with me until my ankle heals?" Like that was really practical. There was barely enough room for him and the bed was a twin. It was all he had space for.

“No. My proposal is that we pack you some clothes, and I’ll take you home with me. I have plenty of room, and you aren’t going to have to climb halfway to heaven to get your groceries. Do you have a bag somewhere?”

“You don’t need to do this,” Noel protested lightly. “I can take care of myself. Groceries can be delivered, and I don’t need to leave for a few days.” He hissed when he tried to move, his ankle throbbing.

“Yeah, right,” David said, and hit him with a glare. “A bag?”

“Under the bed,” Noel answered, giving up. David was a force of nature, and he was in too much pain and too tired to argue. Instead, he managed to get a few things out of the dresser, put them in the bag, and then hop to the bathroom, each step jarring his ankle. By the time he sat on the bed once more, he knew he was pale, and his ankle hurt like hell.

David took the bag to the other room and brought in his coat. “We need to get you dressed and ready. I’m going to call an Uber, and then once you’re ready, we’ll get you downstairs for when they come.”

Noel managed to get a sock on, and David helped with a larger one over it for additional warmth. Then he got his coat, and David bundled up as well. Noel locked the door, and David carried his bag as they managed the stairs one at a time. David was right—it was a damned ordeal that resulted in more under-his-breath cursing than Noel would have liked to admit.

A Toyota Corolla was waiting for them when they exited the building, and after David got him settled in the back seat, they were off. Noel did his best to get comfortable, and David gave him room to spread out. His ankle throbbed, and David seemed to understand, placing his legs over his lap. The pressure eased, and they rode through downtown and continued north.

“Once we get there, I have some pain relievers you can take. They might help,” David said gently, holding his legs, and Noel leaned back in the crook of the seat, closing his eyes,

trying to relax, but everywhere David touched him seemed warmer.

“Is this your house?” Noel asked like an idiot when the car pulled in.

David helped him out and up to the door, carrying his bag. “It was my grandparents’. Grandma left it to me.” He turned on the lights, and Noel hobbled through the house until David guided him down onto a long sofa that seemed to surround him as he sat. David helped him get his shoes and socks off, took care of his coat, and then got some ice on his ankle again.

Noel looked at the comfortable room, completely surprised by how warm and cozy it seemed. There wasn’t a designer... well, anything... in sight. Instead, everything seemed made for sitting and living.

“I’ll be right back.” David got a soft blanket to cover him. “Get comfortable and just relax.” He handed him the remote and left the room, leaving Noel on his own.

Noel heard David in the house, but he left him pretty much alone. “Hey, who are you?” he asked an old cat who jumped onto the sofa and pawed around Noel’s feet before settling near them. “I take it I’m taking your spot.”

“That’s Oscar, and yeah. The sofa is pretty much his domain. He was Grandma’s cat, and when I got the house, I inherited His Majesty as well.” David set some drinks on the table along with a tray of munchies.

Noel tried to sit up and get comfortable. “You know, you didn’t need to do this. I would have managed at home.” He’d been through worse and managed to come out the other side. Though when he looked over the goodies, his appetite kicked in.

David tilted his head to the side. “I have to ask. Every time I’ve done something for you, showed you even the most basic courtesy, you seem surprised. You fell off the stage tonight and hurt yourself, and I feel that was in part because of me.”



Noel rolled his eyes. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

“Smartass,” David said. Damn, it usually took longer for people to catch on to him. “I saw that smile of yours and knew you were watching me.”

Noel had been, and he’d lost track of where he’d been on the stage, but that was his fault. He knew he should have been paying attention to what he was doing rather than trying to make eyes at David. It was stupid, and now he was paying for his own clumsiness. “I got too close to the front.”

“I know. I was watching and saw what was going to happen. It’s how I was there to catch you. And you weren’t clumsy—you were graceful and beautiful.” David leaned forward in the chair, his voice rough. “I couldn’t take my gaze off you. The guys were teasing me about it, but I didn’t care.” He swallowed hard.

“Maybe I do. Maybe you shouldn’t have to take teasing from your friends because of me. Did you ever think that I’m not really worth it?”

David took his hand. “Why do you think that? If it’s because of what you do, that’s bullshit. Everyone has to make a living, and there’s no shame in performing.”

Noel scoffed slightly. “Really? Is that what your family would think? I saw you on television yesterday, there on stage, with your father running for the state senate. By the way, he doesn’t stand a chance in hell to win, but he’s still up there. Do you think his family values platform is going to allow him to accept me or someone like me?” He looked toward the floor. “And that stepmother of yours would probably want to perform an exorcism if she found me here.”

David snickered. “My stepmother would try to hustle you out of this house on a stretcher if she could get away with it.”

“And that’s funny?” Noel asked.

“It is because I don’t like her. I find her too self-centered and out for one thing—herself. She also isn’t particularly welcome here, and she knows it. As for guests in my house, that is my choice, not my father’s or stepmother’s... who are

at a big campaign schmoozefest that they wanted me to go to as well.”

“Why?” Noel asked. “What do you have to do with it?”

David made a sour face. “I’m their tolerance poster child, and I’m tired of it. It’s like putting lipstick on a pig. No one is going to buy it, but they insist that I can help.” He squeezed Noel’s hand a little tighter. “I don’t want to have anything to do with them. That’s why we went out this evening. I needed to be away so I could say that I already had plans, and the guys were more than happy to oblige.” He sighed, and Noel found himself watching David closely.

“Don’t you work for your father? Won’t he fire you?” Noel asked. “What happens if he does?”

David leaned closer. “Not to put too fine a point on it, if my dad fired me, that would be awkward for board meetings, as I sit across from him, and I own enough of the company, thanks to my grandmother, to stay there. My parents like to think they can get me to do what they want me to, but I guess I’m the quiet one who keeps to himself and thinks for himself.”

“So you’re stronger than they think you are?” Noel asked. He liked that David could take care of himself. “I know what it can be like to be around a bunch of sharks. Dance is something that came easy to me. I know how to move, and when I started taking ballet, my teacher realized I was talented. I rose quickly through the ranks and got some really good parts. You should have heard the mothers and dancers when they thought I couldn’t hear. They could be vicious. And I was twelve then.”

“What did you do?” David asked. “I mean... as a kid, that must have been hard. Hearing people you thought were your friends talking like that.”

“I kept to myself, practiced, and threw myself into everything I was asked to do. If they wanted me to jump, I did, farther and higher than the others. If they wanted a pirouette, I leaned to turn faster and higher than anyone else. I walked through the hallways at school like I was on the stage, each move as poised as I was in class. There was no way that

anyone was going to get the best of me.” Noel rested back on the pillow. “And then my ankle gave out. Not the one I hurt today, thank God. I was able to strengthen it again, but it was never the same.” He shrugged.

“I’m sorry.” David said, leaning a little closer, and Noel could tell he was sincere. It was the warmth in his eyes and the way his brows knitted together slightly.

“Don’t be. I learned so much about people and about what it takes to overcome the bad stuff. Mom was disappointed, but I think that was for me and how I lost what I really wanted. But she was there supporting me... until the cancer took her. After that, I was on my own. I’ve worked and supported myself since, and I’m putting myself through school.” Noel was determined to control his own life and make his own decisions.

“And you don’t take any crap from anyone,” David added with a cheeky grin.

“I suppose I don’t take help either. I guess I don’t trust that someone isn’t going to want something in return.”

David lightly touched his chin. “And what if they do... want something... but it’s what you’re willing to give?” he asked, his gaze locking onto Noel’s.

Noel’s breath came more quickly, but David held still, watching him, the heat between the two of them rising. Yet he didn’t come closer. It took Noel a few seconds to realize that if anything was going to happen, he had to be the one to make the first move. After all, it had been he who had set the boundaries, and if they were to be breached, then he had to be the one to do it. Noel drew closer, still holding David’s hand. Their lips touched, and Noel sighed softly as electricity shot between them.

To David, it was like Noel had given permission, and he took over. He leaned closer, pressing Noel down against the cushions, his lips succulent and forceful. Noel gasped as David slipped his hand around the back of his head, taking what he wanted, making Noel fly. David was intense, and Noel loved every second of it. There was no tentativeness, no hesitation.

This was a full-on kiss that seemed to burst a dam between them.

“I’ve been waiting to do that for quite a while,” David whispered once Noel pulled away in order to take a breath. “That first night, you kissed me before hurrying out of the car.”

“Of course I did. You were my knight in shining armor.” Noel cupped David’s cheeks, gazing deeply into his intense eyes. “I was freezing, and some jerk had just made lewd comments to me. Hell, I pretty much felt like crap, and then there you were, offering me a ride. I thought you wanted something, too, that it was a come-on, but you just took me home. Like a gentleman...” Noel swallowed hard, his throat rough. “Like I was worth something.”

David gasped. “Of course you’re worth something.” He actually seemed surprised.

Noel rolled his eyes. “Really? Tell that to the guy who tried to climb on the stage that night to cop a feel and see if I was interested in taking a beer-soaked old coot back to my dressing room. Mostly I dance, but it’s burlesque, so there’s lots of humor and stuff too... but guys still try to get on stage or make lewd comments and stuff.” Noel smiled. “Frankie and the security guys are really good about trying to protect us, and they act fast when people get out of line. But it makes you...” He let his thought die away. There was no need to go into the dark feelings that came up sometimes, not at a moment like this.

“Hey. Most of us had to do things we aren’t... I don’t know... I don’t want to say ‘proud of,’ because I don’t mean that. But there were times in college when I did things that I wish I hadn’t, or times when I thought something was a good idea, and it turned out to be stupid. There’s always the good with the bad, and it’s what we make of things that counts.” David seemed to hold his breath. “I hope you know what I mean...” He kissed him again, taking Noel’s breath away.

“Wait...,” Noel said, then paused. “Do you think what I do is wrong?”

“No,” David answered. “See, I knew I didn’t express myself very well.” He huffed and looked upward, like the words were going to come to him.

“Are you ashamed of what I do?” Noel asked nervously.

David shook his head. “I’m not.” He leaned closer. “But I didn’t want my friends to come to the show. I tried to stop them. Not because I was embarrassed, but because I didn’t want them to see you.” He blinked quickly. “I didn’t want my friends to look at you without your clothes on. It seemed too intimate and too personal... and at the same time, I couldn’t look away because....” He paused. “God, I know I’m being really stupid. Just forget everything I’ve said.”

Noel smiled as he closed the small distance that separated them. He actually understood what David meant. “I never get shy, but I did that first night you were in the theater. It was like I was exposed and... I think it was because you were nice to me. It’s easy to hide behind indifference, but when it’s stripped away....”

“Is that what bothered you tonight?” David asked.

Noel nodded. He had been so wrapped up in the fact that David was there—and he could see his friends beyond the lights—that he got distracted and stuck in his own head and forgot where he was in physical space. That was all it took, and the next thing he knew, he was in David’s arms. “At first, I thought I was okay after I’d fallen, but when I got back to my dressing room, my ankle really started to hurt.”

“I’m sorry. How does your ankle feel now?”

“What ankle?” Noel said, drawing David down into another kiss. Noel shifted on the sofa and groaned as his ankle moved. He tensed, and David pulled back and moved to give him room.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said softly. He took a few crackers off the plate and munched on them while Noel sighed and took a few chips to eat. Oscar seemed content, staying near his feet, radiating a ton of heat. Noel sat up and lifted off

the ice, letting his foot warm for a while. It hurt more, but he couldn't keep the cold on it forever.

"It was me, not you," Noel said, leaning nearer once more. David poured him something to drink, and the two of them sat together. David turned on the television, and Noel propped up his foot, with Oscar on one side of him and David on the other. The scene was entirely too comfortable, even with the pain in his foot. Noel could so easily get used to this... and maybe that was what he was afraid of.

Once *Ghosts* ended, Noel yawned, and David helped him up and to the single flight of stairs. David lifted him easily, and they went up to a large bedroom with simple, heavy wood furniture and a light gray duvet on the bed. There was something masculine about the furniture, but the curtains were lighter, and the light blue walls gave the room a peaceful feel. Noel sat on the side of the bed, and David brought his bag, placing it next to him. "The bathroom is right across the hall, and don't be surprised if Oscar pays you a visit. He seems to like you."

Noel nodded, looking up at David. He couldn't help wondering why he was being so nice. "Thank you." As David had said earlier, going into the motives of others tended to lead him down a rabbit hole. Everything Noel knew told him that David was a nice man and that he should just accept it.

"I'll let you get ready for bed." He handed Noel a couple pain pills that Noel took with some water. "But if you need anything, just let me know. My room is right down the hall." David paused in the doorway before hurrying back inside. He kissed him and then left Noel alone.

Noel heard his footsteps on the stairs, figuring that David was probably closing up the house. He got undressed and lay back on the bed, pulling the covers over him, but the weight pressed on his ankle, and combined with the pain, he found it nearly impossible to rest, even once David returned and the lights were off. The ibuprofen dulled the throbbing somewhat, but mostly Noel lay awake in the strange room, listening to the sounds of the house and willing the ache to go away.

At some point, he got up and hobbled across the hall to the bathroom to use the facilities. In the hall, he noticed a dim light from David's room. Using the wall for stability, he half hopped down. "Did I keep you up?" Noel asked.

David shook his head from where he sat on the edge of the bed, bare-chested, looking like a dream in the soft glow. "No. I usually don't sleep very well." He wiped his eyes, and Noel entered the room, drawn by sheer animal magnetism. David was everything Noel's imagination had told him and more. His arms were indeed strong, as was his chest, covered with a light dusting of dark hair down the middle. Noel couldn't help following the lines on his belly to where they disappeared into a pair of sleep shorts that left little to Noel's ample imagination. "Do you want help returning to your room?" Noel shook his head, standing still, the room growing warmer by the second. "I can get you some water." Once again, Noel moved his head to the side. "What...?" David asked, and paused as Noel took a small hop closer.

He landed in front of David, hands on his legs, closing the distance between the two of them. "David...."

"Yeah...?" he said roughly. "I won't pressure you into anything."

Noel pressed David back on the bed, holding him so that David brought Noel along with him. He was so hot, and Noel ran his hands over David's chest and then up to his neck. "You aren't," he whispered before kissing David hard.

Strong arms closed around his back, holding him, and Noel forgot about everything other than the fact that he was here with David. Intensity built within seconds, and Noel was on fire. He backed away just long enough to tug off the T-shirt he wore before crushing their chests together.

"Are you sure about this?" David asked him. "You told me you don't do private performances."

Noel smiled. "Do I look like I can dance about now?" He shivered as David ran his hands down his back and then slipped one under his shorts and over his rear end. He loved

the feel of those hands, so strong, so sure, and Noel groaned softly as David slipped his shorts down.

It took some doing for him to get them off without banging his foot, but Noel managed, and David rolled him on the bed, getting him settled with his head on the pillow, his intense eyes meeting his. David removed the last of his clothes and settled between Noel's legs. Noel hadn't been sure what to expect from David—intensity yes, even energy, and he was all that, but gentle too. Each movement held power, Noel could feel it, but he was also kind and his movements slow and deliberate, each designed to drive Noel crazy, which he did with his hands and lips before sending Noel halfway to the moon, swallowing him hard.

Noel thrust his hips and sat up slightly just because he had to watch as David damn near swallowed his cock whole. That sight was spectacular and hot as hell. He lay back down and gave himself over to the sheer pleasure. "Don't stop."

David hummed around him and bobbed his head, taking Noel once again, threatening to blow his mind all to hell. When David backed away, and Noel could see straight once more, he brought their lips together. "I'm not going to stop until you tell me to."

"Then we'll go on forever," Noel whispered.

David nuzzled the crook of his neck. "I'm perfectly okay with that." He stroked Noel's cock slowly, working his throat with his tongue, until Noel barely knew which way was up. He wanted this to never end, and yet he knew there was no way he was going to be able to take it. Sensations built, one on top of the other, until he was no longer in control. That would be David and the delicious thing he told Noel: "Man can truly fly and never have to leave the bedroom to do it."

"David," Noel moaned. "I..."

"It's okay. Just give yourself over."

"But I don't want it to end, and..." He clamped his eyes closed, trying to hold on, but David was too talented and seemed to know how to play Noel like he was an instrument.



Noel breathed deeply, pressure building at the base of his spine, his entire back tingling, the feeling spreading through his legs and hands before washing over him completely. Unable to hold back any longer, Noel's release slammed into him, and he cried out as he came in blinding ecstasy, clamping his hands onto the bedding in an attempt to keep himself from flying to pieces as sparks blazed behind his eyes.

Noel lay still, and David cradled him in his arms. "Give me a minute..." Noel breathed deeply.

"It's okay," David soothed, gently rubbing Noel's belly. "Watching you was the hottest thing I think I've ever seen, and I already took care of things." David got some tissues to do a quick cleanup, and then made sure Noel was settled in the bed before turning out the light. "It's been a long time since I've slept with anyone."

"I see. Are you a kicker or something?" Noel asked.

David chuckled softly. "Not that I know of. It's just that I'm only used to having Oscar in bed with me, and he's a real bed hog. That cat believes that the bed is his, and if you lie in a spot he wanted, he thinks nothing of applying claws, especially to sensitive parts."

Noel rolled his eyes and shifted a little closer. "Thanks for the warning." He snuggled down and was finally able to get comfortable. Maybe it was the endorphins masking the injury, but he was tired and his muscles relaxed. "It's been a while since I've slept with someone too. But then, that shouldn't be a surprise. You saw how big my bed is. The only way to sleep with someone is stacked, and while that works for sex, it's too lumpy for sleeping." Noel patted David's arm as it closed around him. "I always used to wonder if there was something wrong with me. I could never keep a boyfriend for very long."

"And I seem to only attract users and losers." David sighed. "You know, I'm really starting to think that maybe my luck is changing."

Noel would like to think that was the case for both of them, but it was way too soon for him to count his chickens.

“How about we take things one step at a time and don’t do anything to jinx things?” He rolled over to face David. “I used to think that there wasn’t someone out there for me. That I was going to be alone. I mean, maybe I’m just one of those people who is destined to go through life as a single.”

“And maybe you just needed to meet the right person.” David stroked his cheek gently. “You’re way too young for that kind of attitude. Heck, we both are. So yeah, you’re right—we’ll see what happens.” David leaned forward and kissed him.

It truly was too early either of them to look too far ahead, but damn, Noel could almost see a future, and that was frightening. He could imagine sleeping in this bed next to David and waking up to him in the morning. That was too scary, because every time he let himself see any kind of future, it had a tendency to be ripped away in the most painful way possible.

David slipped his hand into Noel’s, and he closed his eyes, pushing his worries away... at least for the night.

## Chapter Six

DAVID WAS happy, truly happy, for the first time in quite a while, and it had nothing to do with the way Noel looked in the throes of passion or the sounds that he made. Sex was secondary to the way Noel made him feel just sleeping next to him. David had slept well, even though he hadn't wanted to miss a minute of Noel in his arms. That first night, in the limousine, the most amazingly wicked erotic thoughts had gone through his mind the entire short ride to Noel's corner, all of it driven by Noel's slightly sweet and woodsy scent. And right now, Noel lay pressed against him, that scent driving him nearly mad. All he wanted to do was roll Noel over and love him wide awake.

Noel nestled closer, and David smiled to himself, closing his eyes once again and trying not to press his erection against Noel, otherwise the temptation to rock his hips was just too damned much.

Oscar jumped onto the bed and pranced over the covers and David's legs before making his way up to David's face, where His Majesty voiced his displeasure at not having been fed yet. He petted the cat, wondering if he could get him to settle down for a little while longer.

A door opened and closed downstairs. David stilled for a second. There was definitely someone in the house. "David," his father called up the stairs, and he groaned and slipped out of bed, grabbing his robe. The familiar creak of the fourth step told him his father was on his way up. David pulled on his

robe and quietly left the room, closing the bedroom door as his father stood outside the guest room.

“What are you doing here?” David asked, pulling his robe a little tighter around him. “And at this time of the morning?”

His father’s eyes blazed. “Get dressed and meet me in the kitchen.” His father would have made a great drill sergeant. He loved issuing orders and expected everyone to jump when he did.

David was curious and returned to his room. Oscar ran out as soon as he opened the door, and David quietly pulled on a shirt and sweatpants. He couldn’t help watching Noel for a few seconds as he slept. Then he left, leaving the door open slightly for air movement. He went down to see what had his father’s underwear in a bunch now.

“What is it? Did someone ask you a question about LGBTQ people that you didn’t understand?” He got some coffee started.

“No. Last night was productive. It was what I found in my inbox this morning that nearly made me sick.” He pushed his phone down the counter, and David picked it up. “You made quite a spectacle of yourself last night.” His father shook his head. “It seems you were at some club and caught a stripper as he fell off the stage. He was probably drunk, and now every news outlet in the city is running that video and talking about you.” David pushed the phone back as it started to ring. “There. More calls from donors and God knows who.” His face was red, and David’s normally rather-collected father seemed like he was ready to explode.

“I was there with the guys and saw that Noel was going to fall, so I caught him. It’s a good thing, Dad. It was kind.”

“Fuck kindness. This is politics. No one gives a shit about being kind. They’re all concerned with the optics and how it looks, and if you think my son in a gay strip club is going to help me get elected....”

David sat down on the stool across from his father. “First thing, it’s burlesque, not a strip club, and no one gets naked.

Secondly, I did what I would do for anyone who needed my help. As for the optics, I really couldn't care less." He poured himself a mug of coffee and offered some to his father, who shook his head.

"Bullshit. This affects all of us. Rachel is angry, and now I'm going to spend the next week trying to explain why you were in a place like that in the first place." He stood and yanked on his coat. "Why in the hell couldn't you be one of those good gay people?"

David tipped the stool over, he got up so fast. "And what are those? The ones who follow six feet behind people like you? The ones who keep quiet and don't make any waves?" David shook his head as he went to open the door.

"David," his father snapped, using the same tone he had when David had taken his Porsche for a joyride a week after getting his license. "Don't think I didn't notice that the guest room bed was messed up and that none of your friends are here. Whoever you had sleep over, I want you to get rid of them and make damned sure they aren't seen. It's bad enough you being filmed in that club, but if you brought someone home from that place..." He huffed, a hand on the kitchen counter like he was steadying himself through his rage.

David blinked as he saw his father through fresh eyes. He had always thought of his father as someone who might have been willing to play the game of politics, but that underneath all that was someone who really cared. David always saw the man who raised him as someone with a heart, but he was wrong. So wrong. David stared at the back door and wondered how he could have been so blind all these years. How could he have not seen who his father really was? Yes, his dad could be ruthless when it came to business, but David never doubted that his father loved and cared for him. But did he really? His father would rather David put aside some basic decency and goodness in helping someone because of political optics. Play along, that was all that counted. His own son's feelings had nothing to do with it.

"How are we going to fix this mess you made?" His father continued going on as David stood still, in a bit of

shock. “My campaign people will be in touch. We need to get in front of this and fast.”

David finally opened the door, pressed his father outside, and closed it behind him, knowing if he said anything, then he’d end up screaming, and with his luck, that would end up on the damned news as well.

He poured a second mug of coffee and turned, intending to take it up to Noel, but found him standing at the base of the stairs.

“I take it you heard that,” David said, extending a mug to Noel. “How did you get down here?”

“The swelling is down, and I can put some weight on it.”

David righted the stool and pulled one out for Noel. He sat down just as the back door opened, and David’s father barreled inside again.

His gaze landed on Noel, and his lips curled savagely. “Where did...?” he began, and his eyes widened. “You?” He pointed at Noel. “I know you.” He turned on David in an instant. “You get that man out of this house right now. I knew it. You brought home that stripper last night.” He actually bared his teeth, a bit of spittle flying to the floor. “Just what I need. My son being caught with a... what? Stripper, rent boy... or do they just called them man whores?”

“That’s enough,” David snapped. “Noel is my guest, and I don’t have to explain a damned thing to you. But since you’ve got yourself all worked up, I brought him here because he was hurt and needed help.” David had had enough. “This is my home. It was left to me and not you because your own mother knew just the kind of man you had become. You and Rachel, the damned thief, are no longer welcome here. And as for Noel, he’s a better person than you are, that’s for damned sure.” David saw his father’s phone on the counter and tossed it at him. “Now get out and don’t come back unless you can be civil.”

“Civil?” his father ranted in return. “Civil? You think I should be nice to the whore you brought home? Jesus Christ,

David, where is your sense of decorum?"

David's teeth hurt he ground them so hard. "Get out now. I won't allow anyone to talk that way in my house."

"I was born here...."

"Again, your mother left it to me." He enjoyed pointing that out, because the vein on his father's forehead throbbed when he did. "Along with everything else. So just go before I have to call the police. And what kind of story would that make? Your own son throwing you out of the house?"

"You wouldn't dare....," his father spat with a glare, crossing his arms over his chest.

David took a deep breath and calmed himself down. "That isn't going to work. Remember, I'm your son, and I can be just as stubborn and just as big a pain in the ass as you can. You taught me well, old man." He glanced at the door and waited for his father to leave. Then he closed the damned door after his father and locked it. One thing was for fucking sure, he really needed to have the locks changed and fast.

"Do you want any more coffee?" David asked Noel, who looked completely shell-shocked.

He slowly shook his head. "Do you fight like that all the time?"

"No," David said. "That's the first time. Usually, I just go along with what he wants because it's easier." He finished his coffee and put the mug in the sink. "Do you want to sit and watch TV or something?"

Noel didn't move. "What? You just had a knock-down, drag-out fight with your dad, and you're acting like it was a walk in the park. You threw him out of your house, and.... Why would you do that? I mean... yeah, your father is a real douche, but...." He swallowed, and David sighed, sitting next to him.

"My father is selfish, and he doesn't care about anyone. Certainly not me, and the things he said about you, well. This is my home, and you are a guest in it. He doesn't get to talk to anyone like that."

“So this is about me and what he said? Because I don’t care. What your father says doesn’t mean anything to me. He can’t hurt me because I don’t put any value on his opinion. As far as I’m concerned, he might as well be a giant toad.” He shrugged, and David tried to process Noel’s meaning.

“But he called you...,” David began, and then stopped because he couldn’t bring himself to even say the words. “How can you just take that? I want to take him out back to the woodshed.” David paused and then started laughing. Thankfully, Noel did too. “I don’t know where that came from.”

“Too much *Little House on the Prairie* when you were a kid?” Noel quipped, which only made David laugh harder.

“God, no.”

Noel slid his mug away. “I don’t want you to turn your back on your family because of me. I don’t have a family, and I wish I did.”

David took his hands, gently rubbing the backs of them. “And I have a father who told me that I shouldn’t have helped you because of the damned optics.”

“But he’s running for office.”

“Yeah. An office there’s no way he can win. Not in a million years. But he’s willing to put his son through the meat grinder, lie, and God knows what else for something he’s surely going to lose.”

Noel leaned forward. “He must think he has a chance of winning.”

David shrugged. “I suppose miracles can happen.”

“Maybe he expects to get something else out of it,” Noel said. Not that it mattered to David. His father had his own agenda, and whatever it was, he was looking out for only himself.

“That’s possible. He’s made himself a public figure, and he has more contacts now and has met a ton of people.” David didn’t really care about any of them. “But it doesn’t really



matter what he thinks he's doing. The price is just too much, and I'm not going to let him pull me into his game."

Noel nodded but frowned. "And I don't want you fighting with your family over me. If you have issues with your father, that's fine, but I can't be the reason you walk away from them. My only family is an aunt in Grand Rapids who I talk on the phone with a few times a year. She sends me a card on my birthday and Christmas." Noel swallowed, and David tried to understand. "I've been alone for a long time, and that means that there's no safety net. If I need something, there's only me I can count on." He got up and hobbled back to the stairs. "I think I should go."

David jumped up and hurried over. "You don't need to." He caught Noel as he tried to take the stairs and lost his balance. David guided Noel to one of the living room chairs. "How about I promise you this. My father and I do not see eye to eye on a lot of things, and right now I'm fighting with him, but it has much less to do with you than the fact that he wants me to do things that I just can't. Okay?" He also was not going to allow his father to speak the way he had about any guest of his. David's blood still boiled at the things his father had said about Noel, but he kept that to himself because it seemed to upset him.

Noel lowered his gaze to his feet. "I don't want you to end up like me." He lifted his gaze. "I don't have anyone...."

David touched his chin. There was so much he wanted to say, but it all seemed trite in his head. "I still don't think it was right for my father to say the things he did."

"But was what he said wrong?" Noel asked. "I take off my clothes for money. It's what I do. And some of the other guys have... well... let's say, taken things further. I might not let guys pay me for sex... and for the record, there hasn't been anyone at all in that department for a while... before last night." Noel actually blushed, and David found it adorable. "But I'm not worth fighting with your family."

David tried to think of a way to make Noel understand. "Maybe my family isn't worth losing you?" He held Noel's

gaze until he rolled his eyes and shrugged.

“I’m not sure that’s true.”

Oscar jumped up on Noel’s chair, meowing loudly.

David went into the kitchen and got food for Oscar, who raced in and attacked his bowl like he hadn’t eaten in weeks. “Are you hungry?” David called in, and began getting the things together for a simple breakfast.

DAVID WAS pleased when Noel seemed content to stay. He hated the fact that his father had cast a pall over the day. Still, David refused to let his father’s hatred and closed-mindedness ruin the entire day. He turned on Netflix, and they binge-watched a cooking show, sitting together on the sofa with Oscar curled up next to him.

“Have you traveled a lot?” Noel asked after the episode devoted to French cooking.

“A fair amount, I guess. When Mom was alive, we used to go on family vacations. One year we went to Paris. It was amazing. Mom used to plan everything, and my father went along... sort of. He always seemed content to let her do what she wanted. I think he really wanted to make Mom happy.” David wondered what the hell had changed. Mom’s death had been hard on his father, but maybe the goodness that he’d once had had come from her. And with Mom gone, replaced by Rachel, there was nothing left but bitterness and ambition. Who knew? David refused to spend a quiet afternoon thinking about him.

“I remember a trip to Wisconsin Dells with my mom. We took the jet boat up the river. It was pretty amazing.” Noel smiled and leaned against him. “I miss my mom sometimes.”

David put an arm around him, knowing exactly how Noel felt. There were times when he very much missed the way things used to be. David started the next episode of the show and sat quietly.

“What has you all wound up?” Noel asked halfway through. “Your hand is bouncing. Is it things with your father?”

“No,” he answered. David had learned a long time ago that when dealing with him, he had to give things time. And David was pretty sure that the next time his father needed something, he’d be back as though nothing had happened. “I’m just wound up, though I don’t know why.”

“Should I go?” Noel looked at him, and David drew him closer, nuzzling his neck, inhaling that amazing scent. Almost instantly, the nervousness slipped away, and David closed his eyes, burying his face in Noel’s neck. “David...,” Noel whimpered, stretching his neck and shaking slightly. David loved the way Noel reacted to him.

“You taste so good,” he whispered, shifting on the cushions. Oscar jumped down with a soft growl and probably left the room. Not that David particularly noticed—he was way too wrapped up in Noel. He pressed him down on the sofa, and they made out like teenagers.

“What is this?”

David sat up, staring over the back of the sofa to where Rachel glared at him from his kitchen. “What is it with you and Dad today? It’s like Grand Central in here.” He kissed Noel gently and left him lying down, out of Rachel’s line of sight. Then he got up, straightened his shirt, and stalked over to his stepmother. “I know I locked the door.”

“Your father gave me his key and asked if I could talk some sense into you.” She put her hands on her hips, and David help out his hand.

“Give me the key,” he said, and she slowly handed it over. “Now you can leave.”

She glared at the sofa like she had X-ray vision. “Is your trick... or whatever you call it... still here?”

David scoffed. “I’d say the gold-digging slut is still here, but she is just leaving.” It took Rachel a few seconds before her indignation kicked in. “I know what you are, and I’m tired

of it. You can pull the wool over Dad's eyes, but I've had enough. You pushed Dad into this campaign, and you can see it through yourselves. I'm not part of it any longer."

"We need you. The polls are moving in his direction."

David rolled his eyes. "I'm done. And if either of you push me any further, I will come out publicly against him. His decisions have nothing to do with me, and I won't have my life affected."

She stepped forward on her stiletto heels. "Your father is so angry. He's talking of asking you to leave the company." She was bluffing and David knew it.

"You can leave now." He walked her to the door the same way he had his father. "I have dinner plans this evening. Jack Williams asked to speak with me." He opened the door, and she pulled her coat closed, leaving in a huff. David shut the door and locked it again behind her.

"Do those people have any idea when to quit?" Noel asked.

"They do now," David said as he came around the sofa.

Noel got up onto his feet. "I should get going before your guest gets here."

David closed his arms around Noel's waist and gently drew him back down. "Why? There is no guest. Jack is a friend of my parents, and I haven't seen him in a while. I know you couldn't see it, but Rachel went as pale as a sheet when I mentioned him."

"Why?" Noel asked.

"Because they're having an affair. Or at least I thought they were. Turns out I was right. The way the fear spiked in her eyes told me everything." He began laughing. "I always knew she was after whatever she could get."

"Will you tell your father?" Noel asked.

David shrugged. "He won't listen. But I know that Rachel is going to leave me alone now." He nuzzled Noel's neck once more. "Now, where were we?"

“David...,” Noel whispered, meeting his gaze. The way Noel said his name was enough to send David into overdrive.

“I don’t want to talk about my messed-up father or my cheating stepmother.” He held still. “I’d much rather talk about you... talk to you... or even better... not talk at all.” What he really needed was someone of his own, and David found himself holding on to Noel, probably harder than he had a right to.

## Chapter Seven

NOEL DIDN'T think he had ever made out on a sofa before. At least not like this... and he definitely hadn't been stripped naked and then been teased and delighted to the point that he couldn't see straight. David lay under him, holding Noel tightly, his legs spread. David was so careful and gentle that Noel wondered if David thought he was made of glass.

"I know I'm injured, but I'm not going to break," Noel said softly.

"I know." David held him closer, those amazing hands of his sliding down his back before smoothing over his butt and then parting his cheeks. A finger slid between, tapping lightly, and Noel whimpered because damn... just damn. "You deserve someone who will take their time and show you that you're special."

Noel shivered as David traced his lips with a finger. Noel sucked on the digit, and then David lowered his hand and wetness pressed against his entrance. Quivering under David's touch seemed to be normal for him, and part of him wondered why, while the rest of him just settled in to enjoy the ride.

"What?" David asked. "You look like you're about to explode."

Noel smiled. "I fucking am, if you keep that up." He clamped his eyes closed as David sank a digit into him. He arched his back and groaned deeply.

"I see."

“Yeah. And if that happens before we get to the fucking, I’m going to be really pissed, *and* it would be a damn shame.” He tried not to move. Noel’s cock was so damned sensitive about now that if he slid along David’s hot skin, he was going to come right then, and it was way too soon. Noel used his good leg to stand next to the sofa. “I hope to God you have stuff, because if not....” He glared at David, whose hand shook as he reached to the coffee table. “You keep condoms in there?”

David shook his head, jumped off the sofa, and zipped through the house, his high and tight ass bouncing as he moved. Damn, that was a sight, and so was David a few minutes later when he returned, chest gleaming, cock tall and proud, pointing right at Noel. David definitely worked out. He was a god, and when he got close enough, Noel grasped him, stroking David, the heat off his cock nearly burning his hand.

“If anyone interrupts us, I’m going to tear their lips off,” Noel growled as he pressed David down onto the sofa and grabbed a condom. He rolled it down David’s length and then straddled him, making sure his ankle was in a good position. Plenty of lube and slow going later, Noel leaned back, gripping David as hard as his muscles would allow.

“Jesus...,” David groaned. “You’re hot as all hell, you know that?”

Noel couldn’t help pressing a little, putting on a show for David because, damn, being looked at like he was the center of the entire universe was almost more than he could take. Part of him said that it was just the sex, but Noel sure as hell hoped not. Everyone should be looked at like the entire world revolved around them at least once in their life, and Noel knew exactly what it felt like... now. “And you make me want things I shouldn’t.”

David slipped his hands up Noel’s thighs, blazing a trail of heat to his cock before taking it firmly, stroking and sending Noel halfway to the moon. “But what if you should? What if have the right to want everything?” David asked, pushing upward, lifting Noel along with him, driving his cock deep inside.

“Oh God!” was the only response Noel could manage as David poured on the energy. Noel used the back of the sofa to steady himself as David took him on a wild ride that left him reeling from one moment to the next.

Noel placed his hands on David’s chest to steady himself, while David held his side and drove into him. The energy from David was nearly overwhelming, and Noel hung on, his cock bouncing as David dragged his own across that spot inside.

Noel cried out, filling the room with his passion. He never wanted this to end. David was magic—hell, he was more than that. David was everything Noel had ever wanted, more than he had hoped for, so Noel hung on with everything he had, and all he could do was hope to hell that things turned out.

“David... yeah... don’t stop.”

“I don’t intend to for a long time,” David told him, driving upward harder, making Noel bounce, and damned if he didn’t just let David’s power overtake him. It was hard for Noel to let go, but he did, and he had to trust in David. He drew Noel down, kissing him hard, to the point that he felt it all the way... deep. “You’re amazing, Noel, beautiful and—”

Noel kissed away David’s words, wanting to believe them as David took him to the very gates of paradise, and then just like that, Noel flew and soared, his release taking him higher than he could ever remember in his life. And when he returned to earth, David had him in his arms, holding him. Noel wanted this. He wanted David and the security and care he represented. Noel only wished he deserved to keep it.

“YOU WENT home with him, and you spent the rest of the weekend at his house. You hussy,” Jesse teased the following Saturday when Noel went in to work having missed the Friday performance. He wasn’t going to be able to dance, not the way he usually did, but he had worked up an act that would be less athletic, and Frankie had told him to come back.



“Stop it,” Noel said. “He’s nice, and I like him.”

“Noel is in *lurve*,” Rafe teased, making googly eyes. “God, how awful.” He turned away, and the others shook their heads as they got dressed for the show.

“Don’t pay any attention to Miss Thang over there. He’s all spun up because Frankie didn’t move him to the headliner spot while you were out,” Jesse told him slyly. “Everyone has been asking about you.” He put down his brush. “Did you know that the guy who caught you is the son of some big shit running for office? You’re a local internet sensation.”

Noel sighed. “I know, and because of that, I got to meet his father and his stepmother. They’re really douchy, but David stood up for me.” He actually smiled. “He threw his father out because of the things he said about me.” Noel tried not to hang his hat on that, but every time he thought about it, he got a little goose-bumpy.

“I see,” Jesse said, and shook his head. Then he pulled out his phone and brought up a few pictures before handing it over.

“What is this?”

“A big campaign for political donors,” Jesse said softly. Noel looked over the picture and then handed the phone back. “Doesn’t look like he stood up for you very much if he was out with his father on the campaign trail, acting like the good little gay son.” Jesse stood and pulled Noel into a hug. “I’m sorry. But guys like that will always do what they have to do in order to keep up appearances.”

Noel closed his eyes and tried to put that picture out of his mind. But the evidence was there right in front of him. David got what he wanted and made a big show of fighting with his family over how they treated Noel, but then just like that, he was back with Daddy, making nice and toeing the family line. Noel knew he didn’t really have a reason to be hurt. This is what he should have expected. He and David had some fun—okay, mind-blowing sex that had Noel thinking he’d seen God at least twice.

“I’m sorry,” Jesse whispered.

Noel nodded. “So am I.” He lifted his gaze. “I thought that maybe David really liked me and that he was willing to see me for who I was instead of a guy who takes his clothes off for money.” Dammit. He pounded the top of the counter, the other guys jumping in the mirror. Noel should have known, but he’d let himself rush way ahead.

THE SHOWS were over, and Noel, dressed in street clothes, sat at the bar, and ordered a whiskey.

“You sure?” Salvatore asked before pouring one. “You don’t usually drink out here. The others do.”

Noel lifted the glass and then downed the entire shot in one go. “Guy troubles,” he mumbled. “Why is it that I think I found someone nice, and he turns out to be like all the rest.” Noel sighed at Salvatore. “Why can’t more of them be like you?”

“What? Tall, dark, and handsome?” Sal asked with a wicked grin that got him tons of tips, Noel was pretty sure.

“No. Humble and self-effacing,” he retorted. “But I’d settle for someone kind.” He wanted a refill, but hesitated before pushing his glass toward Sal who added a little more. “You know,” he said, lifting the glass of amber liquid. “I thought I found one....”

“What?” Sal asked as he wiped down the bar.

“A nice guy. Hell, I thought I might have found Prince fucking Charming.” He rolled his eyes. “I should have known better.” He held his glass, staring at the liquid before downing the drink. “Thanks, Sal. I think I better get home.”

“It’s a cold one out there tonight. You want me to call you a ride?”

Noel shook his head. He had walked home in worse, he was pretty sure, and maybe the cold would freeze away this

mopiness. “I’ll be okay.” Noel knew that. He had been through a hell of a lot worse than a guy feeding him a line of bull. But this hurt. Noel had actually thought David was sincere. He sure talked a good game and the way he’d been with Noel... their times together had felt like more than sex. Maybe that’s what had him so mixed up. “I just...” He stood at the bar, looking at Sal, who he’d once thought was so handsome. “I don’t get it, you know? I thought I had good radar for this sort of thing. For the last two years, I hung out with the other dancers, but I never got involved. I kept the customers at bay too. Some were nice, and I might have liked them, but nooooo... I stayed away. Then, a few weeks ago, I let this guy drive me home, and the fucker acts like a gentleman, a real nice guy. He didn’t try anything, and then I saw him here, and he was nice again. Took me home, treated me nice—even came to our rescue with the cops... caught me when I fell...” He smacked the bar. “Maybe that’s it. The next time I get too close to the front of the stage, just let me fall, and maybe I’ll break my neck, and I can be out of my misery.”

“That would be a real waste.”

Noel instantly knew the voice behind him, and he stiffened. “What are you doing here?” He turned slowly, trying to be dramatic, but his ankle hurt, and he winced, ruining the effect. Swearing under his breath, he sat on one of the bar stools.

“Drink?” Sal asked.

“Diet... something, please,” David answered, and took the stool next to him. “You started school this week?”

He nodded. The two of them had texted on and off during the week, but with classes beginning, Noel had been busy, and then tonight, well... everything had gone to shit, and he figured if he sent any message, it would be something awful that he couldn’t take back.

“You’ve been quiet all day, and I thought I’d check you didn’t need a ride home. It’s cold and snowy,” David said as Sal set David’s glass on the bar. He passed over a bill, and Sal took it with a nod, heading away. “Is something wrong?”

Noel thought of just leaving and getting it over with, but he pulled up his phone, looked up the pictures from the event, and showed it to David. “I thought...” He shrugged. “I don’t know what to think. I see you standing next to your father and...”

“Yeah. I did one more event for him. If you look, it’s a children’s charity event, and I couldn’t turn it down.”

“I see. So all that stuff you said at your house?” Noel was so tired and just wanted to go home.

“Was the truth. I made it clear that I was through with his events. I already had a ticket to this one, on my own, because I support the cause. They do a lot with LGBT youth. So I went, and this photographer gathered us together. That’s all there was to it.”

Noel turned away. “But that isn’t all there is. You go to these events all the time.” He pivoted on the stool. “What are you going to do? Take me with you?” Noel suddenly realized why he was truly upset. “Take a look around. Do you really think you’d ever take me to one of those events and hold your head high?” He patted David’s hand. “Your father and stepmother would whisper behind my back the entire time, and you’d be worried I’d say something wrong.”

“Hey.” David drew closer. “I’m not ashamed of you, and yes, I will take you to the next of these events that I go to. I have one in the spring, and I bought two tickets.” The heat washed off David’s body, setting Noel on fire.

“You’d really do that?”

“Of course I would.” David seemed perplexed.

Noel bit his lower lip. “And what are you going to do if someone finds out what I do here? You know they will, and there will be snide comments and even people treating me the way your father and stepmother did. Are you prepared for that?”

David leaned closer. “The real question is... do you know first aid? Because if someone does act that way, you may need to be able to stop the bleeding.”

“What are you going to do? Hit everyone?” Noel asked.

David shrugged. “Nope. I figure I make the first guy who says anything bleed, and he’ll put the word out, and everyone will shut their mouths. Though I might need a lawyer or bail money.”

“You’re on your own there. I don’t bail people out of jail. But I am pretty good with a Band-Aid.” He leaned forward.

“Why don’t the two of you kiss, make up, and get out of here so I can finish closing down the bar.” Sal washed the last of the glasses and put them all away. Noel slipped off the stool, and David put an arm around his waist.

“Come on. It’s late.”

“I know, and I have a ton of homework that I need to get done this weekend.”

“Do you have your books with you?” David asked. “If not, we can get them, and then tomorrow you can study while I figure some cost estimates for work.” He helped Noel with his coat.

“Are you serious? You know I have to be ready for class on Monday,” Noel said, and then shrugged.

“I promise to behave, and I put the cat carrier in the car. I thought Wiggles might like to come over and have a play date with Oscar. Maybe if our cats get along....” He nuzzled Noel’s neck, and in an instant, he found it difficult to think.

“Okay. Let’s go. I need my beauty sleep.”

David chuckled as they reached for door. “Who said anything about sleeping.”

NOEL WAS warm with David pressed to his back, a cat by his feet, and another right up against his chest. Wiggles and Oscar had formed an interesting kitty detente. After hissing at each other initially, they circled each other for a while, and

then after he and David went to bed, they staked out their own domains.

“Hey...,” David said, squeezing him a little closer.

“Is that a stick or are you just happy to see me?” Noel teased, and David drew back, rolling Noel over before pressing him to the mattress.

“You know your phone is vibrating,” Noel said, wanting to throw the danged thing across the room.

David groaned and snatched it up. “Yeah...?” he snapped. “You want to what? Tonight?” David sighed. “Just a minute.” He muted the call. “This is Clive. The guys are inviting me out for the evening. It will be dinner and drinks. Nothing too big.”

“I can go home this afternoon and finish my homework.” Noel could already see how things were going to work.

“No. I mean do you want to come? Or maybe we could have the guys here, though I’m a basic cook, but they can bring stuff.” He smiled, and Noel could tell he was becoming excited about the idea.

“And you want me to join you?” Noel said as David nodded and returned to his call.

“We can have dinner here. And hang out. Noel is going to join us, and you all have to promise to be nice.” David slipped an arm around Noel. “I don’t want you all to scare him away.” He smiled and then added, “Be here at six, and tell the others to bring something... and not just beer.” He chuckled and ended the call. David lay back down.

“Are you sure about this? I can just go home, and you can have fun with your friends.” As much as he’d said that the way David’s father and stepmother treated him didn’t hurt, it did.

David rubbed his back. “If that’s what you want to do.”

Noel lifted his head from David’s chest. “I don’t know what I want. That’s the hard thing. You have me all turned around—you have ever since you gave me a ride home.” He began getting excited, but not in a good way. “You make me want things I don’t know if I can have or deserve. Your father

and stepmother will never like me, and I can live with that. But what if your friends hate me? What if I let this... thing... between us go on and it falls totally apart? What do I do then?" He closed his eyes and tried to calm himself.

"I don't understand..." David breathed.

"Of course you don't. You're a good person, and you're surrounded by good people. I'm just a kid with no parents and no family who is trying to get through life without stepping in a pile of crap each and every day. That's all I try to do. And then you come along, and you're everything I could hope for." Noel glanced around the room filled with things that cost more than he made in months. "And I'm worried that if I believe this is real, that something between us can happen... then what do I do if it's all yanked away?" Damn, he even sounded whiny to himself. David's world was so different from his own, and it was filled with people, like his parents, who would never accept or understand him.

"It is real already." David drew him upward. "This—whatever is between us—is real. And do I know what will happen?" He shook his head. "But if you think that things between us ending wouldn't hurt just as much for me as they would for you, then you're wrong. And I want you to meet my friends. They're good guys, and I'd like you to get to know them. And I'd like to meet your friends too." David's voice broke a little, and Noel held him. "This isn't about me having some rescue complex or anything else. I stopped that night and offered a ride...."

"Because you're a good person," Noel interrupted.

"And I kept coming back because you captured my attention. You're sassy, and you don't take any crap from anyone."

"But what if I say something wrong to your friends?" Noel asked. "What if they don't like what I have to say? What if my opinions are different from theirs?"

"I'm sure they might be, and if one of them is out of line, put them in their place." David gently stroked Noel's cheek,

and he leaned into the touch. “All I want from you is that you be yourself. Let them like you for who you are.”

“But what if I’m not good enough?” And there was the core of his fear. Noel felt it coming to the front—that thing that always sat in the back of his mind.

“For what?” David said. “You are the person you are, and that’s always good enough.” David drew him closer, kissing Noel hard, and soon their conversation seemed far away as David took him to nirvana and brought him back once again.

NOEL SPENT the afternoon reading and taking notes. He also worked to finish the last of his assignments so he’d be ready for the week. David brought him coffee and lunch, leaving him to work while he did things around the house. It was nice having someone else there, but David didn’t interrupt and let him finish. Back in his apartment, it was sometimes cold. He kept his heat turned low because it was expensive to run, so he didn’t turn it up unless he and Wiggles were really cold. Here at David’s there was light and warmth... in many different ways.

“Are you finished?” David asked as Noel closed his books.

“Yeah. I have everything done.”

“Good, because I have something to show you.” David took his hand, and Noel slid off the stool. He still walked stiffly with his wrapped ankle, but the pain had subsided a great deal. He just had to give it a chance to heal and get stronger.

David handed him his coat, and Noel pulled it on and followed David outside and down the path to a small stone building with the same white trim as the house. “My grandfather used to like to paint in his spare time, and he used this as a studio.” David opened the door, and they stepped inside. The pale walls were covered in primitive landscapes.



Noel looked though the huge windows. There was a small kitchen that probably hadn't been used in years, the main room that had obviously been used for painting, and a second one that was empty with a bathroom off it.

"I thought this would make a nice little apartment for you and Wiggles... if you want." He bit his lower lip. "I'd update the kitchen because everything in there is really old. But it has some nice space, and..." David smiled. "I thought you would be a lot closer to the college... and you'd be closer to me."

Noel blinked as he wandered around the room. An empty easel stood in the corner, and there were boxes and an old chair at one end of the room. But it was open, sunny, and really beautiful. "You want me to move in with you?"

"In a way," David said. "I worry about you in that apartment. It's a lot of stairs, and your foot is still healing. The place is also..." David hesitated.

"It's a dump, but it's what I can afford and still be able to go to school and get back and forth to work," Noel supplied, looking again at this light and bright space. It would be the perfect kind of spot for him and Wiggles.

"Well, I happen to know the landlord for this place, and he's pretty nice." David grinned. "But don't think I'm giving this to you. We'll negotiate the rent and then put everything in writing so there isn't anything weird about it. I'm thinking three hundred a month is fair, but the tenant has to help me in the yard and stuff."

"You want me to garden?" Noel asked. "I can do that. I'm not much with plants, but I'm good at trimming shrubs and mowing the lawn." He could see a home here, a real home, and a chance at a real life. "And maybe we could fix the fountain out there and plant a bunch of flowers. My mother used to have a small yard that was filled with color all year long."

David put an arm around him. "So did my grandmother, and I want to make the property look the way it did when she was here. I even have the original plan she used." He sighed, and Noel turned to him.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Why not? You’ll have a better place to live, and I’ll have someone else on the property to help me with some things. Each of us will have our own lives, just like we do now. You’ll be able to go to classes and....” David paused.

“Let me guess. You want me to find another job,” he said. Noel should have known that what he did would be a problem eventually.

“Okay. So I have to admit it. I’m having more trouble than I thought I would with it. I mean, call me old-fashioned, but I don’t want strange men looking at my boyfriend naked... or mostly naked. I want that to be a sight that’s for me. But I’m not going to make it some kind of requirement, and if you want to keep working at the club, I won’t bring it up again. The decision is yours alone, but I wanted you to know that you have options.” He drew Noel closer. “And the offer to stay here has nothing to do with that.”

“Well...,” Noel began.

“You don’t have to make any decisions now, and I’m not going to pressure you. It’s not like I’m going to rent out this space to anyone else.” He hugged Noel tightly. “I just need for you to know that you have someone in your corner and that you get to be the one to make the choices about what you want.”

And just like that, Noel knew what he wanted. It was standing next to him in what could be his new home. No one had ever just supported him like this. “I appreciate that more than you know.” He leaned against David and sighed. Maybe things could work out after all.

“THE GUYS will be here in a few minutes,” David said.

Noel glanced down at his shirt. He wondered if he looked good enough. David always dressed so well, and most of the

time, Noel wore jeans and shirts that he got at the secondhand store downtown. He certainly wasn't fashionable.

David opened the oven to pull out the quiche that he'd gotten at Sendiks, as well as some bread he'd heated up. Noel had put together a hot onion dip that his mother used to make. It was one of the few things he did cook well, and David had been eyeing it since Noel put it in the oven. "You look nice," David told him as though he were reading his worries.

"But is it good enough?" Noel asked.

"Of course," David said as a knock sounded on the door. He opened it, and a group of guys all piled in. "Noel, this is Jake, Clive, Teddy, and his husband, Giles." David lifted the young boy holding Giles's hand. "And this is their son, Archie." He grinned as the little boy hugged him.

"Did you get fish crackers, Uncle David?"

"Yes, he did, and I made up a special bowl for you," Noel said.

"Everyone, this is Noel. He and I met a few weeks ago." David smiled, and to Noel's surprise, each shook his hand, and Archie hurried over so Noel could show him to his fish crackers. Once he had Archie seated with his crackers and a few other munchies, he got the dip out of the oven and helped David set everything up.

"Are you the man David caught the other night?" Giles asked, ruffling Archie's hair. Noel nodded. "And you two met when he gave you a ride home?"

"Yup. David is a really nice man."

Giles nodded as he snagged some dip on a tortilla chip. "This is really good, and yes, he is. David is the best. When Teddy and I were trying to adopt, he helped us through the entire process so we could get Archie. He's always there for both of us, and I'm glad that someone is going to be there for him. He deserves that."

Noel nodded. "Yes, he does." He was coming to understand that helping others was David's forte. There was no hidden agenda. He did it because it was part of the man he

was, and Noel was lucky to know him. “I met his father, though....”

“David is nothing like that old piece of....” He looked at Archie as he stopped himself, but Noel got the idea. It seemed David’s father and stepmother weren’t well thought of in general. “Sorry, I have to watch what I say. Young ears and all.”

Noel understood. “Do you want some cheese or maybe some grapes?” he asked Archie, who nodded, and when Noel got him some grapes, he started stuffing them in his mouth. Giles slowed him down. Even so, the kid looked like a chipmunk. “I worry that I’m not good enough for him.”

Giles rolled his eyes. “Teddy grew up in Wauwatosa, and my family came from Bayview. Teddy worked his way through college, while I was lucky enough to have a grandmother who started a fund to help pay for mine. Clive is a trust-fund baby, but he worked through college as well. We all understand that you do what you have to in order to reach your goals.” He helped Archie again, and Noel couldn’t help liking him. Giles was not at all what Noel would have expected.

“So you think him dating me...?”

Giles took away the bowl and waited until Archie swallowed before putting him down. “Go on over to Papa and see what he’s doing,” Giles told him, and Archie raced to Teddy, jumping onto his lap. “Let me ask you... do you care for David?”

“Yeah, I do,” he admitted, but wasn’t willing to go any further than that. Whatever his feelings were, David deserved to be the first to hear them.

“And you don’t intend to hurt him or use him?” Giles narrowed his gaze as Noel shook his head. “Then all I ask is that you be as good to him as he will be to you. I can already tell how David feels about you. That guy wears his heart on his sleeve, and guys have taken advantage before. As long as you aren’t one of them, all of us are going to get along great.” He tapped the counter and went over to join the others.

“I have all the snacks laid out,” Noel said before sitting next to David.

“The onion dip is really good,” Giles said, and then patted Teddy’s leg. “So what is the plan for tonight besides eating and drinking?”

David looked to him, and Noel shrugged. “What? Do I look like I’m the cruise director?” He grinned, and David rolled his eyes.

“Actually, I thought we’d have a movie marathon. I have *Encanto*, *Frozen*, or *Robin Hood*.”

“*Frozen*,” Archie sang out, and then started singing “Let It Go,” or at least the three-year-old version, with plenty of made-up words. It also apparently came with a dance that involved lots of jumping and butt-shaking.

“Okay, you got it,” David said, and brought up the movie in his huge screen, kicking in the surround sound, which was amazing. Noel leaned against David, who put an arm around him. They dimmed the lights, and everyone got comfortable. Wiggles and Oscar made an appearance. Oscar sat in Clive’s lap, while Wiggles camped out on David’s, both of them soaking up attention.

“AM I interrupting some kind of sausage fest?” The gruff voice, filled with derision, could only be David’s father. Archie whined, and the cats jumped down, hurrying out of the room as David paused the end of the movie.

“Let’s get you something to drink,” Giles said, lifting Archie and taking him out of the room. The other guys stood as David approached his father. Teddy, Clive, and Jake all lined up behind David like a row of soldiers.

“Jackson, you’re a real pig, you know that?” Teddy snapped.

“What do you want now? I did what you asked and went to your event, and you promised that was the end.” David was

clearly at the end of his rope. Noel took his hand, watching as David's father's gaze followed the movement.

"I see you haven't given up your dalliance."

"Oh, knock it off," Teddy told him before David could answer.

"What do you see in him? Is he that good a lay?" God, his tone meant he was cruder than the guys at the club, and that was saying something.

Noel turned to David, whose jaw was set and eyes blazed with anger. "It's okay," Noel said, just wanting to calm him.

"No, it's not." David turned on his father, closing the distance between them, the other guys staying behind him. David had good friends. "I've had it with all of this. Your demands and God knows what else you want. I've done my best to support you and be a good son. But you're a terrible father and an even worse person. I used to think that the meanness and pettiness came from Rachel, but the two of you are just alike."

Nothing seemed to faze Jackson, and for a second, Noel wondered if they were going to come to blows. "Why?" he demanded. "Why a guy like him?"

"Not that you'd understand, but Noel is kind and thoughtful. He's working hard to put himself through school. Something you'd never understand." David separated their hands and put an arm around Noel, drawing him closer. "He's feisty and interesting, and unlike you, he doesn't put demands on me any more than I do. He has a good heart, and I'm falling in love with him. So if you can't understand or accept that, then I expect you to leave my home and not come back." David released Noel and stepped forward. "And if you so much as try to cause trouble, I'll come out for your opponent and turn you into a complete laughing stock. Do you understand? I'm done with your games and your campaign, and if you can't be nice to the people I care about, then you aren't welcome here. And the next time you show up uninvited, the police will be called, and you can explain your arrest at the hands of your son to your campaign donors... and

the media. That will make quite a story.” David huffed, but his father glared, clearly not believing what he was hearing.

“It really is time for you to go,” Noel said levelly as tension washed off David in waves.

“Not as long as you’re here.”

David broke away from him and took his father by the arm, propelling him toward the door. “I’ve tried to do what you wanted because you’re my father. But I’m through. You just aren’t worth it.” He opened the door and pointed. “Now leave. I really am done with you.” He closed the door, threw the locks, and turned off the outside lights. Then he whirled around and left his father peering through the window of the door before leaving.

David went into the kitchen and leaned on the counter of the island, breathing deeply.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Noel said. “He’s...”

“Yes, I did. I have to get away from him if I’m going to have any chance at a life of my own. I don’t want to live in his shadow.”

“Good for you,” Giles said as Noel stared at David, swallowing hard. He then looked over at the others, searching to see if they had heard what he had. The guys all grabbed some food and drinks and then quickly left the room.

“What’s with them?” David asked.

Noel leaned against the island. “Did you mean it?” he asked. “What you said, did you mean it? I’ll understand if it was something you said just to make your father upset and throw him off balance, but I think—” Noel grunted as David pulled him close.

“Yes. I meant it.”

Noel blinked, inhaling David’s rich scent, surrounded by his strong arms. “Really?”

David nodded. “I am falling in love with you.”

“And you want me to come live in the guest house?” Noel asked. “With Wiggles and...” He was finding all of this almost more than he could believe. Damn, he wanted to so badly, but things like this just didn’t happen to him.

“I want you to stay here, and I want Wiggles to come too.” David closed the distance between them. “And yes, I am falling in love with you. And if things don’t work out, you’ll still have a place to live because we’ll put things in writing. I would never put anyone in a position to worry about where they lived if things didn’t work out like... God, I’m babbling like an idiot.”

Noel smiled and put David out of his misery with a kiss.

“Yay, I wanna kiss too,” Archie said from behind Noel.

They broke apart as Giles snagged a giggling Archie, who got plenty of kisses from his papa and daddy. Thank goodness, because Noel was not in the mood to share David with anyone. Not right now.

“Say it again...,” Noel asked.

“I’m falling in love with you.”

“Good. Because I think I already fell for you more than once. And you caught me both times.” What more could he ever want?

“I always will.”



## Epilogue

DAVID CAME home earlier than usual from his new job at Newsome and Howe downtown. After giving up working for his father, he decided to join a law practice, and John Newsome was someone he had known for years. He also wasn't a fan of his father, which was a nice side benefit. But before taking the job, David had employed Mr. Newsome to negotiate his father's buyout of his stake in the family business. That had really set his father's teeth on edge, especially after he had been trounced in the special election.

"The yard looks great," David said once he got out of the car. He and Noel had worked every weekend to clean up the property, and it was really starting to look much better. May was an amazing month, and everything was green and blooming.

"I got most of the trimming done, though I think we're going to have to take out a number of things and replant them. They've just gotten too overgrown." He set his rake aside and hurried over. David caught him in his arms, holding Noel to him. Everything always felt right, no matter how tough his day, once he came home. "How was work?"

David sighed, releasing tension as he stood still for a few minutes. "As good as can be expected. I picked up two more cases, and we signed the buyout papers, so my father had to transfer a huge amount of money to me today, which really pissed him off." David was beyond caring what his father thought about much of anything. Other than across the negotiating table, he hadn't seen him since January. Which

hurt in some ways, but there was only so much pure aggravation that anyone could take. “But it’s over.”

“I’m glad.” Noel rested his head on David’s chest. “I need to go in to work in a few hours. Tonight is my last show at the theater.” Classes were almost over, and Noel had decided to give up his job dancing. “I have an interview next week for a position at Northwest Financial. They want an analyst, and I think I’ll be really good at it.”

David had offered to help him, but Noel had insisted that he wanted to find a job on his own, so David had stayed out of it. “I know you will.” He had every faith in Noel. It was just that he had already interviewed for three other positions, and David hated seeing him get passed over.

“Are you going to come to the show tonight?” Noel asked, and David shook his head. The more he cared for Noel and the deeper his feelings became, the harder it was to see him dance. He never told Noel about it because he truly wanted Noel’s work to be his decision, and David didn’t want to pressure him, but the truth was he was very relieved that he was moving on.

“I have some work I need to finish. I’ll have it done when you get home, and then you and I can have the entire weekend free.” David loved Noel’s smile, especially when it was for him. “Let me go inside and change, and I can help you for a while.” He kissed him and then hurried into the house, glad to get out of the suit and tie.

“I need to clear away these clippings and then prep the beds,” Noel told him once David had changed and found him in the back of the yard, rolling up the cord on the hedge trimmers. David started bagging the clippings in huge paper compostable bags, and Noel turned over the beds before spreading mulch.

The sun was bright and warm, but the wind off the lake kept the air cool. Still, they made progress working together, with David taking care of the clippings to be picked up and Noel finishing the two of the large planting beds. Once they

were done, David helped put all the tools away and made dinner while Noel got ready for work.

David thought of going just to watch Noel dance a final time, but decided to stay home. This was the end of that part of Noel's life, and he needed to be able to say goodbye without David looking over his shoulder. After Noel left, David fed the cats and went to his office to get to work, leaving the door open.

Time slipped by, and David had just finished his brief and was saving the file when he heard the back door open and close. David checked the time and realized how late it was. He closed his work and met Noel in the living room. "How did it go?"

"They had a cake for me. A big dick-shaped cake." He grinned, and David sat down, tugging Noel next to him. "It was good. I did the one show, and Frankie made a huge deal about it being my last one. Then I said goodbye to the guys and came home." He leaned against David. "As soon as I left the house, I just wanted to come back."

"Well, you're here, and there's something I want to ask you." David scooted closer. "Why don't you move in here? Most nights you and Wiggles spend here in the house. If you want your own room, you can have the one next to mine." David bit his lower lip.

"How about I take part of your closet instead?" Noel said, and David nodded.

"Good idea," David agreed, leaning closer. "Let's go upstairs and try out our room."

"Yeah." Noel kissed him hard and then slowly got to his feet.

"Good. Now, I just have one question. Since you're officially living with me, do you think I can get a dance for an audience of one?" Damn, he loved the way Noel moved.

"Any time you want." Noel extended his hand, and David took it. Then he led him through the house, turning out the lights as they went. David followed him up the stairs and

down to their room. Noel closed the door and pressed David back onto the bed. Then the show began, one that David hoped lasted for the rest of their lives.

## About the Author

**ANDREW GREY** is the author of over 100 works of Contemporary Gay Romantic fiction. After twenty-seven years in corporate America, he has now settled down in Central Pennsylvania with his husband, Dominic, and his laptop. An interesting ménage. Andrew grew up in western Michigan with a father who loved to tell stories and a mother who loved to read them. Since then he has lived throughout the country and traveled throughout the world. He is a recipient of the RWA Centennial Award, has a master's degree from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and now writes full-time. Andrew's hobbies include collecting antiques, gardening, and leaving his dirty dishes anywhere but in the sink (particularly when writing). He considers himself blessed with an accepting family, fantastic friends, and the world's most supportive and loving partner. Andrew currently lives in beautiful, historic Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

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

Too Hot to Hold

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