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Save Me, Sinner Copyright © 2013 Avril Ashton

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## **Save Me, Sinner**

Shane Ruskin and Pablo Castillo are building a life together. A rough start gives way to smooth sailing, but before the men could settle into their lives, one of Shane's former cases comes back to bite him in the ass. He has to go undercover, this time to take down a meth ring. It should be a quick assignment, but things quickly get out of control and once again, Shane's life hangs in the balance.

Pablo isn't prepared to sit on the sidelines and watch his lover put himself in harm's way. Their relationship is a secret, but when Shane doesn't check in like he's supposed to, Pablo might have to out them in order to save his lover's life. And when Shane does finally call him, using only their one-word code for trouble, Pablo heads out to do what he does best. Damage.

## **For my Gang**

## Chapter One

Shane couldn't rightly say what woke him. Maybe it was the absolute quiet. Maybe the gentle heat of the morning sun shining on his face through the curtains at his bedroom window.

He stifled a yawn and rolled over onto his back. His aloneness dawned pretty quickly and he opened his eyes. No, he was all alone in his bed. Did that mean last night hadn't happened, that Pablo Castillo hadn't finally come to Shane? Did it mean he'd lost his mind after all, that the pain of walking away from the man he loved had finally taken its toll, making Shane dream everything?

Pablo outside his door, the hurried too-good-to-be-true sex against his door and the words he'd longed for, the *I love you*. Had he dreamt that?

He covered his mouth with a palm, stifling a yawn, before sitting up and looking around. Nothing was out of place. Shane's throat worked and he leaned back against the pillows, head tilted back with his eyes squeezed shut.

Fuck.

A phone rang, startling him. Shane looked around before he realized the ringtone wasn't his, but damn if it wasn't familiar.

He launched himself off the bed and raced out the bedroom. His chest hurt as he held his breath, too scared to hope, but wanting to.

In the living room, he skidded to a stop.

*Oh, God.*

Pablo Castillo sat there, on his couch, a cup of coffee in one hand, a newspaper spread out on his lap and his phone to his ear. He looked like he had no care in the world, like he was at home, wearing nothing but a pair of tight red boxer briefs. Shane made out the bruises and bites he'd left on Pablo's skin the night before, scratches on his upper arms and shoulders, a hickey just below his right ear.

All Shane's marks.

"I'm sorry," Pablo spoke into the phone. "But listen, I'm here if you ever need help. You know that." His words and tone were heavy, laced with a sad finality. Sliding a palm over his shaved head, Pablo continued, "I never wanted to hurt you."

Shane stood and listened. He searched his mind for the identity of who Pablo could be talking to and only one name came up. Still, he'd leave it to his lover to confirm it.

"No one knows who you are," Pablo said softly. He leaned forward, shoulders hunched. "I would never betray you like that, but Shane isn't one of your enemies, he's the man I love and when he wakes up, I'm telling him the truth."

Warmth like he'd never known touched Shane and he couldn't help smiling. It was good to know Pablo didn't plan on keeping secrets. He cleared his throat.

Pablo tensed and threw a gaze over his shoulder. Shane smiled at him. Pablo didn't reciprocate.

"Levi, I gotta go, but remember what I said, I'm here if you need help." Ending the call, Pablo got to his feet. He approached Shane with wary eyes. "How much of that did you hear?"

Shane shrugged. "Not much. Why don't you fill me in?"

"In a minute." Pablo grabbed Shane by the nape and pulled him into his chest. "Good morning." He took Shane's mouth, kissing away his reply.

"Mmm." Shane wrapped his arms around Pablo and fell into the kiss. Parting his lips, he groaned when Pablo's tongue tangled with his. He rubbed up against the man in his arms, his body coming alive, flaming for him. A lifetime of this. That was what he had to look forward to and damn, Shane couldn't wait to start their lives together. He gripped Pablo's shoulders and deepened the kiss. Pablo nipped at him, sharp teeth biting before his slick tongue soothed.

They kissed until Shane couldn't breathe, until his lungs burned, only then did they ease up. Yet they retained the embrace, Pablo's face buried in Shane's neck and Shane pressing tiny kisses to Pablo's ear. They stood in place, in no hurry to move because they had all the time in the world and Shane wanted to be nowhere else, but right there, in the arms of the man who loved him enough to change for him.

"Is there something you want to tell me?" Shane asked after a while.

He heard his lover's sharp inhale, felt him nod.

"J.P.?"

Pablo pulled away, putting just enough space between them to reach out and cup Shane's cheek. "I ever told you how much I love when you call me that?" His brown eyes were filled with love, gratitude, and fear.

Shane frowned at that one.

Why fear?

"No," he answered Pablo's question. "You never told me."

"Now you know." Pablo moved away and motioned to the coffee pot. "I made coffee. Want some?"

Shane nodded. He watched while Pablo poured him a cup. Something hovered in the air between them, and damn if Shane could put a finger on what. Dread, maybe? What did Pablo dread? What put the fear in his eyes earlier?

Was he already regretting his decision to step away from the gang life and focus on building something with Shane?

"Here."

Taking the coffee from Pablo, Shane stumbled to the couch and sank down. Pablo didn't sit. He paced instead.

Shane put down his cup and cleared his throat. "Is that regret I see in your eyes?"

Pablo froze. "Fuck." He muttered the curse under his breath, but Shane still heard the words.

The hollow in Shane's chest grew and grew. That wasn't a denial, he hadn't denied it. "Are you sorry you came?" Wow, his voice. It shook, much like his insides as they quivered. "Do you want to leave?"

"No!" Pablo sank to the floor before him and grabbed Shane's hand. "Babe, I'm not regretting you and me." His eyes begged Shane to believe as his fingers dug into his wrist. "What you see is—what you see is fear. I'm afraid of how you'll react when you hear what I have to say."

What else didn't he know about his lover? Shane bit his lip to stop himself from asking that question. "Why don't you just say what you have to say and let me decide how I'll react?"

Pablo sighed. "I just...I don't want this to hurt us."

"Can it?"

"Yes."

No hesitation. Pablo didn't meet his eyes. The worry and fear Shane had been trying to keep at bay cascaded through him. Instead of lashing out, he shook his head. 'Tell me.'

"Did you know the Nieto brothers had a third sibling?"

Shane frowned. The Nieto brothers were a gang of killers and drug dealers operating out of Mexico. They were at the top of the DEA's hit list. Shane had even gone undercover, infiltrating the operation of one of their associates in hopes of bringing the Nietos down. He'd gotten some good intel and made some arrests, but hadn't managed to snag the big fish. The only good thing that came out of that assignment was meeting his lover.

"There are only two Nietos."

Pablo shook his head. "Three."

"You know this how?"

Pablo sat beside him and touched his face. "I'm not discussing this with Shane Ruskin, DEA, do you get me? I'm talking to you, pretty boy, as my lover. Understand?"

That his lover felt the need to make that distinction hurt more than Shane cared to admit.

"Shane."

"Do you think I'll run to my bosses and repeat whatever you tell me?" he snapped. Pablo's hold on him tightened and he tried moving away, but his lover held him still.

"Don't." Pablo leaned in and kissed his forehead. "Don't pull away."

Shane huffed. "Just say what you want to say, JP."

"The guy I'd been seeing in Philly." Pablo's face twisted into a grimace. "His name is Levi Nieto."

Shane reared back. "The fuck did you just say?"

"He's the younger brother of the men you've been trying to arrest."

"Are you telling me you've been fucking a Nieto this whole time?" Shane grabbed Pablo by his forearm. "Are you telling me you've known this for as long as we've been together and you didn't tell me?" He had to get it right, he had to understand just how deep into this shit his lover sank.

"Yes."

Shane closed his eyes, fighting for calm. "Continue."

“Levi’s story isn’t mine to share, but trust me when I tell you that up until two years ago he thought he was an only child, adopted because his birth parents died.” Pablo paused. Shane refused to open his eyes and look at him. “Levi didn’t know about his older brothers and the way he learned was not ideal. He ran away and we met by chance.”

Shane spoke with his eyes closed, hands fisted in his lap. “And when I told you I was working to bring down the Nietos, you didn’t think I should know about Levi? You didn’t think I could use him?”

“I knew you’d use him, babe.” Pablo’s voice rose. “You and your people would use him as bait and he doesn’t deserve that.”

Shane’s eyes flew open at that. “Let’s table the discussion on who deserves what for now,” he said through gritted teeth. “Was there something more between you and Levi? Something more than just you showing up when it suited you, fucking him, and walking away?”

Pablo shook his head before Shane finished his question. “Absolutely not. It was never more than sex for either of us. We were both hurt and we needed—”

“Yes.” Shane pounced on his words. “You were hurt. You. Since we’re laying shit on the table, why don’t we talk about who hurt you, huh?”

Pablo actually blanched. His face grew pale. “I—” He swallowed. “Angelo Pagan.” Shane blinked at the name. “The guy who ran the gang before you took over, your friend. He broke your heart?” *Did not see that coming.*

Pablo nodded.

“So you and he were…”

“No.” Pablo scrubbed a hand over his face. “Babe, I didn’t even know he was interested in men. I loved him, but I was too scared to make that move.”

“Okay, so what happened?”

“Turns out he was gay, but he was with someone. The cop trying to lock us up.”

Shane blew out a breath. “This is some déjà vu shit, isn’t it?” He shook his head. “Your dead partner broke your heart and I’m guessing he didn’t even know, did he?”

Pablo’s gaze flitted all over the room before settling somewhere in the vicinity of Shane’s forehead. “He’s not.”

“He’s not what?”

“Dead. Angelo’s alive.”

Shane stared at him, eyes narrowed. “I could have sworn I just heard you say Angelo Pagan is alive.”

“He’s alive.”

The pain in his lover’s eyes, Shane couldn’t fathom it.

“He handed over Los P to me, moved to North Carolina, and got married to the cop.”

The fuck! Shane jumped to his feet. “What are you saying, J.P.?”

“Shane.” Pablo got up and grabbed him.

Shane twisted away, quickly putting space between them. His chest. Man, his chest hurt.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why?” Shane’s lips trembled. He pressed them together then asked again, “Why are you sorry?”

Pablo’s eyes glittered. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before now.”

Shane laughed. He laughed. The alternative was crying and he wasn’t about to do that any time soon. “I don’t care that you omitted that kind of information from me. I care that the man you loved so very much, the man who turned you into a fucking shell, is still alive and you still love him. You still care.”

Pablo’s jaw dropped. “What?” He took a step back.

Shane moved forward. “You loved him. He broke your heart by choosing someone else and leaving you all alone. I could accept that if he was indeed dead, but he’s still out there, he’s still alive and so are your feelings for him.” His throat burned as he spoke the words. The truth of it was in his lover’s eyes, dawning so very slowly on him.

“I don’t—”

“Where do I fit?” Shane asked. “You couldn’t have him, so you settled for me instead.” He folded his arms and met his lover’s shattered expression. “If he walked through those doors right now and told you he felt the way you did, where would that leave me? Where do I fit, J.P.?”

## Chapter Two

“Wh-what?” Pablo couldn’t get his words to work right. He was trying to explain and doing a shitty job of it, because now the man he loved thought he’d been second choice. “What does that even mean? I love you.”

Shane’s face was granite. Hard, cold. Impenetrable. Pablo reached for him. Shane moved away.

“Don’t!”

“Do I get top billing?” Shane sneered. “On this sliding scale that you have going, do I get top billing, or is it reserved for him?”

Pablo clenched his fists. “You’re overreacting. I’m no longer in love with him.”

“Oh?” Shane moved to the other side of the room and raised an eyebrow, arms folded across his naked chest. “When did you stop loving him?” His green eyes, they glittered. The hurt in them so bright, Pablo couldn’t stare too long. “Was it before or after you had me in your bed, face down, ass up?”

Last night had been all Pablo wanted. He’d finally gotten over his fear, all the things holding him back, and he’d made the move, went to Shane and told him how he felt. How much he loved him. Everything was right, better than. All was as it should have been. He’d fallen asleep and awakened in the arms of the man he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. But how had it gone downhill so fast?

“Babe.” He walked closer to Shane “Angelo’s married, he’s happy. I’m happy. This is a non-issue.”

Shane gave no signs that he believed him. “When did you find out he was married?”

Pablo didn’t speak. What could he say? He couldn’t fully describe the magnitude of the pain and hurt in Shane’s eyes. He knew the name for the weight that suddenly settled on his chest, on his shoulders. Fear. Like he’d never known. Fear.

“Answer the question. J.P.”

He swallowed at Shane’s whispered words. “The same time I found out your true identity.”

Shane flinched. He pursed his lips and tilted his head upward. “The night you tried to kill me. The night you lost all control. The night you almost broke me.”

“Yes.” Pablo bowed his head. He’d always regret that night, always regret the blood he’d drawn. Shane’s cheek was long healed, the thin scar barely noticeable, but Pablo noticed it. Every time he looked into his lover’s face he noticed, and he remembered.

“I remember.” Shane’s voice was soft and wet, but he refused to look at Pablo. “I remember the look in your eyes that night. Like you’d lost everything, like you didn’t want to live. I remember that look and I thought—” his voice cracked. “Foolish me, I thought it was because you cared.”

“I did. I do.”

“For me.” Shane wiped the moisture on his cheek. “I thought it was because I’d hurt you, but it wasn’t me, was it? It was him. That was when you realized you had no chance with him.”

“No.” Pablo grabbed his arm. “That is not the truth. I love you. You’re my choice.”

“But not your first choice.” Shane yanked away his hand. “I’m so fucking stupid.” He covered his mouth and shook his head slowly. “I’m so stupid.”

“Stop.” Pablo’s heart clenched. Where was their moment of bliss, where had it gone? “I never loved Angel like I love you.” He hugged Shane close, kissing his neck. “I never felt for him what I feel for you. There’s no comparison.”

“He’s alive!” Shane yelled. “He’s alive, and when he married someone else, you almost killed me in your rage. Don’t tell me it doesn’t compare, don’t tell me it’s not the same.” His body shook against Pablo’s.

How did he make Shane see how he felt? How did he make him understand? Pablo had no idea. “I love you.” He hung on to the man in his arms, hung on to him even as he felt him slipping away. “I love you.” His own eyes burned, but he ignored it. Shane was who mattered, Shane’s pain was the one that needed to be dealt with.

He took it as a good sign that Shane didn’t move from his embrace.

“He’s why you kept pushing me away, holding me at arms’ length for so long,” Shane said. “He’s the presence that’s always been with us, even when it’s just us two, he’s been there. A living ghost.”

“Babe, let’s not talk about this now. Please.”

“When then?” Shane lifted his head, lashes wet. “When should we talk about the other man you love? Your first love, the one who got away?”

Pablo shook his head. “You.” He cupped Shane’s chin, felt it tremble. “You’re my first love. You’re my only love. That is the truth. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be. There’s no one else I’d rather be with.” He pressed Shane into the wall and brought their faces together. “You make me better.” His voice shook. “You make me happy.”

Shane closed his eyes. “I can’t—I can’t deal—”

“Deal with it,” Pablo said firmly. “I won’t have you doubting yourself, doubting us. Ask me whatever you want to know.” He released his lover and backed away, hands held up. “I’ll stay over here,” he nodded at the couch, “and I won’t touch you. Ask what you want to know.”

Uncertainty lingered on Shane’s face. He bit his lip and shuffled from one foot to the other, muscles rippling when he moved. His tanned skin was all exposed, a pair of blue boxers the only thing he wore. Pablo had his hands all over that smooth skin last night. He’d kissed every inch and he’d taken Shane and been taken so many times, he’d lost count. He’d never known a happier time. He’d heard happiness was fleeting, but hadn’t expected to witness it up close and personal.

“Why?” Shane asked, imploring.

“Why what?”

“Why did you make me love you so deeply?” The words were mournful. “Why did you make me care so fucking much? I was so happy when I woke up, when I realized last night was not a dream. I was so happy.” Shane shook his head. “Only you can make me and break me so completely. Only you can turn me to this.” He pointed to his red, flushed face. “Only you, J.P.”

“I’m sorry.” What more could he say? Nothing. The realization humbled him. There really was nothing he could say to stop his lover from hurting. The fact was, he’d been using Shane in the beginning to get Angelo out of his head. Out of his heart. That was the truth.

“You loved him.”

“Yes.”

“He fell in love with a cop, faked his death, changed his name, and ran away with the cop.”

Pablo nodded. “Yes.”

“That hurt you.”

“It hurt me.” Drove him to do inexcusable things.

“How did you feel when you learned he’d married the cop he’d given it all up for?”

Pablo opened his mouth. He took a breath and let it out. “Gutted.” His voice caught. “I felt gutted.”

Despair shadowed Shane’s eyes. “So now you know.” His bottom lip quivered.

“Now you know how I feel.” He slapped a palm to his chest, over his heart. “Gutted. By you.”

### Chapter Three

Pablo swallowed. “I’m sorry.” He could and would say the words over and over, all day long if he thought it’d make a difference to Shane. He just wanted the uncertainty to go away, wanted to take away the pain and the hurt he’d caused.

He hadn’t meant to, it was never his intention, but damn if it didn’t look like he’d fucked things up before they’d even gotten the chance to get started.

Shane stood over in the corner, hand over his chest, looking everywhere but at Pablo.

He got up and went over to Shane, taking slow and hesitant steps. Once in front of him, Pablo touched his cheek with a fingertip. “Don’t. I can’t—shit, I can’t handle you in pain.” His hand trembled against Shane’s cheek. “I don’t know what to do,” he whispered. “Tell me what to say, what to do.” His voice cracked. “You’re breaking my heart.”

Shane’s nostrils flared and he pinned Pablo with a glare. “I’m breaking your heart?” He scoffed. “Are you fucking serious?” Wrenching away from Pablo’s touch, Shane asked, “What about mine? All the shit you put me through back in Brooklyn, all the fucking hoops I had to jump through, and we end up here.” He pointed between them. “Here! With me once again feeling less than with you. With me begging for more than you could ever give,” he shouted. “I’m done!” His voice shook uncontrollably. “I’m so fucking done waiting for you to decide who you love more. Who you want more.”

Terror froze Pablo’s words on his tongue. Life without Shane flashed before his eyes and he didn’t want it, he rejected that shit right away. A future without Shane would be dark and desolate, and no place he wanted to be.

“Shane.” He grabbed Shane’s hand when he turned to walk away. “Don’t push me away. Please. Everything good in me is because of you, don’t destroy it.” He couldn’t believe he was actually begging, he couldn’t believe all he wanted, everything that had been in his grasp, in the palm of his hand only hours ago, was slipping away with him helpless to stop the flow.

Shane was turned from him, his face toward the wall, so Pablo couldn’t see his expression, but he felt what his lover felt; his racing pulse, the tremors running through him.

“I’m sorry.” Fuck. He kept saying that, but it didn’t help. Not one bit. “Face me, Shane. Look at me.” He tugged until Shane relented.

“What?” His sullen question didn’t hide the hurt.

“Listen to me,” Pablo spoke carefully. He was too scared to take stupid chances, too scared to let go when Shane tried pulling from him. Pablo edged them closer to the wall and motioned Shane to lean back. When he did, Pablo dropped to his knees.

“Listen, please.” He placed a hand on Shane’s hip and looked up into his green eyes.

“Say what you want to.” Shane licked his lips with a shrug. He seemed hell-bent on making things difficult for Pablo, and why shouldn’t he?

“What I felt for Angelo, it was love, yes.” He nodded. “But he was also a surrogate brother, a best friend, and a business partner. We knew most of each other’s secrets, we went to battle for each other. I loved him and I was devastated when I learned he was in love with someone else.”

Shane’s Adam’s apple bobbed.

Pablo pressed a quick kiss to his hip bone. “I was angry he chose someone else, a cop, over me and the gang. I was angry I wasn’t who he wanted. That I couldn’t be who he needed. I was angry.” He could readily admit that. “That anger,” Pablo touched his chest. “That anger, it ruled my emotions. It ruled me. I embraced it wholly because the alternative was to admit I was alone, that I would always be alone.” His eyes burned and he looked down, hiding. “The alternative would be that despite my loyalty, my dependability, despite having always been there for him, he’d no longer be there for me.”

Shane made a sound above him, a soft sob. “I don’t want to hear this.”

“You have to.” Pablo touched Shane’s stomach, stroked him with a palm. “Please.” When Shane didn’t speak again, Pablo continued. “I knew the moment we kissed on the boat, the second your lips touched mine, that you were different. That you’d changed me in some fundamental, yet undefined way. That was the reason I kept pushing you away, because I knew it wasn’t only a physical thing. I knew where Angelo’s actions had wounded me, letting you in and losing you would fucking kill me.”

Shane blinked down at him, his lips parted. His expression was still unreadable, but Pablo kept on stroking Shane’s belly.

“I loved him.” Pablo said softly, “but what I feel for you, love is too fucking tame a word.” His voice got rougher, harsher. “This thing between us, pretty boy, this fire we make, nothing can touch it. Nothing comes close. Nothing.” He had to stop talking for a second to swallow the lump in his throat. “There was never a choice to make, you swept into my life and took that shit outta my hands. I never had a chance.”

Shane started trembling again.

“Say you believe me,” Pablo pleaded with him. “Say you love me like you did before. Tell me you know you’re the only man in my heart.” Jesus, he’d never done this. He never talked about feelings, ever, but he’d bared his heart for Shane, he’d given him the truth and Shane was...walking away.

“I’m-I need to lie down.”

Pablo sat back, head bowed, as Shane moved from him and walked away. Heart squeezing, he called out, “Shane.” When he looked up, Shane hadn’t turned back to him, he stood in the archway between the living room and hallway leading to his bedroom. “I’m here and I’m staying. I don’t care how many times I have to tell you I love you. I don’t care how hard you push or the distance you put between us. You know me better than to think I’ll walk away. I’ll be here when you wake up. Always.”

Shane waited a beat then continued walking until he disappeared from view. A door slammed.

Pablo flinched. His shoulders sagged. He’d meant the words though, he wasn’t going anywhere. He got to his feet and made his way to the couch with heavy steps. He’d show Shane how much he loved him, how much he wanted him. Their love wasn’t a second choice, wasn’t a placeholder for something or someone else. He had to make Shane see that, had to make him believe it.

Stretching out on the couch, he searched his mind for anything to bring the light back to his lover’s eye, but fell asleep before he could find a solution.

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A rumbling stomach brought Pablo out of his nap. He sat up and checked the time on his phone. Late afternoon and no movement from Shane. He made his way to the bedroom and pushed the unlocked door open. Sprawled in the middle of the bed, Shane snored lightly. Okay. He’d get them some food, order out via the take-out menus he’d spied in the kitchen, and then he’d wake Shane.

Hopefully things would be better then.

After placing an order at the Thai place, Pablo grabbed a quick shower. He was pulling on some jeans when the knock came on the door. Shane still slept so Pablo raced to the door with his upper half bare and still wet, wallet in hand. He yanked open the door and blinked.

The delivery man stood there, bag of food in hand, but he had a companion.

“What are *you* doing here?”

Ignoring the outraged question, Pablo paid the delivery guy and waited for him to disappear from view before he addressed the other, unwanted guest. “This is a definite problem.” He walked back into the house and placed the food on the counter. “A big problem.”

“You haven’t answered my question,” Jack Wellington spoke from behind him. “Why are you here?”

Pablo swung around. “Why do you think I’m here, Jackie boy?” He pushed off the counter and got up close, real close in the DEA agent’s face. He stared into Jack’s light eyes, grinning at the alarm he couldn’t quite hide. “I’m here because this is where my man lays his hat, and wherever Shane lays his hat is my home.” He winked.

Jack flushed. Too buttoned-up, that one.

“Why don’t we talk about why you’re here?” Pablo asked. “Last time I checked, your business with Shane had been concluded. Dead and buried, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Shane and I work together.” Jack glared at him.

“Am I?” Pablo cocked his head to the side, trying to hide the grin when Jack blinked.

“Are you what?”

“Mistaken. Am I mistaken about the status of your business with Shane?”

“You know nothing about Shane and me.” Jack fisted his hands at his sides. “You come in and you brainwash him into thinking you feel something for him, but I know better. Sooner or later he’ll tire of you and –”

“And you’ll be there, ready to help pick up the pieces?” Pablo asked with a smile. He couldn’t help it. He didn’t know whether to shoot Jack or give him a hug because they both knew, Shane wasn’t going anywhere unless Pablo was beside him.

Jackie boy didn't answer him, instead he rocked back on his heels, eyes shooting daggers at Pablo. He had yet to see Jack in anything but a suit and tie. Today he wore a gray one with a white shirt and dark tie. The blond agent had a spoiled arrogance to him that irked Pablo. He just knew Jack wasn't a fan of anything dirty or sweaty.

How had Shane spent all those years with him?

"Do you know why I'm here?" Pablo asked. "Because Shane loves me and I love him. He wants me here so I suggest you get used to it."

"Love," Jack spat. "What do you know about love? You kill people. You destroy lives."

"Ah. Ah." Pablo wagged a finger under Jack's nose. "Haven't you heard? I'm retired." He chuckled.

"Where's Shane?" Jack looked around. "I need to talk to him." He turned and Pablo grabbed him by the shoulder, halting his movements.

"Shane is getting some rest. You're not going to disturb him so I suggest you send him an email later."

"Don't touch me!" Jack tried shrugging him off, but Pablo dug his nails deeper into his shoulder.

"You should have listened to that voice in your head, the one whispering *danger* the first time we met," Pablo spoke against his ear. "Open your eyes, Jackie boy. You fucking with me is not a good idea. Means you're no longer safe, not in the daytime and definitely not at night." He squeezed Jack, heard his breath stutter. "Don't test me, Agent Wellington."

Jack faced him with fury in his eyes. Fear too. "Shane has no idea who you really are, does he?" His chest rose and fell rapidly.

Pablo smiled at him. "Shane knows exactly who I am. He knows I'm the man who will kill and die for him. He knows he comes first. Period. He knows I love him and I will destroy anyone who tries to fuck with what we have. He knows me, Jackie boy," Pablo whispered, "and he loves me. Like he never loved you."

Jack actually blanched. "Fuck you."

"It's not bad thing," Pablo reassured him. "You can find yourself someone brave enough to get past the starch in your spine and give you what you want."

"What do I want?" Jack frowned.

“Let’s talk about what you need. A good fuck.” Pablo winked. “Get you hot and sweaty and walking funny the next day.”

Jack’s mouth hung open. A bright red flush coated his neck and rose to his cheeks. “You—”

“I’m taken, sorry.” He gave Jack his back. “Come back when Shane’s up, but call before you do.”

“I’m not leaving.”

“Oh no?” Pablo spun around. “You sure?” He squinted at Jack’s determined expression.

“You want to make me leave?” Jack squared his shoulders and rested a hand on his right hip. “Try.”

“Ah, Jackie boy.” Pablo clicked his tongue and shook his head. Idiot. “I can have you flat on your back before you ever got your iron out of the holster.” He bared his teeth. “I’m devastatingly good at what I do.” He coughed. “Excuse me, what I *used to do*.” He even supplied the air quotes.

“So do it.” Jack shrugged. “I’m not leaving.”

Pablo did not want to admire the fool, but fuck if he didn’t. “Okay.” He took a step forward.

Jack widened his stance.

“J.P. What the hell are you doing?”

## Chapter Four

Shane squinted at Pablo who made no attempt to move from where he was, all up in Jack's face. The two of them looked as if they were seconds from coming to blows, and Shane weren't having it.

"Back up," he snapped at Pablo. "Move."

His lover held his gaze, expectant, and when Shane didn't give him anymore, Pablo move away, his hands in the air.

"Shay." Jack touched Shane's shoulder. "Why is he here? Have you lost your mind?" he asked. "You know there's no way this guy can be changed or saved, or whatever the hell you plan on—"

"Shut up, Jack!" Shane slashed a hand through the air. "Why are you here?" Shane rubbed his temple. He still felt a bit woozie after being yanked awake by the slamming of the door. He'd jumped out of bed and ran out the bedroom. The only thing that stopped him from bursting in to the kitchen had been Pablo's voice when he spoke of loving Shane.

Jack's eyes pleaded with him to come to his senses. Over in the corner, Pablo stood with his arms folded over his chest, watching in the eerie calm way he'd perfected.

"Shay, tell me he was lying. You can't be serious about having him live here with you?"

"It's true." Shane sat down at the kitchen table and sniffed the bags of food there. "You bought food?" He raised an eyebrow at Pablo who grinned.

"You gotta eat. Right?" Pablo walked over and took the containers out of the bags then made up a plate that he pushed over to Shane. "Here you go."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Jack gasped. He pushed away from the wall and came closer. "Shane, are you even thinking straight? This guy can't be trusted. He's a criminal. Why aren't you running as far as you can away from him?"

Shane couldn't meet Jack's eyes. The pain in them, the hurt, he'd put those shadows in Jack's eyes and he had no way to remove them.

"Shane," Jack whispered. "Why?"

"Jackie boy—"

“No.” Shane held up a hand. “Jack, I’m sorry. I can’t tell you why it’s him and not you. I’m sorry.”

“Five years,” Jack said hoarsely. “Five years, Shane, and not once did you let me spend the weekend with you here.” He looked around the apartment. “Five years I loved you and invested in us, yet you meet him all of five minutes and he gets everything? He gets you?”

“I love him.” Shane shrugged. “I’d say I was sorry, but I will not apologize for loving him.”

Jack flinched.

Shane stared down at his food. His appetite had fled and now all he wanted was a fucking beer. “Why did you come, Jack?”

Jack stood still for a moment, his throat working, hands fisted. He composed himself then spoke. “We’ve been hearing some chatter regarding the Cahns. We think they might be operational again, or at least close to it.”

Shane frowned. The Cahns were a family out of Missouri, notorious for their meth dealings, cooking it, selling it. Shane had gone undercover for three months and with the help of local law enforcement shut them down, arresting almost twenty family members, including the head of the operation, Pop Cahn.

“What do you mean chatter? And I thought Pop was still locked up?” The old man had gotten seven years for his crimes, which included trafficking methamphetamines, and possession of a controlled substance.

“Pop is still inside.” Jack nodded. “The oldest, Edgar, is the one seemingly intent on reviving the family business.”

“Okay, so what does that have to do with me?”

“We might need your meth-addicted alter-ego Johnny to pay them a visit.”

“Wait, what?” Pablo interrupted. “What are you saying?” He looked from Shane to Jack and back. “What is he saying?”

Shane licked his lips. “I might need to go back undercover.”

“Fuck no!” Pablo shook his head. “That’s not going to happen.”

Jack smirked. “You have no say in what Shane does.”

Pablo walked over and sat in the chair next to Shane. “You were a meth head?”

“I was undercover, I played the role.” He’d had to do a lot of things he wasn’t proud of on that case, but what else was new?

“What does that mean?” Pablo grabbed his hand, held him tight. “What does that mean?”

“It means you have no idea what his job entails,” Jack piped up.

“Jack.” Shane got to his feet. “Keep me informed, and in the meantime I’ll reacquaint myself with the case.”

Jack just stood there, rocking back on his heels, hands in his pocket. His eyes were full of need and hope, nothing Shane could give.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow, Jack.”

His ex finally got the message. He jerked a nod and turned, walking toward the front door.

“And Jack,” Shane called out. “From now on please call before you drop by, okay?”

All he got was a stiffening of Jack’s shoulders to indicate he’d heard before the door closed behind him.

Shane plopped down in his chair with a sigh. That was painful, but Jack needed to know where he stood with Shane.

“Thank you for that.”

He glanced over and found his lover staring intently at him. “I did it for all three of us.”

Pablo nodded. “He still loves you.”

And Shane didn’t know how to make it not hurt for Jack. “I heard you earlier,” he said softly. “Heard you talking to him. You told him how you felt about me.”

“It’s no secret how I feel about you.” Pablo shrugged. “The only person who questions it is you.”

Shane didn’t want to deal with the mess he’d left unresolved when he’d run and hidden in the bedroom, but they had to. “I know you love me. I just...”

“Doubted how much?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“You’re everything, Shane.”

And he could believe it. When Pablo touched him like he did now, a thumb swiping over the pulse at his wrist, when he looked at Shane like he did now, his eyes all soft and dreamy and promising, Shane could believe it.

He left his chair and went to Pablo, climbing onto his lap and hugging him tight. “You say you love me,” he whispered in his lover’s ear, “then you have the rest of our lives to show me. Over and over and over.”

Pablo kissed his neck, right there where it met his shoulder, and Shane shuddered.

“You ain’t said nothing but a word.” Pablo tilted his head, a hand on Shane’s nape and took his mouth, kissing Shane like he always did, with ownership.

Shane rocked back and forth on him, no rush, just feeling and experiencing what he’d come so close to throwing away. For a second he’d allowed himself to be taken over by the jealousy, but he knew better. If ever there was a competition, he came out the winner every time. He had Juan Pablo Castillo in his arms. Shane—and nobody else—was in Pablo’s heart.

He dragged his nails down Pablo’s naked back, loving how his lover writhed and moaned for him, how his erection twitched and poked at Shane. He reached between them, stroked Pablo through his jeans.

A phone rang, Pablo’s ringtone. His lover broke the kiss and lifted his ass off the chair to pull the cell phone from his back pocket.

“This shit better be good,” Pablo barked.

Shane watched as the fury on Pablo’s face changed, smoothing away to surprise, and a smile?

“Oh, hi,” Pablo spoke into the phone. He glanced at Shane and winked. “Yeah, he’s right here. Uh huh. Hold on.” He held out the phone. “It’s for you.”

Shane did not like the way Pablo grinned like that, as if he had a secret. He took the phone and cautiously brought it to his ear. “Hello?”

“Couldn’t climb off the dick long enough to give us a call?” The female voice chuckled.

Shane gasped. “Heather! Why are you calling J.P.?” he asked his sister-in-law.

“Aw, didn’t he tell you? J.P. and I are tight.”

“You sneaky bitch!” Shane shouted. “I’ll kill you.”

“Yeah, whatever. I expect you and J.P. at the house tomorrow for dinner,” Heather said. “We’re all looking forward to meeting him.” She hung up before Shane could deliver his “hell no!”

He stared at the phone then at his lover whose lips twitched. “What was that? How does Heather know your number?”

Pablo shrugged. “She stole it from your phone and called me while I was en route.” He laughed. “I like her.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “Yeah well, you’ll get over that mighty quick once you’ve broken bread with her.”

“Oh?” Pablo raised an eyebrow as he trailed a finger down Shane’s spine and dipped it into his ass crack.

“Yes, we’re invited to dinner tomorrow. Hope you’re prepared for the inquisition.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Pablo stared at the home across the street then back at Shane. They’d been sitting in the car for about ten minutes, but Shane still made no move to exit. His lover appeared uneasy. Pablo wasn’t. He’d been through tougher situations than this. He could break bread with Shane’s family, smile and make small talk.

He was good.

“We gonna do this or what?”

Shane glanced at him, his fingers flexing on steering wheel. “I feel like I should warn you right now. And apologize for the third degree you’ll no doubt be subjected to.”

“I’m good with that.” Pablo shrugged. “You’re the one who’s nervous.” He slid his palm down Shane’s nape and pulled his close. “I’m gonna be a good boy in there. Gonna smile for ’em, be on my best behavior. I swear.”

Shane chuckled against his neck. “I’m not worried about that. I’m worried you’ll bail from the table when Heather starts in on you.”

“What about your brother? Won’t he be giving me the evil eye?”

“Nah. Rich is cool. Heather is the one you gotta look out for.” He pressed a kiss to Pablo’s skin. “She’s like a dog with a bone, so prepare for all kinds of embarrassing questions.”

“I don’t embarrass easily.” Pablo gazed at the house. The door opened and a little girl stepped out. She wore pink tights under a pink, fluffy skirt, a purple t-shirt and pink sunglasses. Her hair was a riot of long, dark curls falling past her shoulders. As Pablo watched, she walked down the steps and approached them. The closer she got, the more he saw Shane in her. “I think your niece is looking for you.”

“Where?” Shane jerked upright. “Sophia!” He grabbed Pablo’s wrist. “Come on. Come meet her.” His eyes were bright with happiness. Pablo had never seen him like. It was as if a light bulb had been switched on in his lover.

“Okay.” He opened his side of the door and got out. Shane scrambled after him.

“Uncle Shay!” A ball of pink sailed past Pablo and rushed into Shane’s arms.

“Hi, Sophia.” Shane scooped the little girl up and hugged her close. “How are you? Have you been good?”

She heaved a heavy sigh. “I tried to be good, Uncle Shay, but I couldn’t. It’s so hard.” She dragged out the word *so*. “Mommy wasn’t happy.”

Shane chuckled into her hair. “I bet.”

“Did you bring your new friend?” Sophie looked around and back at Pablo. “Mommy said you’re bringing someone new. I’m supposed to be nice.”

“I did bring my new friend.” Shane lowered her to the ground and pushed her sunglasses up onto her head. Catching her hand in his, Shane walked them closer to Pablo. “Sophia Belle, this is J.P. He’s my special friend. J.P., my niece, Sophia.”

She stared up at him with Shane’s eyes, their intensity like a fist to Pablo’s chest. He smiled down at her. “Hi, Sophia. Your uncle has told me wonderful things about you. I’m happy to meet you.” He took her hand and shook it.

She blinked. “Are you my new uncle? Can I call you Uncle J.P.?” She twirled and faced Shane. “Mommy says he’s not like the others. Will you get married? Mommy says you’re living together. Uncle Shay, can I have a Barbie sunglasses? Cleopia has one and she doesn’t want to share with me.”

Shane gaped down at her. Pablo chuckled. She was bright, way too smart, and a talker. Pablo couldn’t wait to meet her parents.

“Uh, Soph, why don’t you ask your parents about the sunglasses?” Shane rubbed his chin. “As to the rest, you’re way too young for this.”

“I’m not young!” Sophia crossed her arms and pouted. “I’m six and a half, which is almost seven. Seven is very close to ten.”

Pablo couldn’t stifle the laughter and Shane glared at him.

“Okay, yeah.” Shane took his niece’s hand and proceeded up the walk to the house. “Let’s go inside.”

The door burst open. A curvy woman about five-five came running out, wearing a short blue dress and nothing on her feet. She stopped in her tracks when she spotted them.

“Well. I see you didn’t back out.” She flipped dark hair out of her eyes and smiled at Shane when he growled. “Uh-huh. Whatever.” She turned to Pablo with her hand outstretched. “Heather Ruskin. J.P., I presume?”

Pablo held her soft hand in his without shaking. “Juan Pablo Castillo.” He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

She touched her free hand to her left breast. “Well. I see why this one fell for you. Slick, aren’t you?”

Pablo grinned. “Only in the best way.”

She blushed. “Damn, you’re good.” He released her hand and she waved him in. “Come in. Come in.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Pablo didn’t remember what he ate. Chicken something or the other. He did recall meeting Rich, Shane’s older brother. He was an easy-going man who adored his family and his brother. He shook Pablo’s hand firmly, met his gaze squarely, and granted him a nod. Pablo figured he had Rich’s blessing unless he did something to irrevocably harm Shane.

Conversation flowed at the dinner table, mostly questions about Pablo he had no problems answering. They were Shane’s family, he couldn’t lie to them. Much. Sophia had them laughing. She provided the entertainment, and Pablo couldn’t help it. Every time he looked into her eyes, she stole more and more of his heart.

She sat on the floor of the living room, playing with her dolls while the grownups talked. Pablo tuned them out, choosing to stare at her, to drink her in. Her round face and sparkling eyes, they were Shane’s. It hit him then what a child, Shane’s child, would

look like. His chest squeezed. His shirt became too tight and he needed air, but he didn't want to stop watching little Sophia Belle.

Pablo gulped down water, anything to distract him from the thoughts swirling in his head. Thoughts of the future. Of what he wanted.

The night drew to a close and he hugged Heather goodbye, shook Rich's hand again, and barely contained the *oomph* when Sophia threw herself at his chest. Pablo's eyes burned and he buried his face in her hair, breathing her in.

"You're quiet." Shane touched his knee with one hand, the other he used to handle the steering wheel.

Pablo stared out into the dark night, still trying to organize his thoughts. "I'm-It's been an interesting night."

"In what way?"

"I looked into your daughter's eyes tonight."

Shane nails dug into Pablo's thigh. Jaw tight, Shane said, "You know she's not mine. Not in any way that counts."

"You want that," Pablo said softly. "You want a child." Shane didn't speak and Pablo spoke again. "I want one, too."

"Let's—" Shane swallowed. "Let's table this until we get home."

"No." Pablo caught his hand, lacing their fingers. "Gay marriage is legal in New York."

Shane made a sound, like a gasp, but he didn't look at him. "I'm fucking driving, J.P. Don't do this to me right now." His hand shook in Pablo's hold.

"I want to see your eyes light up like it did for Sophia." Pablo wiped a hand over his mouth. "I want to give you that, what you want."

Shane swung into his apartment complex and into a parking spot. They sat in the car after he parked, holding hands. Shane still refused to look at him.

"A child with your eyes, pretty boy," Pablo whispered into the quiet. "With your smile. I wish I could give you that."

"Come on." Shane shot out the car and into the building at top speed. Pablo raced after him. They came together in the elevator. Shane stood with his hands fisted as he watched the number of floors fly by.

Had he upset him? Pablo touched his shoulder. “Shane.”

“Shut up,” Shane spoke through gritted teeth. “How dare you say that shit to me while I’m driving?” He finally met Pablo’s gaze. Heat and lust and tension flared bright in Shane’s eyes. “I’m this close to fucking you in this elevator.”

Pablo grinned to himself and kept his distance. He stared up at the security cameras. He wouldn’t have minded, but Shane would.

They’d barely made it into the apartment when Shane slammed him up against the locked door. He took Pablo’s mouth, kisses wet and frantic while he tugged on Pablo’s belt. Pablo helped, yanking at Shane’s jeans, unzipping and pulling out his already slick cock.

“Ungh.” Shane rolled his hips, thrusting his cock into Pablo’s fist. “Fuck. Your touch.” He ripped away Pablo’s shirt and raked his nails down his chest, catching a nipple.

Pablo hissed. “Fuck!”

“I love you.” Shane kissed Pablo’s neck, repeating the same words over and over. “Love you. Love you. Love you.”

Pablo caught his head, held him still. “Then say yes.” He ground against Shane’s cock, head tipping back at the pleasure. He spoke without looking at Shane. “Say you’ll marry me.”

Shane dragged Pablo’s jeans down his hips. “I’m yours.” He traced a slick finger down Pablo’s crack and pushed in.

“Shit.” Pablo clenched around the intrusion then rocked. “Shane.”

In response, Shane turned him until Pablo’s face was pressed to the door. Two fingers breached him, fucking deep into his channel. Pablo pushed back, tipping his ass higher. One minute the fingers were stretching him then they were gone. He shuddered at the loss.

“You have me.” Shane’s voice was harsh at his nape. His blunt, smooth and slick cock head pushed at Pablo’s entrance, sinking in.

Fire spread like warm fucking butter through his veins and Pablo loved it.

“You have all of me,” Shane said. “So yes,”—his teeth caught Pablo’s earlobe, nipped then released—“I will marry you.” He pulled out then slammed in.

Pablo clawed the door with a hoarse shout. His entire being trembled. His ass blazed with every stroke Shane made. In and out. Every time Shane dug deep, he smacked up against Pablo's prostate. The pleasure set his teeth to knocking. His eyes burned at the pain—sweet agony—and the happiness—drugging bliss.

“Know what I wish?” Shane rasped. “I wish I could breed you.” His fingernails sank into Pablo's hips. “I wish I could get you pregnant, that way I'd see both of us in our child's face.” His voice caught on the last word and he buried his face in Pablo's nape as he pounded in.

Speech had long deserted Pablo, so he clenched around Shane, a signal of his agreement. He felt the same. A warm hand fisted his cock, jerking him with erratic strokes.

“Come for me.” Shane bit him.

Pablo bucked.

Shane bit him again, this time prolonging the sensation, and Pablo's legs gave out. Orgasm hit him, harder than a two-by-four to the gut. He shook, cum shooting into Shane's palm.

“Yes, cream for me.” Shane's hips sped up. A hand at Pablo's nape tipped him forward and he went, opening himself up to the pounding. His head hit the door with each thrust. “Fuck. Coming.”

Pablo clenched.

“Shit!” Warmth jetted into him as Shane climaxed.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I was serious.” Pablo stared at Shane across the pillow.

Shane smiled and touched his nose. “So was I.”

“We're gonna do this?” Pablo rolled to his side and cupped Shane's jaw. “Truly?”

“Yep.” Shane grinned like an idiot.

Pablo stared at him. He was so full, in his chest, his heart. So full. “I love you so fucking much.”

“I love you, too.” Shane scooted closer, damn near lying on top of Pablo, and kissed him. They kissed forever. Deep kisses. Soft kisses. Hard, too. Every variation.

When his lungs burned from lack of oxygen, Pablo pulled back and stared into Shane's eyes. "Look at us. One dinner with your family and I turn us into two sentimental queers." He shook his head.

"Hey, sentimental is good. I like sentimental."

Pablo pursed his lips. "I can do sentimental, I guess. We're getting married." A thrill shot down his spine at that. Shane's eyes sparkled. "We're men, sure, but I never want you to guess how or what I'm feeling." He trailed a finger down Shane's throat, over and past his Adam's apple. "I can't not let you know just how gone I am over you. I can't not tell you that looking at you makes me feel so full." He touched his chest. "Like you're everything. All I need." He swallowed. "Because you are. My everything."

Shane caught his hand, kissed his fingers. "Same here. I feel the same."

## Chapter Five

Shane unlocked the door and walked into his apartment. He stood there for a minute, eyes closed, head thrown back, inhaling the awesome smells of whatever Pablo was cooking for dinner. He had news to share, news he'd been holding on to for almost two weeks. The time had come, he couldn't put it off any longer. He didn't want to see that look on Pablo's face when he finally came clean, but his time had long run out.

He had to leave. Become another person for a little while.

Taking a deep breath, he dropped his bag and keys on the couch on his way to the kitchen. His man stood at the stove in jean shorts sagging low on his hips and a thin gray t-shirt that showed every ripple of his muscles when he moved. Shane leaned against the entrance, arms folded and watched. He had that luxury, the one of just sitting back and staring of the man he loved as he moved about their home.

"You just gonna stand there?" Pablo didn't look up from whatever he was stirring.

"Though crossed my mind." Shane walked up to him and pressed his front to Pablo's back. "You look good like that, nothing sexier than a man who can burn." He nuzzled Pablo's neck, inhaling him. "Whatchu cooking?"

Pablo leaned into him. "Cajun crabmeat fettuccine, pork chops, and other green stuff."

"Yum." Shane pinched Pablo's butt then moved away to peer into the pot. "Looks good."

"Here." Pablo dipped the wooden spoon into the pasta and offered up a bit. "Taste."

Shane's eyes widened when the spicy flavor exploded on his tongue. "Hmm." He nodded rapidly. "Yeah, s'good." It tasted amazing. Pablo smiled at him. "C'mere." He hauled his lover into his arms and kissed him, slow and deep, with a whole lotta tongue and shivers. Almost a month, and damn he still couldn't get enough. And he had to give it up, for a long time. He wasn't prepared.

And he knew Pablo would lose his shit when Shane told him. He'd wait until after dinner.

"You taste better than anything you can cook up," he murmured against Pablo's lips.

Pablo chuckled. "You hungry?"

"I am, actually." Shane released him, reluctantly, and stepped back. "You plate, I'll set."

They moved about the kitchen in sync, Shane setting the table while Pablo piled their plates high. Shane's mouth watered. One of the endless upsides to living with Juan Pablo Castillo was that his lover had a secret yen for cooking. Shane was getting fat from all the good food Pablo concocted. They'd never talked about what Pablo would do as far as getting a job, but his lover didn't appear to be in a hurry. God knew he didn't need the money. Another thing they hadn't talked about, but Shane didn't fool himself. Pablo came to him fully loaded.

They sat down opposite each other, quiet talk about their day as they ate. Shane held back on going into detail about his job, leaving that for later, instead he encouraged Pablo's low rumble about his trials on getting his driver's license changed over to his new address.

"What are you going to do?" Shane asked during a lull.

"What do you mean?"

Shane sipped his beer before speaking. "As much as I love it, coming home to see you here cooking, it must be getting old. You're not used to the mundane."

Pablo squinted. "It's not mundane, it's taking care of you, of us, and our home and I actually like it."

"You like it." Shane stared at him. "You like taking care of the house, doing the laundry and paying the bills. You like being the house husband?"

Pablo's eyes crinkled at the corners. "House husband." He shrugged. "I've never given that word much thought, but I don't mind it." He put down his fork and took Shane's hand. "Listen, babe, I've done fast paced, I've done fight or flight. I want quiet. I can be your house husband. Hell, I'm going to be your husband. I like doing our laundry and cooking our dinner, I like that stuff and I will continue to do them as long as you continue to come home me."

Shane squeezed Pablo's fingers. "I love when you say that word." His eyes closed on a full body shudder. "I fucking love it so hard."

"What word?"

He opened his eyes. Pablo grinned at him, eyes all warm and glowing. Damn. “Husband. Gets me all shivery and shit.”

His lover barked a laugh. “I like it, too.”

“You’d better.” Shane waited until the laughter died down, until Pablo ducked his head to cut into his pork chop, before he cleared his throat and prepared to drop his bomb. “I have to tell you something.”

He couldn’t keep the heaviness out of his voice and Pablo must have caught it because his head snapped up. “So tell me.” His shoulders tensed as though preparing for a blow.

Good instincts.

“I’m so sorry, J.P.”

“Shane.” A tick started at the corner of Pablo’s left eye. “Tell me.”

“I’ve been cleared to go undercover, I leave in three days.” He closed his eyes. Nothing happened. Absolutely nothing. Nothing moved or breathed. It was as if his words had frozen Pablo in place. Shane swallowed his cowardice and opened his eyes again.

Pablo sat staring at him. Knife and fork in hand, staring at him.

“Say something.”

“You didn’t just get cleared today, did you?”

Shane didn’t answer.

“Did you?”

He shook his head. “No,” he whispered.

Pablo’s flashed fire. “How long have you known?”

“About two weeks.”

Pablo jumped to his feet. His plate went flying as did his utensils. “Two weeks?” he repeated calmly. Way too calm. “You’ve known about this for two weeks and you didn’t tell me? Why?”

“I didn’t want to see that look in your eyes, the panic and worry.” Shane stood and walked over to him. “I didn’t want you freaking out.”

Pablo gave him a mirthless chuckle. “Good job then.” He shook his head. “How long will you be gone?”

Jesus. Shane swallowed around the words stuck in his throat. “I have three months, could be more.”

“Christ!” Pablo kicked his chair and it slammed into the wall. “Look into my eyes, Shane.” He cupped Shane’s cheek. “What you see is terror, I’m fucking terrified for you. I won’t be around. I won’t be anywhere close to get to you if anything goes wrong.”

Shane covered his hand with his. “I’ve done this before, I know what I’m doing. Besides, Jack is my handler. We’re both familiar—”

“I don’t trust Jack to take of you.” Pablo’s fingers shook against Shane’s face. “I don’t trust anyone to take care of you but me.” He pressed their foreheads together, his eyes squeezed tight. “Jesus, Shane.”

Shane pulled him in close, holding his lover’s shaking body tight. He petted Pablo’s nape. “I’ll be fine. They know me already so I won’t have to work hard to get back into the inner circle. I’ve already established myself to them.” That had been with the father though, Pop Cahn. Shane didn’t remember anything about the son other than he’d been doing a State bid at the time. He didn’t tell Pablo that.

Pablo moved out of his arms. “Come on then, tell me about the case and the players. I want to know everything.”

“Um, I can’t—”

“You can,” Pablo said fiercely, “and you will. I’m not gonna be one of those partners left in the dark about this shit.” He righted his chair and sat down at the table. “Besides, I’m uniquely qualified to understand all this.”

He was. “Okay.” He sat. “The Cahns are in the backwoods of Missouri, cooking and selling meth. It’s been the family business for years and the last time I went UC, I shut them down, got Pop locked up for a good spell on manufacturing and distribution. He’s still locked up, but his son, Edgar, has taken up the torch. Only this time we think Edgar is taking the brand in a whole new direction. Trafficking over State lines, killing—something his father has never done, to my knowledge—and he’s got new investors. Mexican investors.”

“Not good.”

“Yeah, so my job is to find the names of his investors, get proof about the trafficking, killing, and whatever else. I was Johnny to them, a heavy user and low enough on the food chain for them to not notice me when I slipped in and out.”

Pablo grappled his hand across the table, grip like a vice. “Were you using to keep your cover intact?”

“No.” Shane held his lover’s gaze to make sure he understood. “I was surrounded by it, but not once did I compromise myself. Not once did I want to. I know how to play the game, to put on the act, plus the guys at work made me up good. They gave me the skin and the teeth of a user, but I didn’t indulge at all.”

Relief flashed in Pablo’s eyes and his chest moved in a quiet sigh. “I don’t know if I can do this, Shane, sit by for months without knowing what’s going on with you.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Does anyone know about us, besides Jack?”

“No.” Shane frowned. “Should they?”

“Up to you.” Pablo shrugged. “I just...if anything happens, I won’t know.” His words shook. “If anything goes wrong, I won’t know.”

Fuck, Shane hadn’t thought about that. “Oh man. I didn’t think. I’ll need to have some paperwork redone when I go in tomorrow.”

“I will out us without a second thought if anything goes down, you know this, right?” Pablo glared at him, but Shane didn’t think it was out of anger. “I’m not going to fade into the shadows and act like we weren’t us.”

Shane smiled. “I never thought you would.”

“Are we seriously discussing this right now, pretty boy? Are you seriously gonna leave me lonely for months?”

“I’m—”

“Don’t apologize.” Pablo slashed a hand through the air. “You’re you. I met you while you were undercover. It’s your job. I just...reality is a bitch right now.”

“I’ve been thinking this would be my last UC job,” Shane said, hopeful. “I’m not as young as I once was, and besides, I’m getting married. I need to be around for my husband.”

Pablo’s pupils dilated. “Uh huh.”

“I can look into something less...dangerous.”

“Please do.” Pablo cocked his head to the side. “We need a code.”

“Huh?”

“I’m sure you and Jack have some kinda word or phrase between you for when shit hits the fan.”

“Yeah, we do.”

Pablo nodded. “We need one, and it’s to be used when you need me. When you need my kind of help, because you know the type I bring.”

Shane chewed his bottom lip. He didn’t know how he felt about that. He didn’t want Pablo anywhere near Missouri and the Cahns, but he also knew there was no one better if he found himself in a jam and needed help. Pablo’s kind of help.

“Shane, what are you thinking?”

“You’ll be a last resort. And when I reach out it means you’re to come in guns blazing.”

Pablo grinned. “Like my guns will be doing anything else but blaze.”

Shane rolled his eyes, but he returned the grin. “Brooklyn.”

“Huh?”

“Our code. It’s Brooklyn.”

“I like it.”

“Of course you do.” He pushed his chair back and stood. “Come on. I gotta help you shave your head.” He looked around the kitchen. “I’ll clean up then join you in the shower.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Click.

“It would be really nice of you’d be careful with the clippers against my skull,” Pablo said. “Stop taking pictures, put down the camera, and shave me already.”

Shane giggled. His lover had real aversion to taking his picture taken. Lucky for him, Shane ignored his protests. So far, he’d taken pictures of Pablo naked in the shower, while sleeping, even cooking. Now his lover sat on the floor between his knees. They both wore only boxers. Shane sat at the edge of the bed, electric clippers in hand as he prepared to shave Pablo’s head.

“You ready?” He grabbed Pablo’s chin and turned his face upward.

“I was born ready, son.”

“Yeah, whatever.” He flicked out his tongue, licking the tip of Pablo’s nose. “Let’s do this.”

The only thing cutting through the peaceful silence of their bedroom was the low hum of the clippers. Shane loved this time they shared when he took care of Pablo. He shaved him smooth, until his skull gleamed, until he damn near saw his face in his man's scalp, and until the clippers were hot from use.

He turned the machine off. Pablo turned around, kneeling, his face pressed to Shane's middle, arms around Shane's waist. Shane wiped him with a warm, wet towel then dropped the towel and ran his palms over Pablo's head.

A loud sigh reached his ears. Pablo loved having his scalp played with. So Shane did. He used his palms and his fingers, watching Pablo shiver. He kissed him in the middle of his head.

"There," he whispered. "I made you all pretty and shiny."

Pablo tilted his head up and kissed him, first on his chin then his nose, before coming back to his mouth. He caught Shane's bottom lip and bit him, hard enough to draw a gasp.

"Pretty and shiny like you like me," Pablo murmured. He pushed Shane backward on the bed and crawled up his body.

Shane spread his legs wide, cock growing harder every second. "Exactly like I like you."

## Chapter Six

“You owe me a ring.” Shane kissed Pablo’s shoulder then rubbed his nose on the same spot.

Pablo nodded. “Yeah, and that will be your welcome home present.” Their last night together. Only a few hours and Shane would be gone. He was doing his damndest not to dwell. Not to think, but shit wasn’t that easy. “You come back to me without a hair on your head out of place and you get your ring.”

Shane lay back against the pillows and took Pablo’s hand in his, holding it up and entangling their fingers. “Better be something expensive. And shiny. And expensive.”

“Got ya.” Pablo rolled toward him and pressed their bodies together. It wasn’t about sex, they’d been on a marathon sex session for the past few days. He was sore. Shane had to be sore. But he wanted their skin together. He wanted Shane’s body heat. He wanted Shane’s scent all over him, all over the sheets. “Three months without you next to me.” He didn’t mean to whine, and he hated it, but it couldn’t be helped.

“I know.”

They stared up at the ceiling in silence, and over in the corner the clock ticked, stealing away their time. Hours. Their life came down to hours. The thread of dread in Pablo’s gut remained stuck in place, never leaving. He wouldn’t voice them. Shane’s mind needed to be one hundred percent focused on his job.

“Don’t stay in the house, okay?” Shane didn’t look at him. “Go hang with the guys back in Brooklyn. Heather is gonna come poking around to make sure you’re all right. Don’t push her away.”

“I won’t.”

Shane paused then said softly, “If anything happens, they’ll call you. Before my parents or before Rich. They’ll call you, I made sure of it.”

“Shut up. Nothing’s going to happen.” But he couldn’t promise that, neither could Shane. “Come, put your head on my shoulder.” Shane did, and Pablo hugged him tight. They went back to staring at the ceiling.

“You gonna miss me?” Shane asked.

“Not really, nope.” There’d be no breathing until Shane was back where he belonged. He wouldn’t be able to function until Shane was back in his arms. “Well, maybe a little.”

“Uh-huh.” Shane kissed his ear, slid a palm over Pablo’s naked torso. “I’ll miss you. Every second, every minute. Every fucking day.”

Pablo pushed him away then tumbled them until he was on top of Shane, holding his lover’s head in both hand. “Then come back,” he rasped. “Come back to me, without a hair out of place, without a fucking scratch.” He swallowed, squeezed his eyes shut. His chest hurt. Too bad, too much. He wanted to cling to Shane and never let go. He wanted to chain him to the fucking bed. “Come back to me, pretty boy. Promise.”

Shane’s eyes were bright, glistening, but he smiled. “I promise.” He hugged Pablo to him, and they rolled again, lying side by side. “I love you.”

“You’re my breath.” Pablo trailed a finger down Shane’s nose to his bottom lip which he tugged. “Hurry back to me.”

And then there was nothing left, but soft touches and telling glances. Nothing left but the sleep he fought. The fog claimed him anyway and when his eyes snapped open again, his arms were empty. His insides were aching. His eyes were burning, his chest was heaving and he, he was dying.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shane had no problems getting back into his Johnny persona. He looked the part for sure. His teeth were all messed up, rotten. He hated that. They’d given him some scars and blotches on his face, but there wasn’t much they could do about his weight. Lucky for him his cover had him just re-entering society after a prison stint, so he had an excuse for not looking like a gaunt, stick figure.

He made his way to the usual spot, a local house everyone went to get high or make connections. If his luck held he’d see some familiar faces that could in turn get him in with Edgar Cahn. The two-story run down building was dark, but that wouldn’t be a deterrent to a seasoned user. Shane pulled his hood up over his head, stuck both hands in the front pockets of his ratty jeans and staggered up the walkway littered with people sitting and standing. He shouldered his way past and entered.

The stink hit him first. Hot, unwashed bodies in a confined space with no windows. Goddamn. He rocked back on his heels on the threshold then shook himself and walked in. Two steps and he tripped over someone.

A match flared, one lone orange flame illuminated nothing.

“Yo, who this?”

“It’s Johnny, man.” He added a needy whine to his voice and shifted from one foot to the next, never stopping. “I’m looking for Sammy. He here?”

“I don’t know no Johnny.”

“Aw, man.” He couldn’t tell for sure where the voice came from, but it wasn’t from the person he’d tripped over. “I’m just...I need some stuff, man. Where Sammy at?”

A lengthy pause ensued then the person spoke again. “Walk to your left. Five steps.”

Shane did, moving gingerly.

“Stop.”

He halted. The fuck was this, a Bond flick?

“Stairs are in front of you, take it to the top. Third door to your right.”

“Thanks, man.” Shane ran up the stairs. His eyes adjusted to the dark, but he still had trouble seeing two steps in front of him. Luckily, he knew the layout of the house from memory. When he reached the door he was looking for, Shane tapped on it twice then pushed it in. The small cardboard sized room was lit with a desk lamp. Two people occupied the tiny space, a female lying face first on a narrow cot, a hand hanging over the side. A man sat with his back to the cot, a needle in his left arm, a blissful smile on his face.

“Yo, Sammy.”

Sammy jerked upright, dislodging the needle. He blinked his eyelids as though they weighed a million pounds. His eyes, bloodshot, unfocused, widened when Shane pushed off his hood. “Johnny!” Sammy tried to stand, but wobbled and crashed into the opposite wall.

Shane rushed to his side, grabbing his bony shoulders. “Glad to see you alive, my friend.” The first time he’d done this, he’d wanted so bad to get Sammy out, but the guy

was a lifer and loyal to the people who fed his habit. Pretty quickly Shane had figured out there'd be no turning Sammy over to his side.

"Johnny." Sammy stared at him in wonder, his blue eyes all faded, dulled with the drug. "I can't believe you're back."

Shane flashed him a grin. "Those fuckers couldn't keep me locked up forever. Said I'd be back, didn't I?" He bumped Sammy's shoulder and the other man almost lost his balance.

"Yeah, you did, Johnny." Sammy flashed blackened teeth at him. "So what, you just got out? Looking for a little something?" He pointed to a balled up foil on the floor where he'd been sitting. "Got a lil something, I could share."

"Nah, not right now." Shane shook his head. "Got myself fixed proper once I hit town." He made a show of looking around. "Where you living at? I'm looking for a place to stay, and a way to make some money." He braced his back against the shut door. "Heard one of Pop's sons is running things, think he'll take me on?"

Sammy shrugged. "Dunno man, Edgar is...he's different. Know what I mean?"

Shane didn't, but he nodded anyway.

"He's not like Pop, man. Edgar's a new breed of fucked up."

"He got work?"

"Always, man. Always need someone to help with the cooking or selling." Sammy grinned. "Make some good money."

Shane bounced on the balls of his feet. "Get me in then, Sammy. Vouch for me, I need to make some money. Quick."

"Okay. Tomorrow." Sammy looked back at the woman on the bed. "You wanna crash at my place? It's not too far. My old woman's gonna be out for a bit, but when she's up she'll come over." He grinned down at the half naked body. "Hot, right?"

The woman was all bones, but Shane flashed him a thumbs up.

"Been a while since you had some pussy, right? You being in jail an' all." Sammy snickered. "Me and Rachel, we don't mind sharing."

Yeah, right. "Cool!"

"Come on, I'll buy us a slice on the way."

Shane followed Sammy out the door with a twist to his lips.

Edgar Cahn was a mountain of a man with long shaggy hair down to the middle of his back and a black bushy beard thick enough to hide things in. He regarded Shane with glacial blue eyes that never seemed to blink.

He'd followed Sammy to a cabin several miles out of town to meet with Edgar. Many people milled about the place and nearly everyone was armed with something heavy and lethal looking. They'd taken one look at Sammy and allowed him entry beyond the barbed wire fence, but Shane wasn't allowed in until Sammy relayed their entire history to the two guys at the fence. Even then, after he'd been waved in, he'd been stopped by the completely unflappable Edgar.

"I worked with your dad for a long time," Shane told him in his whiny Johnny voice. "Got locked up with him and went down for him because I refused to talk."

"Yet the first chance you get, you hightail it back here." It wasn't a question, but Edgar did raise an eyebrow so Shane figured he'd better answer.

"I need to make some money, quick fast, then I'm hitting the road." He smiled. "Got a girl waiting for me in Cali, just gotta get some paper together." He lost the smile and faced Edgar head on. "Listen, I have to stay out of trouble, I know this, but I also gotta live, and eat, feel me?"

The men around them snickered.

"All right. You're in, but on a trial basis." Edgar's eyes bored into him. "I'll be watching. I better like what I see."

Shane shuddered at the explicit threat in those words. Yeah, Edgar was so not his father.

He was put to work, and work he did. Helping to cook, bag and sell. Anything Edgar wanted done, he did. He made it a point not to come off too eager to please, but he worked hard. Avoiding the drugs was a feat in itself. He lived with Sammy and Rachel, and though they'd stopped asking him to play around with them in the bedroom, they never failed to offer up a needle or a smoke.

He'd become an expert at faking. And at night he laid on the floor in Sammy's living room, arms behind his head and thought of what and who he'd left behind. He made his weekly check ins with Jack, using the burner cell he'd taped to the back of Sammy's fridge. He didn't call Pablo, but he wanted to. He'd have to bite his tongue more than once to stop from begging Jack to check in on him, make sure he was okay.

That couldn't happen.

Weeks morphed into a month. He played his cool, gathered as much info as he could. Edgar didn't really put him in a position where he could see much, but that changed when he overheard Edgar speaking broken Spanish into his phone one day. Looked like the Mexican connection was real after all. On top of that, Shane had evidence of cooking, dealing and transporting over State lines. Everything was coming together and excitement built. Maybe he could end all this before the three months came around. Get back home to his man and their life sooner rather than later.

Sammy and Rachel woke him one bleary morning with a huge fight that left both bleeding and threatening to kill each other.

"Hey," he yelled at them from the floor. "Take that shit elsewhere. I'm tired."

Doors slammed, voices drifted away, and he settled back to sleep.

A noise jerked him back to wakefulness and he jumped upright. The front door rested next to him on the floor. Someone had kicked it in. He scrambled to his feet, hands up as Edgar and three of his men barged in, guns drawn.

"What the hell?" Shane moved backward. "What's going on?"

"Where's Sammy?" Edgar motioned for one of the men to search the place.

"He's not here." He kept his voice steady, despite his quivering insides. "He and Rachel got in a fight and I told them take it outside. Haven't seen them since."

"He's not here." The man who'd been searching came back. "But look what I found." He held up a paper bag, money poking out the top.

Shane frowned. "What-what's that?"

Edgar turned those cold eyes on him. "Sammy's been stealing from me." He cocked his head. "You and him are tight. You been stealing from me, too?"

"What?" Shane balked. "No way!" What the fuck did Sammy do? Christ!

"Find Sammy and bring him to me." Edgar told one of the guys standing next to him. The man scurried off and Edgar jerked his chin in Shane's direction. "Take him."

"No. I'm not involved—" A sharp pain exploded in the back of his skull and he dropped to his knees. Another blow to his temple and he blacked out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pablo sat on a bench in the playground, watching Heather push Sophia on the swings. The woman had made it her personal mission to be all over him since the day Shane left. He argued with her and pouted, but he welcomed it. Welcomed the distraction and the time he spent with Sophia.

He'd gone back to New York, spent some time with Mateo and the guys, but he couldn't stay long. He's missed his bed, missed hugging Shane's pillow, but when he got back, he stayed outside on the couch. He couldn't bring himself to sleep in their bed. That was hard. Doing laundry was hard. He only had his clothes to wash, as if he lived alone, as if he didn't have someone he dreamed about every night.

The dreams, they weren't good. Nothing about them was good. All he had was blood, pain, and things he never wished to see associated with Shane. He had no idea what was happening.

There'd been no contact.

He clenched his hands in his lap. He didn't know how people did this shit.

"Hi."

He looked up. A woman stood there, auburn hair, tank and tight jeans accentuating the curves, all smiles and pretty brown eyes twinkling for him. "Hi."

She sat next to him. He froze. Was she coming on to him?

"Cleopatra is mine." She pointed to a little girl with dark pigtails and a yellow jumper-thingie going down the slide. "Which one is yours?" she asked.

"Uh, I'm with Heather and Sophia."

"Ah." She flashed a predatory smile. "I don't remember Heather mentioning a brother."

"I'm not."

She licked her lips and shifted closer. What the fuck? She eyed him like a piece of meat.

"Back off, Marilyn." Heather appeared like a guardian angel, thank fuck. "He's engaged."

Marilynn frowned. "I thought your sister just got married?"

Heather grinned. "She did." Jerking a thumb at Pablo, she said, "J.P. here is engaged to Rich's brother. You know, the one you tried to hit on last year?"

“Damn.” Marilyn scowled. “Such a waste.” She scurried away with a swish of her hips.

“Thank you.” Pablo grabbed Heather’s hand and kissed it. “Chick was starting to make my skin crawl.”

They laughed together then Heather broke off and stared at him. “Good to see you smiling. You haven’t done that in a while.”

Pablo looked away and she touched his shoulder.

“You’re lost without him, aren’t you?”

He nodded and blew out a breath. “Fuck. So lost.”

“Poor thing.” She hugged him close. “Bright side is, tomorrow we go shopping for rings. That should perk you right up.” She released him and rubbed her hands together. “I can’t wait.”

“You do realize the ring isn’t for you, right?”

“Oh, boo.” She stuck out her tongue.

He smiled.

After he dropped Heather and Sophia back at home, he made his way to the apartment. He immediately regretted having Mateo and the guys join him. Those bastards were loud. He heard them all the way by the elevators. Barging inside, he slammed the door.

“There better still be pizza left.” He dropped his keys on the table. “And beer.” Tugging off his t-shirt, he headed to the bathroom. “And keep your fucking voices down, this ain’t Brooklyn. You’re not on the block.”

“Aw, c’mon, boss.”

He flipped off Reggie over his shoulder.

Freshly showered, he sat in the kitchen eating a cold slice and downing a much needed beer, trying to drown out the guys’ trash talking as they played video games. A knock came on the door, almost muted by the noise. He shook his head and went to answer it.

He stared at the man in the open doorway. “Jackie boy, to what do I owe this surprise visit?” Despite his flippant words, his heart raced and his gut churned.

Jack looked over his shoulder. “Can I come in?”

“Sure.” Pablo stepped aside and waved him in. He closed the door and stepped around Jack, giving the agent his full attention. The guys didn’t seem to notice they had a visitor.

“Um.” Jack shifted his weight from right foot to left and licked his lips. “We’ve lost contact with Shane.”

Pablo inhaled. And he held that breath, held it until his lungs burned then he let it out with a loud *woosh*. “Repeat that?”

“He hasn’t checked in with me in almost a month and—”

Pablo punched him, on the jaw, and when Jack stumbled back, Pablo grabbed him by the neck and punched him again. Jack fell and Pablo went with him, punching him, pounding his face. Something cracked, and blood, pretty soon blood was everywhere, but his arm wasn’t tired so he continued, wet smacks of his fists against Jack’s face.

Someone grabbed him, yanked him off, but he fought them and lunged at Jack again. Hands red and slick, he grabbed Jack’s gun, released it from its holder and brought it to the agent’s temple. “Did you think your gun would protect you from me when you tell me you lost him?” He must be screaming, but he couldn’t tell. His throat, it hurt, but he couldn’t care. He placed a slippery finger on the trigger.

“What the fuck?” Mateo was extra loud in his ear. “What’s going on?”

Pablo shrugged off whoever held him and crawled atop Jack’s body. The man was curled into a bloodied ball, Pablo couldn’t make out his face clearly, but he saw Jack’s eyes and he knew the other man knew, he was about to die.

“Tell me, Jack,” he whispered. He pressed the gun to Jack’s head, watched it shake. “Tell me how you lost Shane. Say it again, and watch me end you.”

## Chapter Seven

“Boss, we can’t kill him.” Mateo grabbed Pablo by his shoulder, almost yanking them out of joint.

Pablo ignored him, all he saw was red and he wanted to create more of it, so he grabbed Jack by the throat and squeezed. The agent’s eyes bulged, but Jack fought back, legs kicking out, body twisting as he tried to get away. Pablo kned him in the stomach, right before someone pulled him off. He stumbled upright and whirled to deal with whoever denied him his due.

Reggie stood there and he didn’t flinch when Pablo glared at him. “Come on, boss. You know we can’t let you kill him.”

“He lost him!” Pablo exploded. “A fucking month. A fucking month.” A clacking noise echoed with his words, but he couldn’t place it. “He lost Shane and he waits a whole month to tell me?” That son of a bitch had to die.

“What?” Mateo grabbed Jack by the front of his suit and pulled him upright. The agent staggered. “That true? Shane is MIA?”

Blood dripped from Jack’s forehead, nose and mouth, messing up his once-pristine suit. Pablo couldn’t look at him without wanting to lunge, to choke him to death.

“Bring him inside,” he instructed Mateo. “Close the door.” When that was done, he approached Jack where he sat in the kitchen, blood dripping everywhere. “One last time, Jack. One last chance to explain yourself.”

Jack looked up at him with swollen eyes. “Fuck you. Don’t think I won’t be pressing charges, getting your homicidal ass locked up.”

Now that right there was an example of a fool with no sense of self-preservation. Pablo grabbed him by the hair on the top of his head, fisting it hard when he jerked Jack’s head back. “That implies you’ll be leaving here alive.” He released him, taking great pleasure in the way Jack winched. “Now, start talking.”

“There’s nothing to fucking tell,” Jack spat at him. “One week he called, checked in as scheduled, and the next he didn’t. I waited until the following week and when he didn’t make contact, I sent someone in.”

“And?” That was Mateo. Because Pablo wasn’t up to dealing civilly with Jack, at all.

“And nothing.” Jack’s shoulder moved. “No signs of Shane, of him ever being there. None.”

At those words, Pablo spun away. He couldn’t fucking see straight. His entire body hurt, as though someone had landed a full body shot. He bunched his fists, fighting the need to do violence. He needed to stay calm. He needed to focus.

Turning back to the men, he barked orders. “Teo, get stuff ready. We’re heading out. Reggie, you and Freddo clean this place up.” He faced Jack where he sat there, his head lolling to the side. “I warned you before, but you chose to ignore that warning. You’d better hope Shane is okay and unhurt, because if he’s not,” he shook his head with a small, bitter laugh, “if he’s not, Jack, then you’re going to die. I’ll use my bare hands, and I’ll do it buck-ass nekkid. That way I can swim in your fucking blood. That is a promise and I’ve never broken one yet.”

He walked out the room, pulling his cell phone from his pocket. In their bedroom, the room he shared and slept with his lover, he sank down on the bed and tried dialing numbers, but his fingers, they refused to work. His eyes blurred and he couldn’t make out shit on the screen. This wasn’t the time to fall apart, but his body wasn’t listening, or cooperating.

He finally got into his contacts and tapped the number he wanted then put the phone to his ear when the call connected. The clacking sound was there again, annoyingly loud.

“Mr. Castillo, what a surprise.”

“I need your help.” He didn’t have it in him to make small talk with Syren Rua, not then.

For his part, Syren sobered quickly. “Name it.”

“I’m in Atlanta, Georgia.” He touched a trembling hand to his forehead. “I need—I need a plane to take me to Missouri. Like yesterday. I’ll have weapons and I don’t want anyone fucking with me.”

“Okay. Hold on.” Syren went silent, but in the background Pablo had no trouble making out the sounds of kids screaming, laughing.

He frowned at that.

“All right,” Syren spoke in his ear. “My pilot should be available in about three hours. That good for you?”

Pablo nodded. “It works.”

“I’ll call you with where he wants to meet.” Syren paused. “Care to tell me what’s going on?”

“Shane’s been undercover,” Pablo rasped. “Turns out he’s been missing for almost a month, and no one felt the need to share that with me until today.”

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

So was Pablo. “Yeah.”

“Hey,” Syren said. “Take a deep breath, control yourself. I know you want to head out and start hurting people like you’re hurting, but you need to be focused on him. You get me?”

Pablo swallowed. “Yeah.”

“Good. Let me know if you need anything. I mean it, anything. Don’t hesitate.”

“Thanks.”

“Castillo, I can tell you’re barely holding on. Take care, man.” He ended the call and Pablo jumped to his feet, going to stand at the one window in the bedroom.

He needed to get control, stay focused, he knew that, but shit was more easily said than done. The man he loved was...he didn’t even know what and Pablo was just standing there. Waiting.

“Boss, you okay?”

He spun around at Mateo’s query. “Shane is missing, Teo. Has been for a month, so no.” He shook his head. “I’m not okay and I won’t be, until I have him back ali—” The word froze on his tongue and he choked. *Alive*. He completed it in his mind.

“He’ll be fine,” Mateo insisted. “Your boy isn’t leaving you. He’s too hard-headed and hooked on you.” His lips twisted into a grin. “He won’t leave you.”

“He might not have a choice.” The words, man, they hurt. So bad.

“Boss.”

Fuck, he shook. He was coming apart. He inhaled and shifted, and found himself in Mateo’s arms, face buried in his chest. Just for a second, but in that time he realized the annoying clacking sound he’d been hearing was his teeth, chattering.

He released Mateo and stepped back. “We’ve got a plane to take us to Missouri, make sure everything is in place.”

“And Jack?”

“He comes with us.” Pablo cleared his throat. “I want his phone and whatever else he has in his pockets.”

“Done. What are you going to do?”

“I need to call Shane’s brother.” He dreaded that call. Dreaded it.

Mateo lifted an eyebrow. “Is that a good idea? I mean, we don’t even know what the hell is going on.”

“No, but I was supposed to meet up with Heather tomorrow. I need to tell her that’s off and I won’t keep them in the dark, not like Jack did to me.”

“Okay.” Mateo patted him on the back and walked out. Pablo made sure the door was locked then he crawled onto the bed, sneakers on, even though Shane hated that. He lay atop the covers, head propped against the headboard, ankles crossed as he dialed Heather.

“Hey, J.P.,” she greeted him. “What’s up?”

Pablo swallowed. “Is Rich home yet?”

“He’s right here.” Heather paused. “What it is?”

Fuck. He needed to get this done before he lost his nerve. “Put him on the phone, Heather. Now.”

Muffled voices reached him then Rich came on. “J.P. What’s going on?”

He took a deep breath. “I learned a little while ago that Shane has been missing for a month.”

“What?”

He held the phone away when Rich exploded in his ear.

“What the fuck are you talking about? Missing how?”

“Jack says he hasn’t checked in and whoever they sent in to make contact with him found no signs of him.”

“No signs.” Rich repeated the words in a heavy whisper. “What...Is he—”

“I don’t know.” Pablo cut him off before Rich could finish that sentence. “I’m headed out there to find answers. I will find answers, Rich.”

“Oh, God.” Rich choked. “Jesus, he can’t be.”

“He’s not. He’s not.” Pablo pinched the bridge of his nose. “I wanted you to know before I head out. I’ll call you when I have something.”

“Yes, please.” Rich inhaled. “How are you holding up?”

Holding up. Pablo wanted to laugh. “I’m not.”

“Bring him home. Please.”

“I will. I promise.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The days sort of all ran together. Shane didn’t know how much time had passed. He did know he had to find a way to get out. Getting Elijah to tell him the truth behind why he’d shackled Shane and locked him inside a bomb shelter was hard. The man hadn’t come to visit in a while, and when he did come around, he spoke about Shane to his men, never directly to his captive.

Sammy and his girlfriend were dead, shot point blank in the head by Elijah’s goons once Sammy admitted to stealing from Elijah. The confession hadn’t been long in coming. Sammy and Rachel had been rounded up and locked up right beside Shane. He’d begged Sammy not to confess, but at the promise of having to go without his drugs, Sammy had ‘fessed up quick. Seconds later he was sprawled out on the floor, his brain matter splattered all over Shane’s face and clothes.

Elijah wanted Shane to confess to being in on Sammy’s thievery. If he thought that would save him from a bullet between the eyes, Shane would have already done it. As it were, he’d seen what confessing brought on, so he bit his tongue and refused to give Elijah any excuse. That didn’t mean he was in the all clear. His skin was a permanent shade of black and blue from all the beatings, and he had a lump in the back of his head from the butt of a gun. They only fed him when they felt like it, so days would pass before Shane anything in his mouth beside his own saliva. Forget a bathroom, he did his business right where he laid.

What he feared were the drugs. As he was supposed to be a junkie, being locked up like he was, going so long without meant he should be going through withdrawals. He did his best to mimic the symptoms, the shakes and the sweats. He didn’t have to fake the nightmares, and enough kicks and stomps to his midsection and kidneys took care of the throwing up part. Still, he feared they’d come after him with a needle and he’d be helpless. That couldn’t happen.

Ever.

By now, Jack should know he'd been compromised. Would he send in backup or wait it out? Shane didn't know, he couldn't predict Jack right then. He wondered if Pablo knew he'd stopped checking in.

Sprawled out on his back, he stared up at nothing. He had to fight almost every day, since the guys who took turns watching him also wanted to have fun, so they'd poke him, taunt him, until he lashed out. He had to fight and he would, because the alternative would be to give up and give in, and he could never do that to the man waiting for him to come back home. They'd been through too much.

Sometimes, he'd allow the morose thoughts to creep in, especially when he got too weak and hungry to lift his head, when all he could do was watch as the heavy boots descended on his face. The morose thoughts crept in then, and he'd wonder how he'd ever get out, how anyone would find him, and if they would before Elijah got his wish and killed him.

"Well. Well. Someone's up." One of the men, Kenneth, squatted next to Shane and cupped his cheek. "You're up, boyo." He sat back and held up a bag. "I brought you a surprise." He pulled a burger from the bag, along with a needle. "Which would you prefer, your fix or food?"

Kenneth was especially cruel, one of the guys who went out of his way to fuck with Shane. Trying to tempt him with drugs. Fucker. Still Shane played his part, letting his gaze linger on the needle, licking his lips before he answered.

"Food."

That got him a lift of Kenneth's eyebrow, but he didn't care. He opened his mouth when Kenneth held the food out to him and bit into it then chewed. The sound of his stomach drowned out any other noise in the room for a while.

But it didn't hide the sound of a phone ringing. Shane tensed. Kenneth rose to his feet and pulled the phone from his jeans pocket.

A phone. Shane needed to get that phone.

"Yeah." Kenneth listened then nodded. "I fed him like you said." He paused. "Uh-huh. Okay. Bye." He ended the call and pushed the phone back into his back pocket. "Elijah is coming over to pay you a visit." He wrinkled his nose. "Gotta get you cleaned up."

Shane waited until Kenneth got to his knees next to him then he kicked out. His feet and hands were shackled, but he had some leeway and he used it, catching Kenneth in the chest. The other man went toppling backward. Shane gritted his teeth and waited. Not for long.

Kenneth launched himself at Shane, straddling his chest as he pummeled him with stinging blows to his face and chest. “Son of a bitch, I feed you and this is how you repay me?”

Shane didn’t have much time. He writhed, lifting his knees, trying to reach the phone in Kenneth’s pocket. He grunted with every blow, and blood flowed freely from all the reopened cuts on his face. They hurt. God, did they hurt, but he couldn’t let that stop him. He twisted to the right and the phone fell out onto the floor. He yanked on the chains, rattling them to mask the sound, then he rolled, using his body to cover it. The move took Kenneth with him, and the other man delivered one last punch to Shane’s face before he got to his feet.

“Fucker.” He kicked Shane.

He barely saw out of his eyes, but he heard Kenneth move. Then something wet splashed on his cheek. Spit.

He held himself still until Kenneth shuffled away. When blessed silence surrounded him again, Shane used his shoulder to try and wipe the spit away. He had the phone. He had no problems scooping up the phone with his bound hands, but he could hardly see anything when he brought it up to his face.

His hands trembled and his breath came quick and harsh as he dialed. Took longer than he expected, way longer than he had, but he did it and used his chin to hit the speaker button.

*Please. Please. Please.* The phone rang and rang...and rang. *Please.* His face burned again and he realized he’d begun crying. Everything hurt. Everything. But not as much as that phone as it kept on ringing.

“Yeah. Who this?”

*Oh, God.* He choked and opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

“Hello? Who’s this?”

“Br-Brook-Brooklyn.”

Footsteps echoed and drew closer.

“Shane?”

He didn't hear his voice. All he heard was the footsteps and the voice on the phone. His lips moved, he knew that because they hurt like fuck, but he didn't know if he had a voice to speak.

“Brooklyn. Brooklyn.”

“The fucker took my phone!”

Someone grabbed him. He grunted and fought back.

“Shane! Shane, talk to me. Tell me—”

That voice. It blinded him to everything else, so he didn't see the gun, but he felt the white-hot pain as the bullet tore through him.

Brooklyn.

\* \* \* \* \*

His phone rang as he climbed the plane Syren had provided. Pablo paused behind Mateo and checked the caller ID. Not a number he recognized.

“Yeah. Who this?” He heard something, like a muted choking, but nothing else.

“Hello? Who's this?”

“Br-Brook-Brooklyn.” The stammered words, low and husky and filled with pain stopped his heart.

“Shane?” He must have yelled his lover's name, because everyone froze.

“Brooklyn. Brooklyn.”

*Oh, God. Shane.* Someone yelled in the background, angry words. Shane grunted as though in pain. “Shane!” Someone touched his shoulder and Pablo didn't look up, he just hung on to the arm holding him. “Shane, talk to me. Tell me—”

The blast of a gunshot stopped his words, ended the call. The dial tone buzzed in his ear and Pablo collapsed.

## Chapter Eight

His knees hurt. He should get up off the ground. Move. Something. He would. If he could. Pablo clenched the phone in his hand and brought it to his mouth, to stifle any sound he would make. He wanted to make sounds. Only somehow they weren't coming out. Everything remained clogged in his throat.

"Boss." Mateo squatted in front of him, somber eyes meeting his. "Talk to me."

What was there to say? He had nothing to say. "I'm okay." He rose to his feet, unsteady, but he remained standing. He pushed everything down. He needed a clear head. He needed to focus and he couldn't, not if he kept replaying that phone call in his mind. He walked up the stairs and into the plane, ignoring the eyes on him. After he buckled himself in opposite Jack, Pablo spoke.

"Teo, make sure we have wheels when we land." Pablo kept his eyes on Jack. The agent's gaze was wary, as it should be.

"You're kidnapping a federal officer. Do you know that?"

Pablo smiled at Jack. "Hold on to your seat, Jackie boy. I'm not even done yet." He tossed his phone at Jack. "Shane just called me from the number on there." He jerked his chin. "You need to get your people on that, I want to know who the phone belongs to. Now."

"He called you?" Jack's eyes went wide. "Why? What did he say?"

"Jack." Pablo shook his head at the hurt shadowing Jack's beat up face. "You don't get it, do you?" He didn't wait around for an answer. "The number on there, Jack. Get your people to find out who it belongs to. They shot Shane." Damn, saying those words out loud...

Jack froze, the fear plain on his face. "Fine, but I'll need my phone." He held out his hand.

Pablo nodded at Mateo, who handed over the agent's cell.

"Jack, I'm sure I don't have to tell you how upset I would be if you did anything to fuck with this buzz I've got going."

Jack rolled his eyes and proceeded to make the call. Pablo listened for a while then tuned him out. He went back to the phone call. Even though he shouldn't. The pain in Shane's voice. He'd heard that. The gun shot. He'd heard that. His heart squeezed. It

was a painful thing, not knowing. His mind went in some crazy places, veered out into crazy directions, going over all the things that could be happening to Shane. He refused to think Shane was dead. He'd know. He'd feel it.

He would.

"Boss," Mateo murmured. "What's going on?"

The plane began moving. Pablo folded his hands in his lap and stared out the window to his left as the scenery flew by. "He risked it all, for me," he said. "He found a way to contact me and they shot him."

Mateo grabbed his shoulder. "You heard?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"I have a name," Jack spoke up. "Kenneth Smalls." He rattled off an address. "He's familiar, one of Edgar Cahn's workers."

Pablo nodded. "Tell me about Edgar. Everything."

Jack shrugged. "He's new school. Doesn't care about much but the money. Unlike his father, he fully embraces violence and uses that to do his talking for him. He's mostly feared by the guys in that area, which I think was his goal."

"Personal life?" Pablo asked.

"He's got a fiancée, they've been together for a while. I think she's pregnant with their first child. He's not too close with his siblings," Jack continued. "They don't care for how he does business, but no one's trying to stop him."

"I want the fiancée." Pablo leaned forward. "You boys got eyes on her?"

Jack gaped at him. "Yeah, but—"

"There really aren't any butts here, Jackie boy. His first child isn't something someone like Edgar takes lightly." He sat back, a slow grin spreading. "That's something I can, and will, exploit."

Jack cocked his head to the side, disgust in his eyes. "You're rethinking how you do business now? Going after women and children?"

"Forget what you know about my business, Jack. All that shit goes out the window when Shane's life is on the line, because see," he leaned forward again, "unlike you, there's nothing I wouldn't do. There's not a line I wouldn't cross. Morality goes out the window, Jack. It's an albatross around your neck, and it gets in the way when you're trying to make shit happen."

Jack shook his head. "Let us handle it, we know all the players."

"Then I'll learn them." Pablo crossed his legs and put a finger on his chin. "Riddle me this, Jack: Shane had one chance, one shot at a phone call. Why did he call me and not you?"

Jack looked away, lips pressed in a hard, thin line, but Pablo didn't let him off with that pussy move.

"Because he knows me, and he knows shit like rules and morality will never apply. Because he knows I would never fuck with his life, or put anything before him. Because he knows selfishness and jealousy, like that shit eating away at you, gets people killed. And because he knows I would die for him. Happily. Without reservation, without a second thought, but not before making sure I do the damage that I do."

"I love Shane," Jack whispered. "You'll jump at any chance to break the law."

"Maybe. The fact remains, I got this, and Shane knows it." He turned to Mateo. "Get Edgar's fiancée's info from Jackie boy, I want her. She's my bargaining chip and my way through the door." He sat back. "First though, we meet with this Kenneth character." And spill some blood. Naturally that shit went without saying.

\* \* \* \* \*

It appeared Jack got over his pouting fast, because two black SUVs met the men as they got off the plane at a deserted airstrip in the late dusk. Pablo didn't ask questions, Jack didn't offer any.

"Reggie, you and Freddo go with Jackie boy. Fine me Edgar's fiancée."

"Yes, boss."

Pablo pulled Jack to the side. "You working with me, Jack?"

Jack's jaw ticked. "I want Shane back, safe and sound. If that's your objective as well, then we're on the same page. For now."

Pablo had to smile. "Jack, there's no *if*, and know this, when it comes to Shane, we'll never be on the same page." He tuned to the second SUV. "Let me know when you have the fiancée." Without waiting for a reply, he hopped into the vehicle.

Mateo put Kenneth's address into the GPS and they were off.

"What's the plan?" Mateo asked.

What plan? "Spill blood. Get answers."

Mateo chuckled softly. "Sounds good."

In twenty minutes, they were at their location. Kenneth Smalls lived above an electronics repair shop in a rundown neighborhood. Mateo parked across the street. An unlocked gate at a side entrance provided a quick and easy entrance. Pablo had been ready to pick locks and blast through doors.

Understated worked too.

A dark and filthy hallway led to the lone apartment upstairs. Pablo pulled his Glock, Mateo did the same. He tried the door knob. Locked. Pablo stepped back, allowing Mateo to pick the flimsy lock. It took less than ten seconds.

The door swung open with a low creak. Pablo went in first, nose wrinkling at the foul smell that greeted him. “Smells like unwashed ass up in here,” he whispered.

Mateo snickered behind him.

Apartment was too strong a word for the tiny place. The men stood in room that appeared to serve as living room, dining room and kitchen. Loud snores reached Pablo’s ears and he turned in direction of the sound, Mateo on his heels.

He found himself in a bedroom and if he had to guess in the low light, the man on the bed could only be Kenneth Smalls. Pablo smiled.

Sometimes this shit was too easy.

He flicked on the light.

Kenneth jumped upright. “What?” His eyes bulged. “Who—”

“Am I?” Pablo sat next to him on the bed. “No one you know, but we do have a mutual acquaintance.”

Kenneth frowned. “Huh?”

Ah. Big words. “Someone called me from your phone, Kenneth. Someone I’d like very much to find.”

“Hey man, I don’t know what—”

Pablo swung on him, smashing the gun into Kenneth’s jaw.

“Ah, God!” Kenneth grabbed his face as blood ran down between his fingers.

“I’m usually a patient man, Kenneth. Not now. Not today.” He grabbed a fistful of Kenneth’s hair, thankful for the gloves he wore. “Your boss is holding someone, a man named Johnny.”

Edgar’s eyes went wider still.

“I want to know where Edgar has him, and where Edgar is now.”

Tears mixed with the snot running down Kenneth's face. "I just did my job, man." His body shook. "I just do my job."

"Then you should have been prepared for the consequences." Pablo pinched either side of Kenneth's face and when the man's mouth opened, he pushed the gun inside. "Is he still alive?" he asked. "Is Johnny still alive?"

Kenneth whimpered. His tears fell harder.

"Nod if that's a yes."

Kenneth nodded slowly.

Pablo pulled out the gun. "Did you shoot him?"

Kenneth shook, his teeth clicking. "Y-yes," he stammered. "B-but Edgar took-took out the bullet." He swallowed then rushed on, "He patched him up. Fi-fixed up his side."

Pablo frowned. "Why would he do that?"

Kenneth's gaze darted all over the place and he slumped in on himself. "He's-he said he's selling him. To the uh, Mexicans."

"You don't say." Pablo got to his feet. "Where's Edgar now?"

"Please, you're not—" Kenneth's eyes pleaded with him. "Don't kill me."

"Where's Edgar?"

"At the cabin where he does business. The guy is there. Johnny."

Pablo took a deep breath. He needed to get out of there. As he screwed on the silencer, he spoke softly. "I wish I had more time to spend on you, Kenneth. Show you just how much you fucked up, but I can't." Shane took precedence. All the time.

"No. No." Kenneth clasped his hands together, like he was praying.

Well, that wasn't going to help. Not one bit. Pablo trained the gun between his eyes and squeezed the trigger. Once. Kenneth fell back against his pillow, wide eyes staring up into nothing.

*Br-Brook-Brooklyn.*

Pablo squeezed the trigger again. And again. Until Mateo grabbed his hand and pulled him away.

"Save some of those bullets for where we're headed next."

Mateo's phone rang as they got back in the SUV. He answered and spoke to Reggie then ended the call. "They have the fiancée. Jack used his badge, made it all official."

“At least he’s good for something.”

Mateo paused. “He’s scared for Shane, too. He tries to hide it, but I see it.”

Pablo grunted. He didn’t want to think about Jack. He closed his eyes, formulating his plan, because he’d need one. “Call back Reggie. We need to meet up, get some things in place.”

Mateo glanced at him. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking Edgar is about to get his.”

The fiancée’s pregnant belly was huge. Her brown eyes were wide and wet, fear written all over her pale face. They’d all gathered about a mile away from Edgar’s cabin. Pablo voiced his plans.

“My superiors know I’m here,” Jack said.

Pablo ignored him. Jack and his superiors didn’t factor into his thought process one bit. Mateo, Reggie, and Freddo had their directives and they fanned out to get into position. Jack stayed in one of the SUVs, and Pablo got into the other with Edgar’s woman.

She remained quiet when he dug into her purse and pulled out her phone.

He found Edgar’s number in the recently called log and dialed. The phone rang. Pablo drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

“Dawna, baby, are you okay?”

From the sound of love and worry in Edgar’s voice, Pablo had made the right call. “This isn’t Dawna, but you can have her. If I get what I want.”

He counted to six before Edgar asked, “Who is this?”

“Someone who has no problems hurting pretty Dawna and the baby she carries, trust me.”

Dawna sniffled beside him.

He had to harden himself against those sounds. Women and children had always been off his radar, exempt from the violence, but this wasn’t the usual. This was war, he fought for Shane’s life, and he’d use anything and anyone he had to.

“What do you want?”

“It’s funny you should ask that. Tell him what I want, Dawna.” He held up the phone and pressed the speaker button.

“Johnny,” she cried. “He wants Johnny.”

Pablo snatched the phone away and put it back to his ear. “You heard the woman. I want Johnny. You want Dawna.”

He listened to Edgar’s heavy breathing. “Fine. Where and when?”

“Coincidentally, I’m about two minutes from your cabin.” He smiled when Edgar swore. “Make sure no one stops me when I come through that gate.” He ended the call.

“I thought you guys were the cops.” Dawna turned to him. “That other guy showed me a badge, but you’re not cops, are you?”

“Who me?” Pablo laughed. “I am not the police, Dawna. Don’t think for one second that I have scruples, or rules that need to be followed, because you’ll be disappointed.”

She bent forward, dark hair falling into her face as she covered her mouth with a hand and cried.

The gate to Edgar’s cabin was open when he approached, so Pablo drove through. He didn’t see the men Jack claimed Edgar had manning the gates and surrounding areas. Mateo and the rest must have already gotten set up. The place was quiet. He drove straight up to the cabin’s front door then leaned over and opened Dawna’s door. She got out, carefully and slowly with the belly, and he followed, using her as a shield.

He took her arm, put his gun to her temple, and led her up the few rickety steps. The door swung open as he got closer. He pushed Dawna through first then stepped inside. Edgar—he assumed the mountain of a man glaring at him was Edgar—stood when he approached. As did the three other men with him, their guns pointed at Pablo.

Pablo braked and moved to the side, keeping Dawna with him.

“Who are you?” Edgar asked.

“No one important.”

“He’s not the cops, Edgar.” Dawna would not stop with the tears. “He’s not police.”

Edgar frowned.

“Where is he?” Pablo asked softly. He wanted to yell, demand Edgar bring him Shane, but that would show his hand, show how much he cared. “Bring him here.”

Edgar motioned to one of the men flanking him and he scooted off.

“You messed up, my friend,” Edgar said. “Taking my fiancée, bringing her here.” He shook his head, blue eyes promising violence. “I don’t know who you are, but you messed up big time.”

“You think so?”

Footsteps sounded, drew closer, and Pablo stooped breathing. Two men came into view, one holding the other upright with a knife to his throat. Pablo stared.

Shane was skinny. Scary skinny, and his face was unrecognizable. Swollen. Cuts. Bruises. He couldn’t tell if Shane’s eyes were open or not, they were that swollen. His clothes were in tatters, caked with dirt and blood. Part of his t-shirt had been ripped at the midsection and Pablo made out the bandage at Shane’s side, brown with dirt and dried blood.

His hands, Pablo’s hands trembled where he held Dawna. He wanted to rush to Shane, hold him tight, but he couldn’t.

“You have him,” Edgar barked. “Let Dawna go.”

Up until that point, Shane hadn’t made any movements, but at Edgar’s voice he tensed then shifted with a painful groan. Pablo stared at him, ignoring Edgar.

“J.P.”

The surprise in his lover’s voice. The hope, and the relief. Pablo wanted to weep. “Hey there, pretty boy.”

Shane’s cut lips trembled. Sweat left tracks in the dirt caked on his face. “You came,” Shane whispered. “You came.”

Pablo’s chest hurt like a motherfucker, but he kept his face impassive. “Did you doubt that I would? Did you think I wouldn’t come whenever you called?”

“You came.” Shane’s voice broke.

“Always. I will always come.”

Edgar looked from Shane to Pablo. “What’s going on?”

“It appears that you made the one move guaranteed to bring a war to your doorstep. A stupid move.” He couldn’t contain the anger, he shook with it.

Edgar frowned. “A war with you? I don’t even know who you are.”

“That’s about to change, isn’t it?”

“They’re lovers,” Dawna piped up. “Can’t you see that?”

“Like homos?” The guy holding Shane asked in disgust.

Pablo eyed him. He'd die first.

"J.P." Shane lifted a hand, or tried to, because it seemed to take everything. He let it fall back to his side, limp. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Don't—" Pablo shook his head. "Don't apologize, Shane. Don't. Did you think I'd let them take you from me? You made promises to me," he said softly, "I'm holding you to them."

"Enough of this shit. Kill them." Edgar yelled the words and took a step forward.

A low ping sounded then Edgar froze and sank slowly to the floor. More pings and men started dropping. Pablo dragged a screaming Dawna to the corner, bending low.

"You move, I kill you," he snapped at her. She curled in on herself, but he made sure she was out of the line of fire before he went to Shane. The guy who'd been holding him laid crookedly, a bullet in his forehead. He wanted to be the one to deal with Edgar, but he had to make Shane priority.

Thank God for Mateo and the rest of them. Footsteps pounded behind him, but he ignored them, grabbing Shane.

"Shane. Shane."

Shane felt so fragile in his hands. His eyelids flickered. Pablo didn't see any fresh wounds on him, but something was wrong. He could tell.

"J.P."

"Shane, tell me what's wrong." He cradled Shane's head in his hands. In the background he heard Jack's voice, calling for an ambulance.

"Drugs," Shane's voice was so weak. Thready.

Oh, God. Please. "No." The word was agony.

"They shot me up before they brought me to you." Shane lifted a hand and cupped Pablo's cheek. His fingers were cold and they shook.

Like Pablo shook.

"I don't feel—" Shane leaned to the side and threw up. His body fell backwards, out of Pablo's hands.

"Shane!"

Shane stared up at him. "I'm sorry." Tears leaked from his eyes.

“Don’t. Don’t fucking be sorry. Stay with me.” Pablo grabbed his face. “Stay with me.”

Shane spasmed and his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Ambulance!” Pablo yelled over his shoulder. “Where is the fucking ambulance?”

“On its way.” Jack’s face was wet.

“Shane, the ambulance is coming.” Pablo spoke to the man in his arms. “You’ll be better soon.” Water dripped onto Shane’s face from above. Pablo frowned, but he couldn’t take his eyes off his lover. He lay there so still. “You’ll be better in no time.” There went the water, dripping onto Shane’s cheek. Pablo wiped it away. “Just...stay with me. You promised me a wedding. You promised children and a lifetime, Shane. I’m holding you to it.”

“Don’t cry,” Shane’s soft voice echoed. “Don’t cry.”

He touched Pablo’s face and he realized then that the water was actually his tears. Falling fast.

“Sir, let us help.” Someone touched him, tried to take Shane, and Pablo fought them until he noticed the EMT uniforms. Three men lifted Shane and placed him on a stretching, while putting a mask over his face, and—

Pablo looked away.

“We gotta take him in, now!”

He rushed after the men carrying Shane out the cabin. “I’m coming with him.”

“Sir—”

“I’m his partner. I’m his lover. I’m his fiancé and I. Am. Coming.” He climbed up into the back of the ambulance before anyone else could voice their useless opinion. He sank to his knees beside Shane, holding his hand, talking to him while the EMTs hooked him up to monitors.

“I’m right here.” He kissed Shane’s fingers. “I’ll be right here, all the way.”

“J.P.” Blind fingers touched his face. “Love you. Love you. Always.” Shane’s hand dropped away, falling limp at his side. The monitors beeped.

“He’s flat lining!”

## Chapter Nine

“Clear!”

Shane’s beaten body, gaunt and bloodied, arched off the skinny cot the EMTs placed him on. Pablo had moved away so they could deal with Shane, and he crouched in the back of the ambulance, heart in his throat, watching as strangers worked frantically to save Shane.

They had to save him, had to make him right again. There weren’t really other options.

A thin beeping yanked a sound from him. The EMTs rushed around, yelling shit Pablo could barely understand, poking and probing an unresponsive Shane.

“Got a pulse.”

He bit down on his clenched fist, hard for sure, but he felt nothing. His gaze darted from Shane to the machine he’d been hooked up to. The one that showed the crooked lines proving he was alive, even if he was barely hanging on.

The ambulance rolled to a stop and the doors flew open. Pablo jumped out and backed away, moving to the side as people converged on the ambulance. He followed as they wheeled Shane out and into the building, answering barked questions about his name and what happened. Then he was gone, taken to a room where Pablo couldn’t follow, where he couldn’t watch.

He stood in the crowded hallway, people milling all about him, with his hands shoved in his pockets. He just stood, with his head down. He didn’t know where to go, or what to do. Lost. So fucking lost. And empty. Helpless. That feeling resonated most of all, and it rocked him, that he did all this and yet, complete strangers would be the ones to ultimately bring Shane back to him. It was all out of his hands and he hated it. Hated feeling helpless, hated that he couldn’t do more.

Turning away before he listened to his instincts and ran into the room they’d taken Shane, he pulled his phone out and called Mateo.

“Boss, you okay?”

“I’m at the hospital.” He gave Teo the name. “They’re working on him.”

Teo sighed. “I’m still at the cabin. Local PD is here, and I think your boy Jack called for backup from his people ’cause they’re also here.”

Pablo rubbed a palm over his head. He'd have to deal with Jack at some point. "Send Reggie and Freddo back to Kenneth's place. Clean up time."

"Already on it."

"I'd have liked to burn that fucking cabin to the ground, but we can't." Not with the authorities all over the scene. "I'll be here with Shane," he told Mateo.

"Uh, boss, Edgar's on his way to the hospital. Something about a gunshot to the neck, and surgery."

"I'll be waiting." He ended the call and found an empty chair to collapse into. So Edgar was alive, and headed his way. Looked as though even the universe agreed Pablo needed to fuck his ass up proper. He took a deep breath and let that go, for now. He had to call Rich, give him an update. Fuck if he didn't dread doing that, but he dialed the number anyway.

Five minutes later, the call was done and he felt like puking his guts out. He knew Rich and Heather tried not to react since Sophia had been right there, but he'd heard the fear and panic in their voices. They were on their way to Missouri despite his objections. He couldn't stop them, they were Shane's family, too.

Someone sat in the chair next to him and he jerked upright. Jack. Pablo gritted his teeth. "Can't get rid of you, can I?"

"How is he?"

Pablo just shrugged. He wasn't up to it, he doubted he'd ever be. Dealing with Jack wasn't on his top ten list of priorities at the moment.

They sat in silence, undisturbed despite the hustle and bustle of the ER. He didn't know what to make of Jack's presence, but he did his best to ignore him.

"Wellington!"

A voice boomed and Pablo looked up. An older man dressed in a dark suit, with silver hair and a round belly, approached them at a clipped pace, anger on his face. Pablo squinted.

"Sir." Jack jumped to his feet.

Huh.

"What the fuck is this?" The man crowded into Jack's space, spit flying as he barked. "I let you and Ruskin handle this, and you fuck up royally?"

Jack's face went red, but he didn't back down. "Circumstances beyond our control, sir."

"Really, is that what it is?" His boss placed both hands on his hips as he looked down at Jack. "I thought it was rank incompetence." He glanced at the room they stood in front of. "What's going on with Ruskin, and why is he here?" He jerked his head in Pablo's direction.

"This is Pablo Castillo," Jack said. "We think Edgar drugged Shane, we're waiting for the doctors to tell us what's what."

His boss squinted. "I know who he is. I want to know why he's here."

"Who's here for Shane Ruskin?" A tiny woman with dark skin and tired eyes walked out from the makeshift room, wearing blue scrubs, clipboard in hand.

Shane jumped to his feet. "Pablo Castillo." He held out his hand and she shook it. "Fiancé."

Someone choked. He didn't look to see who that person was.

"What's going on?" he asked the doctor.

"Sir, I can't talk to you." The doctor took a step back. "You're not immediate family."

"What part of fiancé isn't immediate family?" Pablo balled his fists, but Jack grabbed his shoulder and flashed his badge.

"Tell us what's happening, please," Jack said.

After a moment's hesitation, the doctor conceded. "Mr. Ruskin had an overdose of methamphetamine." She glanced down at her clipboard. "Lucky for him, it wasn't severe, despite how it appeared, and he got treated relatively quickly. He's malnourished, dehydrated, and has a few broken ribs, along with the bullet wound."

Pablo shoved his hands back into his pockets. "He'll be okay? The drugs, they won't...affect him long term?"

"Too early to say, but it shouldn't. We're treating him intravenously for the seizure."

Pablo pursed his lips and nodded. Seizure.

"Since Mr. Ruskin was injected with a needle, we're also treating him for any contaminated diseases like HIV and viral hepatitis."

That was a blow he hadn't been prepared for, and he staggered under the force of it.

"We'll be moving him to a private room, get him set up. Right now he's being sedated while we work to patch him up." She smiled at him, all bright, probably meaning to reassure him.

He should tell her to table that shit. It wouldn't work.

"Doc," Jack's boss spoke up. "May I have a word?" He took the doctor's arm and guided her away.

Pablo dropped back into the chair. He didn't know how to describe what he felt, how he felt. He just...he wanted inside that room. He wanted to see Shane. He wanted something to do other than sitting there, being useless, feeling helpless.

"Hey."

A hesitate touch on his shoulder made him look up. Jack stood over him with his sad eyes, and his sad face, and his oh-so-sad voice.

"Are you okay?"

Pablo snorted and shrugged away Jack's touch. "What do you think, Jack? What makes you think there's an option besides hell no to fuck, I'm not okay?"

The other man sat beside him. "I'm sorry. I just—I'm still processing all this."

"Processing, huh? Let me know when you're done with that." He got up and began pacing. "This is the second time, Jack. The second time he's hurt while working with you. I'm sick of this déjà vu shit." His trembling words told of his fear.

Jack didn't shy away from Pablo's accusing glare. "I know." He twisted his hands in his lap. "I know that, okay?"

"Then what are you doing to fix it?" he shouted. "He's in a hospital once again, fighting for his life once again. That should have been avoided, if you'd put your jealousy over the fact that he dumped you to the side, and called me the instant he didn't check in."

Jack's jaw tightened. "I followed protocol. I know that's a foreign concept to you, but I went by the book. It's my job to follow the rules."

"And look where we are." He waved a hand in a sweeping gesture. "Look where we are, Jack. Something's not working, and it's unacceptable." He stood over Jack. "If it brings me to a hospital where I have to watch Shane hurt, it's unacceptable. If it puts my

relationship and Shane's life in jeopardy, it's unacceptable. If I have to come in and clean up your fucking mess," he yelled, "it's unacceptable."

"Gentlemen."

Pablo froze at the sound of Jack's boss's voice. He spun around.

"Anyone care to explain to me what's going on?" The man lifted a bushy silver eyebrow. When neither Pablo nor Jack spoke, he went on, "Wellington, you and Ruskin have been keeping things from me." He walked over to Pablo. "Harold Davenport is the name."

"You know mine."

"You and Ruskin?" Davenport asked.

Pablo shrugged. "You heard me." He wasn't about to offer up any more for those people to use against Shane.

After holding Pablo in a staring contest for a while, Davenport broke eye contact and turned to Jack. "Wellington, I'll need you in my office first thing Monday. And Ruskin, too, as soon as he's better." Davenport walked away then stopped. "I guess I should congratulate you, Wellington, on getting your man. I hear we've got Edgar Cahn in custody."

"Yes, sir."

Davenport walked off.

"You must be happy." Pablo mocked Jack. "Got your man, though I'm sure you'd give that up if you thought you had just an ounce of a chance with Shane."

"Look." Jack stopped and sighed. "I love him, okay? Yes, I know he's with you, that he chose you, but that doesn't make my feelings for him go away. That doesn't erase what I feel."

"Have you tried?" Pablo moved closer to him, getting in his face. Jack's eyes widened. "Did you try, or do you think that somehow what we have won't last, and you'll get a chance to swoop in?"

Jack's throat worked, Adam's apple moving up and down. "You're not right for him," he croaked.

Pablo smiled. "You're correct. I'm not right for him. I'm perfect for him. I love him, like you never could. And most importantly, he loves me, like he never did you."

Jack paled. "You'll hurt him, I just know it. You'll break his heart and I—"

“Oh, Jack.” Pablo shook his head. “You’ll never get it. I’ll never break Shane’s heart. He’ll never break mine. Yes, I’ll hurt him, and he’d do his own damage to me, it’s how we work. But in the end, we’ll go to bed together and he’ll touch me, I’ll touch him, and the hurt will disappear like it’d never been.” He smiled again. “It’s called love. You need to find yours, and leave mine alone.”

“Or what?” Jack’s chin lifted. “You’ll try to kill me again?”

“Try?” He lifted an eyebrow. “I haven’t tried to kill you yet, Jack. If I did...well, you’d be ghost, wouldn’t you? If I didn’t know Shane would be mad at me, you’d already be floating somewhere face down.” He shrugged. “That’s where love comes in. And sacrifice. Because you being here, still breathing, is a sacrifice I make. For Shane.” He got up and stood there for a second, staring down at Jack, at the stubborn way he gazed back at Pablo. “Jack, it’s time to move on.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Another day spent waiting around for Shane to wake up. Pablo slept on a cot in Shane’s room, after going to bat with the powers-that-be. He wasn’t about to leave Shane. It was going on three days, and still Shane wasn’t awake.

Like they’d done since the day they’d arrived, Rich and Heather came by at dusk, bringing him food. After an exchange of hugs, he left them to sit with Shane. He finally had the chance to pay a visit to a patient one floor up. Edgar Cahn had survived surgery, came through with flying colors. He’d had a bullet lodged in his neck, perilously close to his spine. He got himself all patched up, and Pablo had rooted for him. After all, he needed the man alive.

In his room in a motel near the hospital, he grabbed a quick shower and change of clothes. Mateo and the rest of the guys stayed around with him, lending their support. He appreciated it, but all he had time for was Shane. His lover lay in that bed so still, hooked up to machines as they doctors did their best to fix him. Pablo spent all his time there, at Shane’s bedside, talking to him.

Back at the hospital, he made his way to the floor where Edgar was being held. Two uniformed officers stood outside. Only one shot. He had only one shot and he couldn’t afford mistakes. He pulled the surgical mask over his face and looked down to make sure the scrubs were on right. Picking up a clipboard, he pinned on the ID badge

he'd grabbed from one of the male doctors and approached with his head down, looking at the charts in his hand.

No one intercepted him. Wasn't that just like the fucking cops? Never on point when they should be. Worked for him. He entered the room and quickly made his way to the bed. Edgar lay there sleeping. Pablo removed the finger monitor and placed it on his own finger then pulled up a chair. A smack to the face brought Edgar blinking awake and when he opened his mouth, Pablo stuffed a balled up sock in there.

He sat back and admired his handiwork. "Look at you. Remember me?"

Edgar's blue eyes focused mighty quick. They opened wide, all bright with the fear.

"I hope you didn't think we were done." Pablo sat forward, elbows on his knees. "We don't have a lot of time, but I thought I'd stop by. Tell you how Shane is doing."

"Umf. Umf."

"That's right, you don't know who he is." He patted Edgar's hand. "That's okay. His name is Shane, he's undercover DEA." He laughed when Edgar's head rolled from side to side on the pillow. "Yes, DEA, and he's my fiancé." He paused. "You know, I haven't had a lot of time to use that word. Fiancé. I like it."

Edgar went back to making his sounds again. Pablo ignored them.

"You think you up for a story?"

"Umm. Ungg."

"I suggest you shut your trap and let me talk," he said in a low tone. "As it stands, I'm ready to bust a nut with my need to snuff your life out. Let's not speed it up, huh? Prolong that shit."

Confusion shadowed Edgar's eyes.

"Bust a nut?" Pablo laughed. "The thought of doing to you what you did to Shane gets my dick hard." He shrugged. "Sick, right? But sick enough for you. You don't fuck with me and mine, and not expect to bend over and get yours in return. Metaphorically, speaking of course. I'm in a committed relationship." He winked.

Edgar kept shaking his head.

Pablo got to his feet and stood over him. "I usually like to take my time, you understand. When it comes to something like this, the quick ain't for me, but we've got to make allowances for where we are." As he looked down at Edgar, Pablo's heart began

racing. He had to close his eyes and take a breath to get himself back under control. That man, this man, had come way too close to Pablo's home and his heart for comfort, and he had to go.

"Be thankful for small mercies, Edgar Cahn," he whispered.

He slapped a palm over Edgar's mouth, trapping the sock inside, and nose. Edgar fought, of course he did, and maybe if he'd been at one hundred percent, things wouldn't have gone as smoothly. His feet kicked off the sheets, and his hands jerked, pulling on all the machines he was hooked up to. He tried twisting his head from side to side, but Pablo sat on his mid section, holding him down and kept his gloved hand over his mouth, watching Edgar's eyes flare bright with fear and fight, and the self preservation that came a little too late.

Finally Edgar went still beneath him, his dead eyes giving him away. Pablo heaved a breath. He removed the sock, stood and straightened the sheets covering Edgar. He cast one last look at the room then made his exit. He went straight from Edgar's room to one of the male restrooms on the floor. Inside a stall, he stripped off the scrubs then stuffed them, and the sock, into a garbage bin.

He shook. And he couldn't stop. He collapsed onto the closed toilet seat, hands wrapped around his middle, body bowed in half. The tremors rode him hard and fast, made his skin clammy, and his body ache. There was nobody there to hold him up, but he let himself go, let himself fall into the darkness. Just for a little while. He sat there, forehead pressed to the cold door.

He remained in that position as he let the fear loose. He gave in to it. What he'd refused to let himself feel until that moment. The possibility had been real. Losing Shane, he'd come a hair's breadth away and it ate at him, that fear. It froze him up, fucked with his breathing, with his stomach. That fear. It took him places. Took away his sense of reason.

That fear. He never wanted feel it again.

Time fell away. The tremors slowed to a stop and he stood once again, this time on legs that didn't wobble so much. He buckled the belt holding his jeans up, and tugged on his long-sleeved t-shirt before walking out the stall. He washed his face, gargled , and then made his way back to Shane.

Rich and Heather met him there, giving him that look that said Shane still wasn't awake. The doctors had taken him off the sedative, so why was it taking so long for him to open his eyes?

He pulled Heather to the side and whispered in her ear. When he finished his request, she wore a smile.

"You sure?"

He nodded. "Yes." He held out a piece of paper. "It's all here." He pulled out his wallet and handed over his card. "Cost isn't a factor."

She looked up at him. "Okay. I'll get right on it."

"Thanks." He pulled her into a hug. "See you."

He waited until Heather and Rich disappeared before he crawled into Shane's bed, and smoothed a hand over Shane's dry brow.

"Time for you to open your eyes for me, pretty boy."

## Chapter Ten

A groan made its way past Shane's lips. His body felt heavy and wrecked, as though he'd been through some shit. The beep and whir of machines reached his ears, letting him know he wasn't where he wanted to be. He shifted his body and moaned when pain radiated down his side.

He tried opening his eyes, but his lashes felt as if they weighed a ton. They wouldn't budge. Panic set in and he fought. His lashes finally lifted on a pop, in his mind at least. He felt dazed, and his eyesight was a bit blurry, but he made out the room.

Pale walls. The smell. The bed. He was in the hospital. His heart beat jacked up, until he made out the figure standing off to the side, a cup of coffee in hand, staring out the window. He squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again.

His lover was in profile, but Shane saw the strain in his shoulders. He licked his lips.

"J.P." His voice was really the thinnest thread of sound, so he muscled up some saliva, swallowed, and tried again. "J.P."

Pablo tensed then he turned slowly. "Shane?" His brow furrowed. "Shane!" He raced to the bed then stopped. "Are you okay? I should call the doctor." And he dashed out the room.

Shane frowned. What was that? Pablo looked happy to see him awake, and yet there had been something—caution, hesitance—in his eyes right before he left the room. Shane shrugged it away and focused on why he was in the hospital. What it meant. Edgar and his men had had their fun with him, hadn't they? And right there at the end, they'd plunged the icing of that fucked-up cake into his veins. His mind and body rebelled at that a memory, and he started to sweat.

"Mr. Ruskin." A female doctor walked into the room, Pablo on her heels. Instead of going to Shane, though, his lover stood off to the side, watching with a tick in his jaw. "Welcome back." The dark-skinned doctor smiled at him before consulting her charts.

What did that mean? Shane looked from her to Pablo. "What do you mean? How long have I been here?"

"Ten days." Pablo finally spoke, his face blank. But Shane heard the agony in his words and he knew his lover was in no way all right. He wanted to reach for him,

console him because he knew Pablo would let no one else do it, but they had no privacy, and even if they did...the other man appeared to be keeping his distance.

He'd question that later. Right then he needed to know what happened to him.

"You had a seizure," the doctor said. "You overdosed on the meth, but you were lucky. We got you before your organs began failing and was able to deal with that swiftly. We also tested you for HIV and other viral diseases."

Shane gaped. "What?" He hung on to the sheets. The fucking dirty needle they used to shoot him up. Blinking rapidly, he ignored the doctor and focused on the other person in the room. "What were the results?"

"Negative, but you'll need to be tested again in a few months." The doctor scribbled something on her chart then spoke again. "We had you sedated when you were just brought in, but took you off a few days later. We were all beginning to worry—" she glanced at Pablo then back at Shane— "when you didn't wake up immediately."

"But I'm okay now. Right?"

"We'll continue to monitor you, but you should be fine although I'm sure you'll have some continued pain and discomfort. I don't anticipate the drugs having any lasting side effects."

Jesus Christ.

After checking out his ribs, lungs, his pupils, and some poking, the doctor said, "I'll send someone in with some pain meds." She walked to the door. "Take it easy on yourself."

And they were alone. He and J.P. Even if it was for a little while. "J.P." He held out his hand and Pablo was at his side, kneeling as he grabbed hold of Shane's fingers in a punishing clench he welcomed.

"You're awake." Pablo's palm was moist and when he pressed his lips to Shane's fingers, Shane heard the rasp of his breath as it whistled through his nose.

"You were scared," Shane said softly. It wasn't framed as a question because he hadn't meant it as one. He knew his lover.

Pablo didn't answer. He bent his head over Shane's hand, forehead pressed to his knuckles. They remained like that, in a heavy silence that got Shane all choked up, got his throat all clogged with the emotion his lover tried so hard to hide.

"I'm sorry." He needed to say that, needed to express his sorrow. "I'm so sorry."

Pablo heaved a sigh and sat back, meeting Shane's gaze with red-rimmed eyes. "I made you a promise. The promises I make, I keep." He jerked a nod. "Look at your left hand."

Shane glanced at the hand Pablo indicated then back at his lover. "What's—Holy crap!" There was a ring on his finer, his ring finger. He stared at it, lifted his hand and stared some more.

"Your ring." Pablo's tone was dead serious when he said, "I had Heather get it. It's titanium, with a rose gold filling."

Shane gaped at his finger.

"I went with that one, but it also comes in platinum if you don't like the gold." He hesitated. "Do you like it? We can change it if you don't."

"No, I—Yes." He practically shouted the words. "It's-it's gorgeous." He cupped Pablo's face. "J.P., I love it." He couldn't stop smiling. And wiggling his finger. And ogling the pretty jewelry.

"I knew you would." Pablo's face softened. "There's an inscription." He made the comment as casual as one would tell the time of day, but Shane wasn't fooled.

He pulled on the ring and it came off way too easily. "We'll need to get it sized," he murmured as he peered inside. His heart stuttered as he read the one word inscription out loud. "Brooklyn."

"Says it all, doesn't it?"

He swallowed. "Yes," he whispered. "It says it all." He gazed into Pablo's eyes, thinking he'd never felt so close to him, and yet, somehow, he felt there was something there, something between them, that Pablo was choosing not to put into words.

"J.P.—"

"Mr. Ruskin." A nurse walked into the room with a tray of food. "I've got some food, and meds, for you." She looked from him to Pablo. "Hello."

Pablo nodded at her and stood. "I'll be right back. I've got to tell Rich and Heather you're up." He touched a finger to Shane's cheek and disappeared out the door.

Shane dropped his head back onto the pillows with a sigh. His lover was avoiding him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shane didn't see Pablo for a long time. He saw the doctor again, he saw the nurse who came to give him his sponge bath. He saw Heather and Rich, but he didn't see Pablo. Heather regaled him with the tales of Pablo never leaving his bedside, sleeping in his room with him, even battling the staff for the right to that. And yet, there he was, awake, finally, but his lover was nowhere around.

Heather and Rich teased him about the ring, but brushed aside his comments about Pablo avoiding him. And they also dropped a bomb. Pablo had been questioned, by Jack no less, in the deaths of Edgar Cahn and one of his men, Kenneth. They just dropped that little nugget, casual as you fucking please, into the conversation.

He schooled his features, tried not to give anything away even as his insides rioted. He was aware of the lengths Pablo would go to for him, and he didn't give two fucks what happened to Edgar and Kenneth after what they did to him and others, but he didn't want this all to come back to bite Pablo in the ass.

Because if it did, if anything happened, it would be his fault. It would be on Shane's shoulders. Long after Heather and Rich left, Shane lay in his bed, staring at the ring on his finger. His heart ached. He wanted his lover, wanted to touch him, and he knew Pablo enough to know he wanted the same. So where was he?

Someone knocked on his room door, waking him from a light sleep. He jerked his head up in time to watch Jack stride in. Shane smothered a sigh. This was a conversation long overdue, and he braced himself for it.

"Shay!" Face bright, smile wide, Jack leaned over the bed and pulled Shane in a tight hug. "So good to see you awake. You scared the hell outta me."

"Jack." Shane patted him on the back. "Hey."

"Don't do that to me again." Jack pulled away and glared down at him, but that didn't hide the fear in his eyes. "I was so Goddamn scared for you, Shane."

"I know and I'm sorry."

"How are you feeling? What did the doctor say?"

Shane recounted what the doctor said to him earlier.

"Good. Good." Jack nodded then looked away briefly. "Davenport knows about you and Castillo. He was here when Castillo named himself your fiancé."

Ah. Here we go. "Not named, stated fact." He held up his left hand.

Jack sputtered. He grabbed Shane's hand. "Are you kidding me, Shane? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I love him." He shrugged. "That's all there is to it."

"But he's—" Jack pressed his lips together. "He killed Edgar Cahn and one of his men, did you know that?"

Shane lifted his chin. "Did he? Is he locked up then?"

Jack scoffed. "Castillo and his crew are too damn good to leave anything lying around for us to find, you know that. We can't hold him."

"You have no proof, but you know he did it. Is that so?"

Anger flashed in Jack's eyes. "Don't play with me, Shane. You and I both know he did it. They hurt you and he hurt them. Worse. Just like he did with York in New York. Hell, we still haven't found his body."

*And I doubt you ever will.* But Shane didn't voice those words. "I'm not interested in your suppositions and your vendettas, Jack."

"Why can't you open your eyes, Shane? Why can't you see going down that road with Castillo will only bring you heartache?" Jack dropped to his knees beside Shane's bed. "Shane." He took Shane's hands in his. "He's a bad man. He's ruthless. There's no redeeming someone like him. He likes drawing blood too much." His eyes begged Shane to hear him, to listen. "He tried to fucking kill me!"

"Why would he do that?"

Jack broke his gaze then, choosing to look somewhere over in the distance as he said, "I went to your place to tell him you'd stopped checking in, and he attacked me."

"You had proof then. With you being a federal officer, if he attacked you, you had grounds to get him arrested and locked up for a long time." Shane frowned. "Why didn't you?"

"It had been a month after you stopped checking in, and I told him that."

A month. Jack waited a month. "I see why he did why he did. I would have done the same."

Jack tensed then jumped to his feet. "What? You're siding with him?"

"You're selfish, did you know that?" Shane balled his fists. "I can't believe—" He shook his head. "A month, Jack. You let those sons of bitches have me for a whole

month because of what? Jealousy?” he yelled, despite the pain in his side. “Because you wanted to stick it to him, the man you think I chose over you?”

“Didn’t you?” Jack fired back. “Didn’t you choose him over me?”

“Jack, come on.” Shane sighed. He lowered his voice and continued. “We were broken up long before I met him. We were over even longer than that. Don’t make it sound as though I did something wrong, as though I’ve wronged you in some way. We’re done. We’ve been done.”

“Just like that?” Jack shook his head. “I spent years with you. Years. You never even gave me a key to your place, but he comes around and months later you’re what, shacking home, getting married?”

“Yes, to all those things.” Shane pushed himself upright, ignoring the sharp sting of pain the action brought to his side. “Do you want to know why, Jack? Because I want those things with him, and I never wanted them with you.”

The hurt on Jack’s face. So profound in its intensity. It was a physical thing, and watching it was like a blow to Shane’s gut. He hated having to hurt Jack, hated having to do any of it, but it was necessary. Pablo sacrificed so much for him. He gave up his life for Shane, and what had Shane done in return? Besides having his ex blocking Pablo at every turn?

“He’s going to hurt you,” Jack said softly. “I know because I’ve seen it, I’ve seen the bloodlust in his eyes. That man is not a nice person. He doesn’t know how to change, how to love.”

“And do you, Jack? Let me tell you something, that man you speak of, I own him.” He curled his left hand onto his chest, over his heart. “Every inch of him. The bad parts and the good? I accept them. He’s mine, and I own him,” he whispered. “He belongs to me.”

Jack’s eyes were wet. He cupped Shane’s face and bent, pressing his lips to Shane’s. Shane didn’t fight it, but he didn’t participate either. He remained still and he let Jack kiss him, let Jack run his fingers through Shane’s hair. He closed his eyes when Jack traced the angles of his face with the pad of one finger. When Jack stopped touching him, Shane opened his eyes.

And stared in Pablo’s. His lover stood in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest.

“I love you, Shay,” Jack murmured against his lips. He smoothed a hand over Shane’s hair on last time. “I hope you can be happy. Believe it or not, I want you to be happy.”

“The man behind you makes me happy.”

Jack straightened and spun. Pablo’s face was expressionless.

Jack looked back at Shane. “I put in for a transfer. Not sure to where yet, but this might be the last time we see each other.” Grief darkened his expression.

Shane nodded. “Bye, Jack. Take care of yourself.”

Jack stared at him, then nodded and walked out the room. Pablo waited until he left then stepped in and closed the door behind him.

Shane blinked the tears from his eyes. “Don’t hurt him, okay?”

“I haven’t yet, have I?”

Shane took in his lover. Pablo was dressed in a red V-neck long-sleeved t-shirt, the front tucked into his dark jeans. His NY belt buckle was huge and silver and flashed when he moved. He wore red classic Reeboks on his feet. He looked good, always did, but he also looked tired. Exhausted, really.

“What did you do to Edgar and Kenneth?”

Pablo didn’t answer him right away. He grabbed a folded chair over in the corner and brought it next to Shane’s bed, then sat and stared at Shane.

“What?”

“I love that you know me so well. That you know what I would and would not do.” Pablo leaned forward. “You know Edgar and that Kenneth dude weren’t going to be allowed to hurt you and just walk the hell off like nothing happened.”

“I know that.” Shane nodded. He expected nothing less.

“You know I’ll come to you wherever you are, whenever you call. Whenever you need me.”

“Yes.”

“You know that I live and breathe for you. That my priority is you, us.”

“Yes.”

Pablo paused. “I want to know what your priorities are.”

Shane blinked. “What?”

“This is the second time I’ve been here, watching you fight for your life, Shane.” Pablo stood and kicked the chair to the side, not forceful, but not gentle either. “I’m not good at this. I’m not good at just sitting and praying for you to be better. I’m sure God has long washed his hands of me, he’s not listening to my prayers.”

Shane frowned. “What-what are you—”

“You’re my strength, Shane. You make me strong. But I have one weakness,” Pablo said softly. “You.”

Shane’s jaw dropped. “J.P. You’re not making sense and you’re scaring me.”

“I don’t like being afraid. I don’t like how it makes me feel, sick to my stomach, cold all over. I don’t like feeling helpless, unable to do anything but watch you suffer. I can’t do it.”

Shane’s stomach rebelled. “What are you saying?”

“Something needs to change,” Pablo said. “Watching you fight for your life. Shane, that shit kills me. It kills me inside and I lash out. I can’t control myself. I can’t get a grip on me. I don’t like who I am in that moment. I’m afraid of who I am when I’m scared for you. You, you make me afraid.”

Shane nodded. He understood the agony in his lover’s voice. He got it. “I’m sorry.”

“You made me a promise, but here you are and you’re not fine. You weren’t fine.” Pablo’s voice shook. “You don’t know what that’s like. To watch the person you love suffer.” He hunched his shoulders. “To watch that person flat line. Watch them die.”

“J.P.”

“The way I love you,” Pablo rasped. “The way I love you. There’s no way to deal with that fear except to make someone else feel it. You hurt and I hurt someone. Because that’s what I do. That’s who I am. I just...I want you safe. I want you happy. I want you,”—he sniffed—“I want you alive.”

“I am,” Shane whispered. “I’m here.” He lifted both arms, opened them wide. “I’m here, because of you. I trusted you to take care of me, to protect me no matter what. Whatever the cost and I knew you would.” His vision blurred when he gazed at Pablo. “J.P. I knew you’d come for me. You always do.”

“I always will.”

“Then come here,” Shane begged. “Hold me like you want to. Touch me like I want you to.”

And Pablo was in his arms, squeezing Shane. Suffocating him with his arms. Their lips met, clung. Pablo broke off the kiss and buried his face in Shane’s neck. They held each other.

“You and our life together,” Shane said in Pablo’s ear. “That’s my priority. Us. You loving on me, me loving on you. All that the ring on my finger represents. That,”— he kissed Pablo’s neck— “That is my priority.”

## Chapter Eleven

*One week later*

Shane sat upright in bed with a sigh. Three nights in a row. Three nights he'd woken up to find the space beside him empty, cold. Three nights and this was the last time. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and glanced at the digital clock on his side.

2:16 a.m. In bright red numbers. It appeared he'd misplaced his lover. Again.

Despite the assurances he'd made to Pablo in that Missouri hospital, something obviously still held Pablo back from relaxing. From moving forward. Hell, except for a few chaste kisses now and then, he'd stopped touching Shane. Couldn't be because of Shane's wounds. His ribs and the bullet wound were almost completely healed. Yes, Shane still wore a bandage, but that was mostly to protect the damn thing from getting wet more than anything else now.

They still had to wait for his second HIV test, and Shane did his best not to think about that and what it could mean if things didn't go his way. He couldn't let himself take on the what-ifs. Still, he dug around his drawers in search of a stray condom. They'd have to take precautions. His life, and that of the man he loved, was in serious jeopardy.

Fucking Edgar. That bastard was lucky Pablo got to him first. Shane heaved a huge sigh when he found a condom in the back of his sock drawer. After checking the expiration date, he grabbed the lube off the bedside table then clad only in black briefs, he made his way to the living room.

Pablo sat on the couch watching ESPN, the volume on the TV turned down. He wore a black wife-beater and red pajama bottoms, and he sat so still. He looked alone, and lonely, and Shane wasn't having it. Shane walked over and stood in front of him.

Pablo's head jerked up. "Why are you up?"

"I could ask you the same, no?" Blocking Pablo's view of the TV, he asked, "Is it too much to ask that I find you in our bed when I roll over?"

"Shane." Pablo sighed and shook his head slightly. "Sorry."

"That's not what I want," Shane said. "I want you to tell me what's keeping you awake at night, what's keeping you from touching me."

“I touch you.”

“Yes, but you don’t *touch* me.” Shane caressed Pablo’s head. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“Nightmares.” Pablo pursed his lips. “Just nightmares.”

Shane dropped to his knees and placed a hand on Pablo’s thigh. “They’re not just nightmares if they’re keeping you from me. Why have you been keeping your distance?”

“I just...I want to touch you, of course I do. I want to make love to you, but more importantly, I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I want that hurt.” Shane cupped Pablo’s jaw. “I want that hurt if it brings us pleasure. If it includes you touching me, you holding me, then I welcome the hurt.”

Pablo shook his head, eyes somber. “Shane—”

“No. We’ve been apart for fucking ever. I almost died. I want that hurt, I’ve earned it.”

“Goddamn, pretty boy.” Pablo touched him, trembling fingers on Shane’s nape. Gentle, but the pad of his lover’s fingers were rough, and Shane shivered at that contact. His body came alive for it. He’d yearned for it, and damn it, he was getting it.

He climbed onto Pablo’s lap, straddling him, knees pressing down on the cushions on opposite sides of Pablo. He clasped Pablo’s face in his hands. “Look at me,” Shane ordered. “Look at me.”

Pablo blinked at him, dark lashes sweeping low then lifting. “I’m looking.”

“Are you?” When the corners of Pablo’s mouth lifted, Shane continued. “If you’re looking you’ll see me, the man you love, the man who loves you back. You’ll see I’m alive. You’ll see that I’m safe. You’ll see that I’m needing you and I’m begging,” he finished the sentence on a whisper, “I’m begging, give me you.”

“You have me. You never have to beg.” Pablo yanked him close, buried his face in Shane’s throat. “You never have to beg.”

“I am, because you’re keeping yourself from me and I hate it. It’s unacceptable.” Shane pulled back, looked Pablo in the eye. “The next step is for me to just take it. Don’t think I won’t.”

Pablo laughed, the glare from the TV illuminating his dancing eyes. “Brave, aren’t you?”

Shane's smile wobbled as he slid his palm over Pablo's smooth head. "I can afford to be brave. I'm alive, and I've got Juan Pablo Castillo in my bed." He held up his left hand. "I'm wearing Juan Pablo Castillo's heart on my finger."

Pablo captured his hand and kissed his knuckles. Kissed the ring. "You are."

"Then kiss me. With tongue. Lots of tongue."

Pablo grinned, but he complied and Shane found himself moaning, rocking back and forth in Pablo's lap as his man kissed him like he'd ached to be kissed, wet and sloppy and decadent. He dug his fingers into Pablo's shoulders and wiggled on the erection poking him in the ass. Palm splayed on the back of Shane's head, Pablo held him steady, held his head in one position as he ate away at his mouth, thrusting his tongue deep, his groans blending with Shane's. He was being feasted on, savored, and Shane loved it, welcomed it.

Just kisses. Only kisses. Tiny bites, hard nips, and tongue. Rough and carnal swipes of tongue, over his teeth and gums, both of theirs twisting, battling. Shane moaned into Pablo's mouth. Releasing Pablo's shoulder, he cupped his jaw, held him still and rolled his hips slowly, working himself over Pablo's crotch.

The man in his arms shuddered. A guttural groan left Pablo and vibrated through Shane. He pulled at Pablo's wife-beater, pulled it up, and left it bunched at Pablo's neck like a cloth necklace. They'd have to break the kiss to remove it and Shane wasn't ready for that. Pablo's hand drifted from Shane's head down his back and Shane twisted his head, angled the kiss to the left.

Then the right.

Pablo cupped his ass, kneaded him.

Both men groaned. He rode Pablo's shaft, rode it. Humped him. But he never broke that kiss. Until he had to breathe.

Shane released Pablo's lips with a wet sound. "Fuck." Pablo's mouth was wet, lips swollen and shiny. "Get undressed." Shane scrambled off, and stood as Pablo yanked off the wife-beater and threw it to the side. He then kicked off the pajama bottoms.

No underwear.

That would make things easier.

Before he got the chance to tug off his briefs, Pablo leaned forward and yanked down one side then buried his face in the exposed area, where Shane's hip and thigh met. Teeth grazed him. His knees buckled.

"Shit."

Pablo chuckled against his skin. "You wanted it." He paused long enough to look up at Shane. "I'm giving it to you." He buried his face in Shane's groin, inhaling loudly. "The way you smell." He made an inarticulate sound. "Missed that shit."

Shane cupped the back of his head, held Pablo to him. They remained still, Pablo inhaling him...until Pablo yanked the briefs down to Shane's mid-thigh and moved to take his cock in his mouth.

"No!" Shane tightened his hold on Pablo's head, kept him immobile. "We have to, uh—" He swallowed and jerked his chin to the floor where he'd dropped the lube and condom. "Protection, J.P."

Pablo leaned back until their gazes met. He cupped Shane's balls. "There is nothing I'm willing to let come between us. Nothing." He dipped his head, swallowing Shane down.

"Oh. Oh, God." Shane clutched Pablo's shoulders to keep from falling over. "Fuck, J.P." He closed his eye and threw his head back, bucking into Pablo's hot mouth. The gesture his lover just made. That meant more than anything. More than he could express, and the magnitude of just how much the man on his knees loved him hit Shane. Full blast. In the face. His eyes burned.

Pablo's tongue swirled over his cock head, playing peak-a-boo with his slit. Shane groaned and thrust, seating himself deeper down his lover's throat. He never wanted to leave the wet cavern, but Pablo's fingers were on his balls, pulling on them, tugging, tracing his sack and the underside.

"J.P. Don't," he moaned. "Gonna come. You're gonna make me come."

Pablo sealed his lips around Shane's length and blew. Heat. Slick heat and a fucking suction that felt as though Pablo as trying to suck Shane's heart out through that tiny hole at the tip of his cock. He grabbed the back of Pablo's head and held him there, nose pressed to Shane's pubic hairs, hungry sounds filling the room, and Shane slammed forward, pouring his seed down Pablo's throat.

The other man gurgled, choked, but he clamped a hand down on Shane's hip, holding him in place. He didn't fight Shane's controlling grasp. He stayed there on his knees and he took it all, drinking Shane's cum as if it were a glass of lemonade on a sunny day.

Love. Such a simple word and yet, so fucking profound what it made men do. How it made men feel. Lost and yet, found. Adrift, but anchored. Shane pulled away from Pablo. "Sit back." His voice was raspy, guttural. "I'm riding you."

Pablo licked his lips, picked up the lube, and settled back on the couch. He spread his legs and looked up at Shane through his lashes.

"Come and get it." He lubed up the cock stirring on his belly, the crown red and wet. Shane waited until he was done then climbed him, limb by limb.

He took Pablo's mouth, thrusting his tongue inside, searching out the taste of his cum no doubt still lingering there. When the musky mix of salt and bitter hit his taste buds, Shane shuddered. Pablo met his foraging tongue thrust for thrust as his slick fingers dipped down Shane's ass crack and tapped at his hole.

He took a breath then let that shit go. Two thick fingers breached him, bringing the pain. He embraced it, accepted it as his due, the price he paid for the pleasure. Groaning into Pablo's mouth, Shane relaxed. Pablo sank deep, rough, no time for finesse, no time to linger either. He scissored the fingers inside Shane, stretching him quickly before removing them.

Shane lifted his ass off Pablo's lap, and grasped his lover's shaft, pointing it at his entrance. At the brush of the wet tip against his hot skin, he opened his eyes. Pablo's were still closed.

"Watch me," Shane commanded.

Pablo's eyes flew open.

"Watch me," he said again as he sank down, taking Pablo inside, inch by hard, smooth inch. "This pain I cherish." His voice went deep, smoky. "I love it, because it's you. You're loving me." He sank down until he sat atop Pablo's upper thighs.

Pablo stared at him, pupils dilated, nostrils flared, lips bruised and swollen. "Shane." Agony bled from that one word, Shane's name. Pleasurable agony, Shane knew that. He recognized it.

He didn't move except to kiss Pablo's nose. "I missed this every day I was gone. I missed the feel of you, your touch on my skin." Shane grabbed Pablo's hand and brought it to his own throat then dragged it down his chest and abs, to just over his groin. "I missed your hands, how they hold me, how they touch me with such reverence all the time. As if you can't believe you get to touch me at all."

"I love touching you," Pablo replied hoarsely. "It's my favorite thing."

Inside him, Pablo's cock throbbed and pulse. Shane squeezed his muscles around the shaft and Pablo jerked. His lips parted on a grunt.

"Then touch me." Shane tilted his head, exposed his throat, and Pablo touched him. He cupped Shane's jaw then slid that hand down, to his throat then his nipples. He flicked each one with a fingernail. Shane hissed. Pablo continued touching him, stroking his abs, his belly, then he fisted his straining cock and stroking that too, slowly.

"Those hands protect me," Shane whispered. "They save me. They're one of my favorite parts of you." He moved then, eased up then sank down slowly, his lips hovering over Pablo's. Less than a breath separated them.

"I love you," Pablo said. His breath touched Shane's lips and chin. Spreading heat.

Shane nodded. Leaning forward, he spoke at Pablo's ear. "I never get tired of hearing those words, or the slide of your skin against mine." He lifted off Pablo then sank down again. "The feel of you inside me, on me. You surround me. I'll never get tired of that look in your eyes. It holds me, warms me, grounds me."

"I belong to you," Pablo said. "I heard what you told Jack."

"I meant every word." Linking his hands around Pablo's neck, Shane leaned back until their gazes met. "I own you, and you've already laid claim to me."

"Damn right."

He sank his teeth into Pablo's shoulder. "Then prove it," Shane whispered. "Fuck me. Make me feel it. Make it hurt." He rolled his hips and tightened his muscles, speeding up his movements. "Come inside me. Mark me. Give me all of it, full me to the fucking rim so that it spills over and out."

Pablo's hips were already slamming up into him before Shane finished speaking. Fingers digging into Shane's hip, Pablo fisted Shane's hair with his other hand and

pounded up into him. Shane hung on, his moans growing louder and louder as Pablo nailed his prostate.

“Yes.” He quivered, arched and begged for more. “Give it to me. I want it all.”

Pablo buried his face in Shane’s throat, his teeth biting at Shane, no pussy nips, but grownup bites, painful, but Goddamn, it felt good. So good. Shane couldn’t fucking see. He hung on to the back of the couch and slammed down on Pablo. The cock in his ass swelled, throbbed and kept fucking him, deep, stretching him wide.

Too fucking good, this.

Pablo used his hold on Shane’s hair to yank his head back, more exposure for his throat. And he used his teeth and tongue to wreck Shane, to unravel whatever control he had left. He left it all on the wayside and lost himself in the pleasure sparking through his veins. He immersed himself in the smell and feel of the man he loved, thankful that he had another chance.

“Gonna come,” Pablo warned. His tongue swirled in the hollow at Shane’s throat. “Gonna fucking mark you,” he growled. “Let everyone know who you belong to. Who owns this.”

“You.” Shane rode him hard. So hard. “It’s yours. All yours.” He raked his nails down Pablo’s back. “Fucking take it, it’s yours.”

Pablo mashed their mouths together. Teeth clicked. Shane tasted blood. He didn’t give it a second thought. Pablo palmed his ass in both hands, spread him, and pistoned up. Shane held tight to his shoulders, allowing Pablo to handle him any way he wished. His lover took control, using his hold on Shane’s ass to lift him off his cock then slam him down. Over and over. And every time he came down, Pablo’s dick was there, ramming his prostate. Battering him with the pleasure. And the pain.

His cries rose higher and higher, echoing, blending with Pablo’s grunts.

“Fuck, yes.” He bit his lower lip. “God. I love it.”

“Then come for me.” Pablo touched him there, where their bodies met, circling his stuffed hole. “Come, pretty boy. Dirty me up.” He lifted Shane high, completely off his dick then slammed him down.

“Motherfucker,” Shane screamed. He came in torrents, pouring it all out on Pablo’s stomach. “More.” He shook with it, went wild for it, slamming up and down

without assistance from Pablo. “Fuck! Fuck!” He shouted until his voice rebelled, until all he had were whispers. “More.”

Pablo gave him more, more dick, digging deep, fucking him until Shane’s teeth rattled, until sweat burned his eyes, until his ass blazed with the most awesome fire. Then came the part he loved most, when his lover kissed him, tongue shoved deep enough for Shane to choke on, and came. The sweetest sound left Pablo, contentment, satiation, and maybe even a hint of regret that it had to end at all.

Exactly how Shane felt.

Pablo flooded him, cum hot like lava, scorching his insides. He shuddered at that sensation, ass muscles spasming, clenching around his lover’s dick. They panted into each other’s mouth, bodies quaking, Shane still milking that cock to the last drop.

His man kissed him, soft pecks this time, all over his face. “I love you.”

“Mm.” Shane shuddered. “And fuck if I don’t love the way you show it.”

They chuckled.

Shane clutched Pablo close. “I love you, too,” he whispered against Pablo’s sweat-slicked skin. “I remember that morning in Brooklyn when you let me go. I remember that hopeless feeling. I remember wondering how I’d ever get rid of the pain in my chest. Or how I’d ever get over you.”

Pablo’s arms tightened around him. “You’d never be hopeless again.” It was a promise. A decree. Shane believed it. With every bone in his body.

He snuggled closer. “We gotta start looking at houses.” Their future, they had a future to plan, too look forward to. He still had to talk to his boss at work, still had that huddle to overcome with his HIV status, but whatever it was, they’d handle it together.

“House then babies.”

If they didn’t quit with the happy, he’d start crying for sure. He nodded into Pablo’s neck then kissed the red lips tattooed there. “Yes. House then babies.” He nipped Pablo’s earlobe. “Take me to our bed, I’m gonna need you to fuck me again. Until the sun comes up.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The meeting with his boss went as Shane expected. Five minutes in then he was out. They wanted to know details of his personal life, when did he and Castillo get

together? When was the relationship consummated? And he was having none of it. So they handed him a suspension while they reviewed his conduct.

He expected that. So he didn't let it bother him. They'd see he did nothing wrong. In the meantime he got to spend time with his man and look at houses. He'd also re-evaluate his options, should his supervisors find him guilty of some shit. He knew for sure he was done with undercover work. He couldn't put Pablo or himself through that a third time. Maybe something behind a desk, pushing paper. Anything that brought him home at the end of the day.

He'd gotten his tests back and they were all negative. No transmitted diseases. All across the board. Relief didn't begin to describe the weight that lifted off his shoulders. And Pablo's too, because whatever affected Shane affected his lover. His wounds were all healed. So right now, he wasn't stressing a damn thing...

Until he got off the elevator and spied two men leaning up against his door. One, with shoulder-length dark hair and a cognac-colored leather jacket over a dark t-shirt, jeans and boots, had his back to the door. The other man, short dark hair, red t-shirt and dark jeans with boots, leaned into him, *nuzzling him?*

He took a breath and walked up to them. "Can I help you?"

Two pairs of eyes focused on him, laser-bright. One face he recognized. Crap.

"Shane Ruskin?" Familiar guy asked with a raised eyebrow. Latino, that one. Skin like Pablo's. The tattoos weren't hidden well, Shane still got a glimpse of them, and he knew.

Motherfucking Angelo Pagan was at his door.

"Who's looking?" he asked.

"Rafe Soto-Ashby." Pablo's former partner, the man he'd once loved, held out a hand. Shane took it. "My husband, Gabe." He nodded at the man beside him.

"What-what are you doing here?" Wasn't the guy supposed to be in hiding, in a hole, somewhere?

Rafe chuckled. "We've been calling Pablo, but he's not answering."

"Uh. No, he's—" Shane blinked— "He went to a matinee with my sister-in-law and niece." He checked his watch. "He should be home soon."

"Cool."

Cool? "Why are you here?"

The husband answered him. "We heard you were in some trouble. We thought we'd come say hi, introduce ourselves, and see if you guys were okay."

Shane narrowed his eyes. "A phone call would have cleared that right up." He didn't know how he felt about having the man Pablo had loved for so long that close to him.

"True, but this way we get to meet. Gabe and I have heard so much about you." Rafe smiled at him. Shane wasn't fooled for one minute. He recognized that look in Rafe's eyes, he'd seen it in Pablo's enough times. The man was a fucking predator, coiled to strike, and his sights were set on Shane.

"So what, you guys want to wait out here in the hallway for J.P. to get home, or you gonna move so I can open the door?"

Gabe yanked Rafe aside. "Move out the way, babe. Let the man inside his house." His eyes danced.

Shane ignored them and unlocked his door then stepped in and waved them inside. When he closed the door behind then, Rafe turned to face him.

"So...J.P., huh?" His husband joined him in chuckling.

Okay. Enough. "All right, here's what's going to happen. You two will sit your happy asses down there," he pointed to the couch. "You will keep your traps shut while I call J.P. Yes, J.P., and if you so much as move a fucking muscle, I will shoot both of you."

Gabe shrugged and pulled his husband behind him as he moved to the couch. "Dunno, Angel. I like him. He's got balls."

"Balls. That ain't balls, he's probably just suicidal," Rafe grumbled.

Gabe yanked Rafe down beside him on the couch. "He threatened to shoot me, so calm your ass down. You know you won't like me with bullet holes."

"But..." Rafe held up a finger. "If you'll note, he also called us happy, cop."

"Well, we are."

Rafe nodded. "True."

Then they shut up. Thank God. Shane rushed past them and into the bedroom, dialing Pablo. His lover answered after seven rings.

"How did the meeting go?"

"Forget that shit. We've got guests."

“Uh...” Pablo paused. “Who?”

“Your people. Rafe and Gabe. They’re in the living room, and I threatened to shoot them.”

His lover barked a laugh. “That must have gone over well.”

“We’re all three still alive so it’s all good for now.” He looked at the bedroom door. “Get your ass home now.”

“Twenty minutes.”

“Fine.” Shane disconnected the call and took a deep breath before he made his way back to the living room. “He’ll be home in twenty minutes.”

“Aw, no rush.” Rafe shifted away from Gabe on the couch and patted the space between them. “Sit, we’d love to get to know you better.”

“Fuck off.” He eyed them. “You trying to intimidate me? You shouldn’t bother; I’ve been through tougher shit than this.”

Gabe snorted. “I doubt it.” He patted the space between him and Rafe. “Sit, Shane. We just want to get to know you, make sure you’re treating J.P. right.”

Rafe snickered.

“His name is Pablo to you,” Shane snarled. “I’m the only one allowed use of that name. And to put your mind at ease. I love my man. I’m in love with Juan Pablo Castillo. He treats me right, and I do the same. Now you two, shut it.”

He turned away, but Rafe grabbed his left hand, held it up. “Looky, cop. A ring.”

“Ooh.” Gabe leaned over Rafe to get a closer look. “It’s pretty. Why come mine’s not as pretty?”

Rafe heaved an exaggerated sigh and dropped Shane’s hand. “Fine. I’ll get you another pretty.”

“Nah.” Gabe shook his head and kissed Rafe’s forehead. “I’m partial to my ring.” He nodded at Shane. “Looks good. You guys gonna make it official?”

“Hell yeah.”

Gabe pouted. “We’ll definitely have to be nice to him now.”

“Sucks,” Rafe said. “But we can try.” He smiled at Shane, a wide smile that reached his eyes, making them glitter. “Welcome to our family, Agent Ruskin.”

“Yeah, what he said.” Gabe grinned. “It was nice to see you actually try not to shoot us.”

“It was hard.” Shane nodded at Rafe. “Thank you. I love him.”

“We see that, and he loves you,” Rafe said. “So you’re family.”

“We take care of family,” Gabe said.

Shane didn’t even know why the hell he got choked up, but he did. Thankfully keys jangled in the front door. His man was home and not a moment too soon. Pablo came through the door, smiling, pizza and beer in hand.

“Hey, pretty boy.” He pulled Shane close with his free hand, kissing him soft and deep. “You okay?” he asked when he pulled back.

“Yeah.” Shane nodded. “We’ll talk about the meeting later.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Not really.”

“Amigo, stop playing kissy face with your man and come say hi.” Rafe walked over to them with a smile.

Shane took the food and beer from Pablo as his lover was enveloped into Rafe’s arms. Angelo Pagan. His name had changed, but he was still the same man. And Pablo had loved him once upon a time. Shane looked over at Gabe.

Did he know? Had he ever known how Pablo felt about his husband? Didn’t look like it, because Gabe was smiling, his expression open. No angst or censure there. He trusted his man and Shane, he trusted his.

Completely. He had nothing to worry about, especially when Pablo stepped back and grabbed him, pride and love in his eyes.

“We’re getting married,” Pablo declared. He held up Shane’s hand, the left one, with that gorgeous ring. “And we’re gonna have us some babies.”

Shane grinned.

“Let’s get drunk and celebrate,” Rafe yelled.

Everyone cheered.

Pablo held on to Shane long after his pretty boy had climaxed inside him and rolled to the side. They lay under the covers, panting, Shane nuzzling Pablo’s throat while Pablo traced circles on his lover’s sweaty back.

“What did you think about them?” he asked quietly. “Angel and Gabe?”

They'd spent an enjoyable evening together, laughing and talking. Catching up while the three men got to know each other. He wanted them all to get along. Rafe had invited them to a New Year's Eve party at their house, and Pablo and Shane had accepted.

"I like them." Shane lifted up on his elbows. "They're in love, they're happy and they accept me in your life."

"Their acceptance isn't necessary," Pablo told him.

"I know." Shane kissed his brow. "But it means a lot. And we've got friends now, who know us, all the messy stuff and don't care, because theirs is just as fucked up."

Pablo laughed. "Good point." He sobered. "You haven't told me how you feel about being suspended. What are you gonna do if you lose your job?" He knew how much Shane loved being in the DEA.

"I don't know." Shane shrugged. "Here's what I do know, I want to spend as much time as I can with you. Buying a house. Getting you that car you keep putting off."

"Why can't I use your car?" Pablo pouted.

"You need your own car and tomorrow we go car shopping." Shane paused. "We need to pick a date for the wedding. When and where."

"Lots of plans." Pablo rolled until he was on top Shane. He gazed down into his lover's eyes, wide and open and full of things spoken and left unsaid. Didn't mean he didn't know them, though. Didn't mean he didn't feel them when Shane stroked a hand down his back.

"Lots of plans. We have a future to plan." Shane cupped Pablo's nape and pulled him down until their lips touch. "Lots of love to make." He parted his thighs.

Pablo snuggled between them with a smile, and rolled his hips. "Lots." He kissed Shane, telling him with every stroke of his tongue how much he loved him some pretty boy. Thanking him for coming along and saving him very day.

Shane answered back with the tightening of his legs around Pablo, and the scrape of his nails down Pablo's back, that in reality they saved each other.

**The End**

## **Coming Soon**

*Sinner Like Me* (Brooklyn Sinners 3.5) \*Free Read

Syren Rua finally has what he's always wanted. He's settled into a life with his Marshal and the daughter they're raising as a couple. Everything he's been through, all the pain and dark memories, brought Syren this far, and he's in a wonderful space. Happy and loved. Which is why he never sees the approaching danger until it's too late.

Kane knows his lover well enough to know something is amiss. He isn't prepared for the answers to his questions, but nothing will stop him from fighting beside Syren as they stand together to protect their family.

### **Brooklyn Sinners in Reading Order**

Book 1: *Love the Sinner*

1.5: *Always a Sinner* (\*Free Read)

Book 2: *Sinner, Savior*

2.5: *Save Me, Sinner* (\*Free Read)

Book 3: *A Sinner Born*

Book 4: *Sinner's Fall*

Work in Progress: *Lies Sinners Tell* (Brooklyn Sinners #5) Series Finale

### **About the Author**

A Caribbean transplant, Avril now lives in Brooklyn, N.Y., with a tolerant spousal equivalent. Together they raise an eccentric daughter who loves reading and school (not so much school anymore). Avril's earliest memories of reading revolve around discussing the plot points of Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys with an equally book-minded mother.

Always in love with the written word, Avril finally decided to do the writing in August of '09 and never looked back. Spicy love scenes, delicious heroes, and wicked

women burn up the pages of Avril's stories, but there'll always be a happy ending; Av remains a believer of love in all its forms.

Addicted to cake, the ID Channel and the UFC, Avril writes Erotic and GLBT Romance for **Ellora's Cave**, **Evernight Publishing**, **eXtasy Books**, **Secret Cravings Publishing** and **Total-e-Bound**.

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