

Chapter One

Charlie Baker held the cell phone in his hand, staring at it blankly. He swept his thumb over the picture on the display, waiting for the old hurt to return, but it didn't. The emotional pain that had haunted him for months was gone. The agony of betrayal, of being deceived, and ultimately of loss, had run its course. The physical reminders would be with him until the day he died. Gazing at the now-bucolic picture where the pixelated image of his ex had been for three years, all he felt was a hollowness, a vague wish to turn back the clock and do something—anything—different. That was pointless, and he knew it.

Sighing, he wrapped his arms around his knees, watching the waves from the sand dunes where he sat. There was a nip of fall in the air. The Texas coast in early November didn't really get cold, but early-morning breezes, pulses of salt air that came in from the gulf, weren't uncommon. The oversized fisherman's sweater covering his frame protected him. The occasional cry of a seagull broke the morning quiet, but that was about it. People didn't come to the beach in November. And that worked well for him. Charlie wasn't ready for people, but his wish for solitude wasn't to be granted.

The spirited yaps of a puppy pulled his attention down the beach. He felt a weak smile try to break free at the pup's antics as he raced in and out with the waves, barking at the water like it was a vicious monster, and he was protecting the coast from it. Folding his arms over his knees, he rested to watch his carefree romping. He noticed the athletic form jogging not too far behind, glad he wasn't a stray. The closer they came, the better he could make out the pair. The dog looked to be around six months old, still wily but not gangly, and full of life. A yellow lab, if he wasn't too wrong. The man trailing behind was in his twenties or early thirties, he guessed, with finger-length blond hair. He only wore a pair of dark green jogging shorts and sneakers with a windbreaker knotted around his waist, obviously used to the coastal weather and the beach.

Charlie hadn't felt warm in months. One of the things he'd grown accustomed to, he supposed. He was surprised when the dog spotted him and changed direction faster than an animal in loose sand should have been able. The puppy charged him, but didn't bark or growl, his tail wagging like Charlie was just his latest friend—or toy. *How long did teething last for dogs?*

"Hey, big guy," he crooned. The dog plopped on his back in instant love, wagging his tail and whining, begging for a tummy rub. "Okay, but I don't want to get you in trouble." Charlie stretched out his right arm, glad it didn't shake too badly, and ran his fingers over the panting body. The animal grunted in sheer appreciation.

"Samson." Charlie's head snapped up, instantly withdrawing. The dog's owner was looking his way. He tucked his hand back into the sweater sleeve, leaving only his fingers visible. Samson rolled to his feet and bounded to his master with a woof.

Then he surprised Charlie, racing back to him. He wiggled closer, like he wanted to climb on his lap. Charlie oomphed when a rather large puppy paw jabbed him in the middle.

"Samson!"

The dog whined and blatantly disobeyed. Charlie caught it when the man calling for the dog began to lope in his direction. A rueful scowl seemed to say he'd expected something of the sort from the animal.

"I'm sorry," they said at the same time.

“Samson is in obedience training and still young enough to be a brat.” The man unfurled a leash that had been stashed in a side pocket, and clipped it to Samson’s collar.

“He’s a very friendly dog,” Charlie offered.

“Sorry he bothered you.” He tugged on the leash and Samson finally deigned to listen, sitting not quite calmly at his owner’s side.

“He didn’t.” Charlie pushed his hands into opposite sleeves, making sure his body was covered.

“Aren’t you hot?”

“Aren’t you cold?” He raised his chin to look up. The man was nearly naked. How could he not be cold?

The blond laughed. “Touché.” He tapped the dog’s head, whose tongue lolled as he panted. “Well, this is Samson. I’m Gregory.”

“Nice to meet you both.” It wasn’t frosty, but it was a far cry from honestly welcoming.

Charlie guessed Gregory took the hint as he stepped away. “Enjoy your morning.”

“Thank you,” Charlie replied. Gregory turned and continued with their run, Samson now trotting at his side on his leash. Charlie watched them go, their forms shrinking to dots on the beach.

He’d been coming to the beach for a few days in the mornings and hadn’t seen the pair before. He didn’t try to postulate why. It wasn’t like he owned the beach, just rented the bungalow across the dunes. His PT had told him he needed to walk more, and Charlie took that to mean walking to the beach counted. So what if he came and sat? His legs got him there, didn’t they?

He sighed, flexing his shoulder, feeling the tightness of the healed skin. The burns had healed, though he still felt the monumental difference along his side and to his shoulder. *Twenty-eight fucking years old and on disability.* He snorted, disgusted.

“Don’t wallow, Charles,” his physical therapist and psychiatrist had both cautioned him. “You are not to blame. There’s still a whole world out there. You’re young and healthy.”

Except he’d be walking with a cane for the rest of his life.

He wanted to pitch something, but clutched his phone tighter to restrain the impulse. Stretching his legs, he couldn’t help but notice how much muscle mass he’d lost under the thin sweats while laid up in the hospital. He’d always been a little on the thin side, but he’d worked hours every day to make himself stronger, to be a reliable member of the firehouse team.

Charlie never expected his lover to try to kill him by burning down their own house, though. A plotted suicide. A firefighter murdered in his own home. The irony wasn’t lost on him.

The burn scars stretched from his shoulder, down his back ending on his right thigh above his knee. The doctors had grafted some to minimize the largest scars, but he’d lost chunks. Skin and muscle. He shivered, closing his eyes for a moment. *Stop it. You’re alive, and he’s in jail along with his fuck toy.* They’d both planned it. How sick was that? He couldn’t just break up with Charlie.

Plucking at the top of the sweats, he popped sand off in powdery bursts. With a glance at the phone for the time, not the picture, he reached behind him for the cane he used. He was stronger now, but he kept it close for those times when his thigh gave him

problems. It was useless on the shifting sands, but he could manage that much until he hit the hard pavement to walk the few blocks on the sidewalks to his home. After attempting the sand, he knew he'd need it on the return trek.

Charlie took slow, measured steps, concentrating to make his legs work in sync in the soft sand. With the damaged hamstring and tendons, his right leg would never flex and support him the way it had before. He'd always need the cane. What made it hard was the damage to his shoulder. He had to hold his weight on that shoulder when his leg grew tired. For a man who had taken his body for granted before the fire, he knew he never would again.

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Gregory ran with Samson at his side. The light lap of the rolling waves helped him keep a steady pace, the air filled with the salt of the sea and things that a person either loved or hated about the beach. The salt spray. The humid scent of fish and water. Gregory had always loved the beach and missed it. A California transplant for four years, he knew he wasn't leaving Texas, but at least he could get a good beach fix.

After a quick time check, he made a U-turn, tugging a still-energetic Samson with him. The dog had energy to spare, but he'd be settled by the time they reached the car to drive home. He loved the morning runs and knew he needed to make them more regular. Samson's latest attempt at home decorating had made Gregory see that much. The poor couch. He groaned with mild humor. He knew what he was getting into when he adopted the rascal at three months of age. He'd just forgotten how much work there was in training and keeping all things smaller than an elephant out of his jaws. He'd been well-behaved all morning. His exuberance had kept Gregory smiling most of the run.

Until Charlie.

What would have been a slow breath was instead a head shake because he was running. Samson was the ultimate goodwill ambassador of puppy-dom. He loved everyone, and wasn't at all modest about begging for attention. "Slut," he teased. Samson wagged his tail.

Gregory noticed a slow-moving person ahead, and immediately knew it was Charlie. The man was wearing a sweater thick enough for the Canadian Rockies. This was Texas. Charlie's choice of attire dumbfounded him. As Gregory drew closer, he noticed the cane in his right hand.

Coming up from behind, Gregory was also able to follow the other man's hitched movements, the stiff stride as he balanced on his left leg and maneuvered his right in a steady motion, like he was relearning how to walk. Unconsciously, Gregory slowed his run to an easy jog. He doubted Charlie would want to know he was being spied on.

Gregory followed his awkward gait, his frown deepening as he noticed the way Charlie's leg kept trying to buckle, but he managed not to let it. It was clear the cane wouldn't help him in the sand, then noting the direction he was taking, Gregory spotted the dip in the dune Charlie was clearly aiming for. The soft sand was all but sucking his feet out from under him. He doubted with the way Charlie's head was bowed with concentration that he was aware of the pitfall looming before him.

As though aware in a sixth sense kind of way, Samson made no bones about yanking loose from Gregory's lax control and galloped up to Charlie to stand in his way.

He didn't bark, but he stood his ground, stopping Charlie in his tracks. His tail moved slowly.

"Samson," Gregory growled, not at all pleased with his behavior. So much for training. Gregory jogged to catch up.

Charlie looked over his shoulder, a questioning expression on his face.

"I'm sorry. I guess he wanted to say goodbye."

Charlie blinked, then relaxed, leaning on his left leg. "It's okay."

Gregory bent at the waist and grasped the leash out of the sand, wrapping it over his palm this time. "Do you live close by? I think Samson wants to walk you home."

Charlie's green eyes darkened, his frame reflexively weaving in the other direction. "Crummy pick-up line," he muttered.

Gregory was struck silent, then it hit him. "Oh. I'm not gay."

Charlie's head tilted.

Gregory sighed. "Look, I know you don't want the company, but you're about to fall headfirst into a sinkhole. I'm not an asshole who's going to let some guy, anyone, do that."

Charlie faced forward, searching ahead, and his eyes widened. Then he looked down. "Thanks, Samson." He grinned when the dog wagged harder. He shifted his weight, glancing to his side. "Sorry. I'm not usually this difficult."

A light smile hit Charlie's face, an actual softening of his lips in apology, and Gregory returned it. The man's green eyes were deep, like a stone green. They were brilliant in the morning sunlight. "Not a problem. We're on our cool-down anyway. If you wouldn't mind a guy just hanging out to be a friend?"

Charlie seemed to consider it, staring him in the face. "I walk slow. Might not be worth your time."

Gregory didn't let his expression change, but he caught the between-the-lines meaning in that. "Nah. Though that sweater boggles my mind. It's barely sixty out here."

Charlie shrugged, but didn't offer an explanation.

"Okay," Charlie finally said. Gregory stepped clear to let Charlie regain his balance and direction, then with Samson at his side, adjusted his stride for Charlie.

"Do you like football?" Gregory asked a few minutes later.

Charlie focused ahead, then dropped his attention to where he was walking, one stiff pace at a time. "I'll watch almost anything but golf. I just don't get the shut up and wait of the tension."

Gregory chuckled. "Me neither. I mean, who wants to whack a ball for three hundred yards only to have to hunt for it and whack it again?"

Charlie's laugh was low and short, but Gregory was sure he needed it.

"This is going to sound corny, but I'm new in Texas." *Little white lie; bad Gregory.* "Would you like to come watch a game this afternoon?"

Charlie stopped, studying him through some wicked golden lashes. "You sure you're not gay?"

"Completely." Then Gregory's devil spoke up. "It's a waste, I know."

Charlie smiled knowingly, transforming the whole brooding depth of his features. "Conceited much?"

"All the way," Gregory retorted, fighting hard not to grin like a jackass. Charlie was the first guy he'd met in ages that he genuinely felt relaxed around. He knew he'd

been too reclusive of late, stuck to his computer working. It was the cycle of the seasons though. The beach was all but deserted except for the native residents.

Charlie debated his invitation, eyeing him with some speculation in his gaze. “Why don’t you come to my place? I need to do my stretches, and the first game will have started before I’d be able to go anywhere.”

“You’re sure?”

Charlie rolled an unconcerned shoulder. “Why not? If you want beer, bring some. I don’t drink.”

That surprised Gregory, but he made a note of it for later. He liked Charlie and thought they could be good friends.

“Sure. Come on, slowpoke. Let’s go. I stink and want a shower.”

“Bastard,” Charlie mumbled.

With a wince, Gregory realized what he’d said, but noted there wasn’t any anger in Charlie’s expression or in his tone. He let out a thankful breath, signaling to Samson with the leash that he could stop sniffing the dried dune grass now.

Gregory walked with Charlie for a couple blocks, surprised he’d managed as far as he had with the bad leg and cane.

Charlie pointed. “That’s my place. The bungalow with the shit-brown siding.”

Gregory laughed. “Why don’t you change it?”

“Renting. Don’t really care.”

Gregory didn’t remark on that. A lot of people rented. He was probably getting it for a deal during the off-season by the beach. “Okay. So be back in say, two hours?”

Gregory met Charlie’s eyes, unsurprised at the dubiousness in their green depths.

“Sure. I’ll be here.”

“Want me to bring anything? Don’t want to invade and mooch.”

“Sure. You can even bring Samson if you want. He’s housebroken?”

Gregory groaned, rolling his eyes. Oh, the arguments he and Samson had over *that*. “One of the first things we covered.”

Charlie smiled at his aggrieved tone. Gregory noticed Charlie was physically using his cane now, so he decided it was time to let him go home. “I’ll go shower and stop by the store on the way. Football cannot be enjoyed without mounds of food with health warnings on it.”

“Sounds good.”

Gregory offered his hand to shake. “Should’ve done this at the beach, but hey. Nice to meet you.”

Charlie switched the cane to his other hand and offered to return the gesture. Immediately, Gregory noted the shake in his grasp. He made a point not to overwhelm the man. “You too.”

Gregory released him. “Great. See you in a while then.” With a last glance, he turned on a heel and jogged with Samson down the block, noting the name of the street when he hit the end of the sidewalk. He controlled the urge not to twist around to ensure Charlie made it home. Though the man was obviously recovering from something, he sincerely doubted he wanted anyone, even a new—or any—friend, hovering over him.

Chapter Two

Charlie heaved, bracing his torso to do another round of leg lifts. The three-pound weight killed him, but it was necessary to rebuild any of the muscle he had left. The spare bedroom was layered in mats with various weights aligned in sets along the wall. None of the weights were like the ones he used to do workouts with. Nothing was over ten pounds. In order not to overcompensate with his left side, he refused to use heavier weights. It had taken his PT about four weeks to convince him he needed to build them back up equally, though the left side would structure faster and in tighter form. He couldn't look at it as his right side not doing the same; it simply was going to rebuild at a different level. And it would never again be equal.

He longed to do the presses and knee crunches he used to, but knew those weren't happening, so he made do with the lifts, arm curls, and stretches.

Removing the weight after the last count, he stretched again, breathing a little heavier. Rolling his neck, it popped and he groaned. He was regretting inviting Gregory over. *What's a straight guy doing bugging me?* He chided himself. Okay, he wasn't bugging him, but still. Charlie's friends were all in Houston, hours away. None of them even bothered to call anymore. *I haven't made it easy for them.*

A few had come to see him in the hospital. He hadn't really been up to facing anyone right after the fire. After the truth of what Garen had done, Charlie had just felt used and beaten. He'd had no room for sympathy, or worse, pity. The firehouse crew had been supportive, but once it came out that Garen was his partner and not just his roommate... He let out a hot breath. The shit had hit the fan. They'd unanimously written him off. Charlie let them. He was useless to anyone in his current shape. He'd accepted their rejection at the time, though now he knew it was plain ignorance on their behalf. It wasn't like he'd been less of a man because he was gay. When they should've had his back, kept him strong from rescue to rehab, they'd dumped him like a ripe bag of trash. Charlie hadn't cared a whole hell of a lot at the time, and still didn't.

Not when his lover had drugged him, dragged him to bed and then set his house on fire after posting a suicide note on the internet. Five more minutes and he'd have been dead. That's what the arson investigator had told him.

That note he'd sent to God and beyond was the only reason anyone had thought to see if it was real. The note was sent to everyone on his e-mail list because Garen hadn't really cared who his closest friends were, just that he covered his bases. Well, that was where the fucker screwed up. Shithead sent the letter to his parents and to his sister, Elizabeth. The instant she got it on her Blackberry, she'd called nine-one-one and commanded their asses to his house. His sister wasn't stupid. It was because of her that Charlie learned how long Garen had been cheating on him. She'd led the charge on discovering the truth. Lying in bed, recovering from being burned, half-buried, and inhaling smoke, Charlie just hadn't given a rat's ass over anything to do with Garen. He'd made the connection as his consciousness returned and his capacity to think grew stronger. He didn't have the strength to be mad, not when he was simply trying to stay alive.

It's why he didn't drink alcohol anymore. The fucker had toasted him with Class-A bourbon and enough sleeping pills to drop a horse on its ass.

Everything from the kerosene to the leftover suicide pills were stashed in the bedroom with Charlie. How a drugged man could start a fire passed out in bed had

never occurred to Garen. For a murder attempt, it was sloppy as hell. As suicide went, Charlie had to be superhuman to accomplish all the stuff that Garen had done *while* drugged, because even an insane man would have a hell of a time imbibing that much *plus* the pills while his house burned to the ground around him.

Breathing evenly after his workout, Charlie pushed himself up and stood straight, feeling the pull in his back. A hot shower would ease the strain. Tired, but not limping as badly as he had been that morning, he aimed for the bathroom and the shower. He knew he was going to pay for sitting on the cool ground for so long.

And just think, he silently grouched. *You've only got another sixty years or so of this hell to live through.*

"Ain't I fucking lucky?" He ran a stiff hand over his hair, no longer buzz-cut but still short, then stalked to the bathroom.

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Gregory knocked on the door and waited. The bungalow was small in comparison to a few of the other homes on the street, but it looked sturdy for coastal weather. The little yard was winter dead, with sand lining the edge of the street. *Hard to get away from it.* But Gregory didn't mind. He'd been on or near one beach or another almost his whole life. He noticed there wasn't a car anywhere except his Jeep in the drive near the front door. It made him wonder a little more about what had happened to Charlie.

"The party has arrived," he announced when Charlie opened the door. Surprise was replaced by light pleasure.

"I honestly had my doubts."

Charlie looked down, that kind smile softening his lips in welcome. *Figures. The hairball would get a warmer greeting. Should just make him the icebreaker everywhere.*

"Hi, Samson." The traitor had the nerve to wag his tail. "Come on in. It's not much, but it's comfortable."

Gregory went inside, letting him close the door on the November chill. The standard hardwood floor was swept clean of sand, a typical problem. There wasn't much in view. A couch, a good-sized TV on a stand along the farthest wall with a coffee table in the middle of the room. The kitchen was to the left, with a low break wall and a baluster painted a sky blue, the same as the kitchen.

"Nothing to worry about. Okay to let him loose?" Charlie waved a hand in the universal 'go ahead' motion and then turned for the kitchen. Gregory noticed that Charlie was walking around without the cane, not as slowly or gingerly as he had been that morning. He hoped that meant he was feeling better. He didn't want to be a guest who was a burden. "I snagged some chips, dip, and some sodas," he added, lifting the three bags hanging from his fingers.

"Sounds good. I have ice. Can't live without it, even in a blizzard."

"Damn. Will you marry me?"

Charlie glanced over a shoulder, then laughed. "Careful, sailor. Someone might think you *are* gay."

"I have a confession," Gregory said while setting things out on the kitchen table.

Charlie stuttered to a stop a few feet ahead of him, his eyes wary.

Gregory rushed on, knowing Charlie thought he'd deceived him. "I used to work with a group of guys and three of them were gay. They rubbed off on me, but they were

more sane than the straight bastards I knew.” *And not nearly the assholes either*, he added to himself.

Assimilating the answer, Charlie nodded, then asked, “What did you do?” He gathered glasses for their drinks.

“Same thing I do now from home. I’m an academic translator.”

“From home? I didn’t think you could do that.”

“Well, I work with about eight major national campuses and freelance across the country. Can’t really tote that to the office.”

“Good point.” Gregory handed over the balled-up plastic shopping bags and Charlie stuffed them in a container under the kitchen sink. With freshly washed dark blond hair that was still damp, he was dressed in loose sweats and an oversized sweatshirt, looking like someone’s younger brother hanging out. “What about you?”

Charlie’s jaw tightened. “I was a firefighter near Sugar Land until about fourteen months ago. I was released.”

“Nothing doing since?”

Charlie shook his head.

Samson trotted into the kitchen, his nose to the floor, snuffling and investigating, expelling the building tension Gregory caught in Charlie’s frame. “Feel free to tell me to shut up,” Gregory said, apologizing.

Charlie lifted his chin, his green eyes losing the shadows in them. “It’s okay. Just a sore spot.”

“No doubt. I bet you were awesome,” Gregory said without even thinking about it. He just wanted Charlie to feel better, and doubted he was wrong.

Charlie swallowed. “Thanks. Grab the junk food. Let’s go see who’s playing.”

Gregory recognized evasion and a wish to drop it. Charlie quickly filled both glasses with ice and Gregory brought up the rear to get comfortable on the couch with him. The TV flickered on and he let his mind go blank with following the game.

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Charlie felt Samson plop his head onto a bare foot, immediately rolling back to sleep. It had been ages since he’d had a dog. He couldn’t keep up with one now, and Samson was a good example of why. He had endless energy, and he was going to be as large as his coffee table when he was fully grown. Regardless, those brown eyes and an innate eagerness to please sure did make him likeable.

He rocked his foot under the weight of the dog’s head and got a grunt of pleasure.

The sound drew Gregory’s attention to the floor. “Sheesh. He’s such a slut.”

Charlie’s lips quirked. It was a shame he wasn’t gay. Charlie peeked at him, catching him unawares watching the game again. Golden blond hair long enough to grasp, but trimmed. Warm brown eyes. Remembering him running by on the beach brought to mind his firm chest, nearly hairless except for a thin line running below his collarbone to meet on his sternum. He had strong legs, and he hated to admit he’d noticed so much, but a great ass. He hadn’t looked at a soul with any kind of interest since he left the hospital.

It was probably better that he wasn’t gay. Charlie wasn’t interested in even considering a relationship again, but a friend was something else. Except for his sister, he didn’t talk to anyone, didn’t see anyone. The friends he’d had in Houston were in his past. They didn’t want to have anything to do with him if he couldn’t go out and party

and dance like he used to. Mentally he shrugged. It was their choice. Having someone close by on the island wouldn't be so bad.

"I'm glad Samson stopped," Charlie said quietly a couple hours later as they gathered up the remains of their snackfest and empty cans after the game. He caught Gregory's brown eyes. "If you're new to Texas, I can tell you where there are some great sightseeing spots. I'm not much on clubs anymore, but those are all over Houston and Corpus anyway."

Gregory's gaze grew confused for a heartbeat, then he replied, "Oh, great. Thanks." He carried decimated chip bags into the kitchen, trailing Charlie.

Sitting had stiffened Charlie's leg some, but he could walk without it bitching. "I guess what I'm sucking at saying is...thanks for coming over. It's been quiet since I moved in, and I hadn't realized how much."

Gregory's eyes warmed to a gleaming mocha. Faint streaks of black pulled them out of the boring column. Something told him Gregory had a certain mischievousness about him with the way his eyes sparkled. That flare went with the comments on the beach. Gregory made him want to laugh, something he hadn't been doing lately.

"Happy to waste a Sunday with you. Feel free to repay the favor. You're welcome whenever." Spotting the magnetic pad and pen Charlie kept on his refrigerator, Gregory wrote down his address and phone number. He handed it to Charlie expectantly.

Grasping it between his fingers, he carefully wrote out his information at the bottom, then tore the portion off. With Samson on his leash once more, Gregory headed home.

Watching Gregory and Samson leave, Charlie wondered idly how much shit his sister was going to give him at finding a friend. He wasn't exactly in the third grade now, but it had been a long time just the same.