

Chapter One

Jack followed the gyrating mob of bodies on the dance floor, idly rolling the glass on the table between his fingers in utter indifference, feeling the ice tap at the glass more than hearing it. Some of the crowd was in skintight leather, others in denim or silk. All were men. None appealed to Jack. He hadn't danced with one, not that many hadn't asked or plied their way into a hello with a drink. It didn't matter in the least to him. He wasn't there to cruise or to be picked up.

He should have been having a good time. He wasn't.

Thumping bass music vibrated the floor, the plastic seat under his ass, even the air with the lights swinging and sparking to the rhythm. The blaring cacophony was enough to give a person epilepsy. His cousin, Trevi, had dragged him to Slick's, and he really wished he hadn't. Turning thirty was total bullshit in his book. Especially when doing it alone.

Hell, Trevi was having a better time than Jack was, dancing, uncaring that his partners were men. His cousin was a party animal. He could find a pack of hyenas and have a good time. He'd kept an eye on his younger cousin, but figured if he wanted to play in this pool for whatever the bounty, then he'd better be prepared to pay at the door. So far, Trevi had managed to avoid any real issues, and Jack was losing interest in keeping tabs on him. Might be why he hadn't been back to the table in a dog's age. Maybe Trevi had figured it all out. Maybe. He wasn't holding his breath.

Jack lifted his glass to slurp down the latest concoction that had been set before him. He hadn't had to order one drink yet. He'd lost count, and had quit bothering to thank the sharks swimming in ever-tightening circles for their largesse. If they wanted to toss drinks his way, let them. He didn't have to work for another three days. Jack could get wasted in a swan dive of FUBAR proportions. And he was certainly considering doing just that.

"Damn it, Ryan. I said leave me alone." Someone jostled his chair, but he ignored the bickering couple.

"But, babe, it was a one-time deal."

Petulant whining. Yeah, that's a real man there, folks.

"Fuck you!"

A body slammed into Jack, splashing his drink over his hand. He set it down and stood. Probably something he shouldn't have done since he was half-lit like a Christmas tree, but no one started shit around him.

At six-three he wasn't huge—there were bigger men in all ways than him. But woe be to the one who dared to meet and keep his gaze.

"What's the deal?" His voice was low, yet still easily heard over the pounding of the music.

"None of your business."

Jack assumed the belligerent ass was Ryan, his counterpart, as of yet, unnamed.

He stared the dickhead square in the eye. “It becomes my business when you start getting physical.”

The man who had obviously been determined to end whatever was going on took Jack by surprise. He wasn’t some little twink, but a specimen of gorgeousness in a dark blue, skin tight t-shirt and ass-hugging denim. And was apparently the one who had plowed into Jack. It was more likely he’d been shoved, taking in their faces.

“Brant, seriously. He didn’t mean shit.”

“Obviously, neither did I if you let him do you.”

“You were late!”

“Don’t fucking pin it on me. You shouldn’t have let the ass suck you off!”

Jack had heard enough and was sure he didn’t need to know more. He was ready to avoid a lover’s spat, but that was when Ryan went a little too far. Thrusting a hand out, he wrapped unforgiving fingers around Brant’s throat, yanking him bodily forward. He wasn’t a lot taller than Brant, but did outweigh him with muscle that looked gifted by barbell.

Ryan gave Jack a smug look. “Sorry for disturbing you.”

Brant growled. “Let me go, you asshole.”

“Sorry. Can’t hear you.” Ryan began to step away, as though this was nothing unusual between the two. But by the flare of anger in Brant’s eyes, it was.

Jack heard his request clearly. He reached into his back pocket, aware Ryan had already dismissed him. Opening his bi-fold in clear view, he calmly but clearly ordered, “Let the man go, Ryan.” The flicker of his badge was unmistakable in the shimmer of the glittering lights.

A small gathering had quieted to watch the drama, but the club patrons were mostly oblivious. For that, Jack was grateful. He wasn’t on the clock and he was halfway to drunk. Just what he needed going on a report.

Slowly, Ryan’s fingers flexed, as he stood nearly eye-to-eye with Jack. Brant was right at six feet at a guess, and sleek as a leopard. Sinewy strength that, at the moment, was held frozen as Ryan debated pushing harder for domination.

Seconds crawled by until he relinquished Brant’s throat. He lifted a snarled lip at Jack, a “this round” silent challenge in his expression. Stepping away, he spun and disappeared into the crowd. Jack waved his hand. “Go,” he mouthed, and like a gun had been shot, the crowd vanished.

Jack slid into his chair, scouring the crowd for Trevi. He was done. Ready to get his ass home and in bed.

“Thank you.” Brant stood at his shoulder.

“Don’t mention it.”

“I don’t want to impose, but can I sit for a minute?”

Jack raised his gaze and noted the other man still looked shaken. “Sure.” He motioned to a chair at his side. “Is he like that all the time?” he asked, once Brant was seated and breathing calmly.

Brant shrugged, leaning on his elbows on the table, avoiding the slopped over liquor of Jack's drink. "Not sure. We only dated a few weeks." At least it was clear Brant had no intention of continuing with the jackass.

Glancing at him, Jack had the oddest notion he knew this man. Probably from the too many "whatevers" he'd had to drink. A fresh something slid onto the table, the waiter motioning across the room.

Lifting his eyes, Jack spotted the gift giver; a decent-looking businessman with steel rim glasses and a cute smile. He dipped his head in thanks, but didn't touch it. "Fuck."

"Tell me to kiss off if you want, but who pissed in your Cheerios?"

Jack snorted. "Here." He offered Brant the fresh drink. "Enjoy." He stood from his seat. "If another black haired mongrel that looks like me shows up, tell him I went home."

"What's your name?" Brant asked quickly, green eyes expectantly focused on him.

"Jack."

"And the mongrel?" Brant asked with a light grin.

"My cousin, Trevi."

"I can do that. And thanks, Jack."

"No problem." He gave Brant a final once-over, stumped at the sense of recognition and knowing he was too drunk to really put it together. He walked outside to the cool autumn breeze, inhaling deep to help clear the alcohol fumes in his head. His ears were practically ringing from the insane volume inside. Taking his time, he walked to the side of the building, ready to find a cab.

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Brant followed the large cop out of the bar with his gaze. "And Mom said there were no good men left," he whispered under his breath. Brant had barely walked into the bar when he learned of Ryan's infidelity. He'd missed the backroom show by only a mere ten minutes. *Late my ass.* But better now to know Ryan couldn't be faithful. The violent streak he hadn't expected, but he wasn't a wimp. He was a third degree black belt, something he rarely exposed, his ace in the hole. He knew he wasn't huge, but he didn't lament the fact. Brant was sure the fuck not a pushover either. The situation just hadn't left him many options. The bar was packed tighter than sardines, and the gawkers had penned them in like sideshow freaks at a circus. Jack had stepped in before he'd had a chance or the need to defend himself.

He pushed the drink away, not wanting to accept another man's offering. Now that he and Ryan were done, he didn't even want to stay. Slick's wasn't his kind of hangout; it was a little too wild, a little too loud.

A younger version of Jack bounced into the table. "Hey! Where's Jack?"

"Went home. Trevi?"

The laughing man with rolling dark eyes just like Jack's nodded. "Spoilsport. He should have had a better night. You only turn thirty once."

It was Jack's birthday? Brant didn't say anything in reply. The man had definitely not been interested in anything to do with it being his birthday.

"Okay. Well, so long as you know."

"Yeah, no worries. He's a grump, thought this would cheer him up." Trevi leaned in as though to whisper in a conspirator's way. "He's gay."

Brant laughed. "You're in a gay bar, Trevi."

"So? Freaking dance fiends!" Someone pulled at the belt at his waist, and Brant burst out with short laughter as Trevi was yanked to the dance floor with a drunken shriek of surprise. Brant hoped he didn't do something he'd regret in the morning. Namely, go home with a gay man.

Brant shook his head. Trevi looked like a grown man, younger than Jack, but old enough to know what he was getting in to. He slipped from the chair he'd borrowed and apologized as he accidentally bumped into someone.

Ryan's feral grin met him just as he encircled a wrist and bent one of Brant's arms behind his back. "Hi, honey. Ready to go home?"

Brant drew a calming breath. His muscles clenched under the strain of the hold on his arm, but he knew he could escape. Ryan was overconfident, expecting Brant to simply follow and obey. He was the greater fool for it.

Brant walked in front of Ryan through the doors into the cool evening. September was brisk at the higher elevations. Closer to the coast, it wouldn't be so noticeable after the sun set. "Ryan, let me go." He made the request firm. Ryan didn't even slow, as though he hadn't heard, still herding Brant toward the parking lot.

They walked calmly until Brant made his move. He bent his knee, throwing his weight off balance. Using his free elbow to take Ryan off his guard, he then twisted to land a jabbed knee into Ryan's stomach. Ryan sagged with the wind knocked out of him and Brant punched him on the temple with the broadside of his fist. He went down like a felled log within seconds.

"No, *honey*, I'm not going anywhere with you," Brant stated firmly.

"Holy shit."

Brant spun, unaware they'd had an audience. A smile rose when he recognized Jack. Then Brant realized what he'd just seen. "You're not going to arrest me, are you? He was trying to take me against my will."

"I saw him." Jack's gaze flicked to the man on the ground, then up to Brant again. "You... That was explosive. You were free before I even said a word."

Looking at the dark haired man before him, he noted the difference between him and Trevi... Trevi! "Hey, is your cousin safe in there? He does know it's a gay bar, right?" Sharks could hurt a tender, inexperienced thing like the cute, young man.

"He knows." Jack's expression cooled. He grimaced, then, "He's gay, but hasn't quite figured it out. He plays too much. One of these days, it's going to catch up to him."

Brant cleared the space between them, approaching Jack. "What are you doing out here? Thought you were going home?"

“Waiting for a cab.”

Brant dug his keys out of his front pocket. “Come on. I owe you.”

Ryan moaned, shakily rising to his hands and knees. Jack seemed to debate, maybe considering arresting Ryan instead, then nodded.

Brant waited for Jack to settle in his car to get directions.

“You really didn’t need me earlier,” Jack mumbled, his head resting with his eyes closed.

“Yes and no. I couldn’t have stopped him in the club. I do appreciate you doing that.”

Jack snorted and Brant slid a glance in his direction, careful to pay attention to his driving. “Trevi said it was your birthday.” The radio was off, so the words were soft spoken.

A wide shoulder lifted. “Yeah.” The tone was clear. *Don’t want to talk about it.*

“So, are you a beat cop, a detective? Vice?”

“Just a regular beat cop.”

And sour persimmons were sweeter than that answer. Jack was a prickled pickle. For some reason, Brant felt drawn to the surly man. He intrigued Brant even if all his efforts were fruitless to learn more. He watched the road, listening as Jack’s breathing evened out to a light doze.

Stealing peeks to his side, he noticed Jack wasn’t bad looking. In fact, if he wasn’t grimacing or snarling, he was very appealing. A masculine jaw, firm lips with a teasing fullness to the bottom one, a slightly sharp nose with a bump on the bridge telling it had been broken at least once, and espresso black eyes he remembered seeing earlier walking with Jack to the car. Not quite onyx but so brown they could fool anyone. The man’s physique was incredible on top of it. Solid abs, thick arms and thighs, and his ass was solid as steel if the view Brant had of Jack’s departure was to be believed. Jack was the kind of man that women sighed over and bemoaned their loss for being gay.

The kind of man Brant hungered for.

He let out a slow breath, concentrating on his driving. No sense in dreaming about this one. Even he recognized the signs of an unattainable heart.

Chapter Two

Jack waited for the ambulance to clear the bay before leaving his patrol car. He separated himself from the coming moments as much as he could, but it didn't matter. DV calls still got to him. More than half the time, the victims of the attack wouldn't press charges, which made him grit his jaw until pain sliced his brain into shards. Until someone died. And the cycle would repeat with a new attack, a new victim, a new fear that he couldn't stop.

Closing his eyes, he drew a steady breath through his nose. The sound of the ambulance doors smacking closed had him crack an eye. Slowly, it lumbered out of the circle, crisp autumn air mocking the coldness in his chest. He doubted anything could be colder than his own heart.

With his computer, papers, and camera in hand, he exited the car, to stride through the ER doors.

He greeted the duty nurse behind her station when he was close enough. "Hi, Janet."

The mature, fuller-figured redhead who usually worked his shift nodded at his approach. "Hi, Officer Torres." She glanced at a screen on her computer. "Give them about five more minutes. I think she was being given stitches. She didn't want to be admitted."

"Okay. Thanks."

Jack wrote the information down. When he was finished, he strode with a relaxed gait for the ER curtains behind the duty station. The ER was quiet at the moment, only the curtained-off room where the domestic violence assault was being treated and one other patient. By the view of the trim woman sitting in bed with her legs crossed reading a book while hooked up to heart monitors, it appeared very nonemergency to Jack.

Staff in scrubs and white coats alike scurried through, gathering files, moving machines, chatting in passing, adding to the general chaos of a hospital's working innards. The ER was like a well-oiled machine. All he knew was he was glad he wasn't on their side of it. Once was enough.

His step faltered when he neared the drawn curtain, hearing a voice he knew, a voice that belonged to a face that had haunted him for almost two weeks, since the night of his birthday.

"Okay, Darcy. You're cleaned up. I'm going to write you a prescription for a painkiller and an antibiotic ointment to help keep the stitched cuts from scarring. If you have any questions about either, ask before you leave, or call when you get them." He must have paused for an answer, then he continued, "If someone's not here already, an officer will need to take a statement about the assault. I recommend you listen, and really consider pressing charges this time."

His tone was light, gentle, so caring. Soothing, flowing around him and the woman behind the curtain. Jack's eyes grew unfocused as he remembered the few short

words they'd shared the night the doctor had offered him a ride home. Why hadn't he ever noticed Brant before? Had he always been at Arbor Heights Medical Center?

Focusing, Jack found the computer clutched between his fingers. He cleared his throat, alerting them to his presence.

The curtain shook then slid on rings that screeched with a metallic rasp on the bar overhead. Brant had his back to Jack but he knew it was him. He was dropping a pen into his white coat pocket, his stethoscope hanging like a long neon snake from around his neck. "Hang tight, Darcy."

Brant startled when he spun, green eyes widening behind narrow frames and thin lenses that made chocolate lashes richer. "Jack." It was a breathed gasp. He recovered quickly, a friendly smile on his lips. Green eyes flicked to the name badge of his uniform. "Sorry. Officer Torres."

"I didn't know you worked this shift," Jack offered.

"Transferred. I only filled in as needed before."

Jack nodded. Speaking over his shoulder, Brant said, "I'll be back in a few minutes, Darcy. Listen to Officer Torres. He's a good man. He can help you."

Jack wasn't prepared for the blanket vote of approval, or the spear of longing for more that came with it. He knew he didn't deserve it. If Brant knew just how badly Jack had failed... With a quick shared glance, Brant left Jack with the reason he was there, a young woman who didn't deserve being beaten so bad she needed to be in the hospital.

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Brant felt his heart thudding against his ribs. *Jack Torres*. He quickly grabbed the paperwork and slips for his patient to get her the painkiller and ointment. It was all a ruse to hide his real reaction to seeing the tall cop again. His skin felt tight and he knew if he so much as looked, his situation would be noticeably, embarrassingly, apparent beneath the waist of his scrubs. He hadn't given much credence to the attraction he'd felt the night they'd met, but he guessed what they said about men in uniform was true. Jack was magnificent in his. He knew parts of his body had caught onto that fact and were brazenly taking notes. He surreptitiously rolled his hips, determined to derail the burgeoning throb of desire.

Standing at the nurses' station, he filled out the required forms nearly on autopilot, even as his gaze crept repeatedly to the enclosed room where Jack was taking Darcy's statement. He hated seeing the woman in the ER again. Maybe Jack would be able to convince her that she didn't deserve the treatment her boyfriend was giving her. Brant knew he'd tried, with little effect.

He dropped his focus when the image of a broad chest and wide shoulders in city blues filled his mind. Damn, the man was gorgeous. And daunting. Did he ever smile? He certainly hadn't expected to ever see Jack again, though he couldn't help himself from thinking about him, or even more secretly, dreaming about him.

The murmur of voices was low, but the rumble of Jack's was unmistakable. The man was sexy no matter what he was doing. Listening, Brant realized he was also as

patient as any man he'd ever seen, coaxing information out of Darcy. Details. Brant hoped this time her boyfriend was put behind bars. A man who abused another deserved jail time. Brant had no patience for physical abuse.

Secretly hungry for another glimpse of the quiet cop, curiosity kept pulling his attention in the curtain's direction. Hoping she gave Jack the information as well, was another reason he couldn't stop staring. And it hadn't gone unnoticed. Though, thankfully, Janet didn't have a clue to why he couldn't seem to stop sneaking glances in the direction of the drawn curtain.

"He's good. Darcy will be fine," Janet remarked at his shoulder.

Brant looked up, discovering her watching the enclosed room as well. "I've never worked with him."

"He's an excellent counselor. He's as big as a building, but I've never seen a more quiet spoken man."

Brant heard the admiration in Janet's observations. "You've worked with him for a while?"

"Almost two years now."

Brant signed off on Darcy's release. "When they're done, she's cleared. Just make sure she gets these."

Janet set the offered pages in the patient file. She would finish up the insurance papers now that he was done.

Brant swept a gaze across the ER. "At least it's been quiet tonight." The patient on the monitors had driven herself in for heart palpitations. Probably anxiety, but Brant couldn't fault her for being cautious. He rubbed the back of his neck.

"Dr. Teller?"

"Hm?" Brant swung to face Janet.

"Go get some coffee. You look like you're going to fall over." She nudged him on the shoulder with stiff fingers.

"I think I will. Want something?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine."

With a last glance, hoping for just a glimpse of the Hispanic brick wall, Brant walked through the ER doors to the coffee shop at the end of the block.

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Twenty minutes and eight photos later, Jack left Darcy waiting for a family member to come collect her. She'd listened to his advice, hopefully taking it to heart. He didn't get to say goodbye to Janet as he walked past. She was on the phone with someone looking for a missing person, by the sounds of things.

What he didn't expect was to find Brant leaning against his car's fender, a cup of coffee in one hand, and another large steaming cup on the hood.

"Hope you like them sweet. It's the only way I keep going." Brant lifted an engaging smile as he neared.

"I had no idea."

Brant shrugged. "It took me by surprise too." He palmed the extra cup, offering it. "Is she going to press charges?"

"I think so. She's still shaken up." Brant waited as Jack opened his cruiser and emptied his hands. "She agreed to counseling."

"That's an improvement right there. I tried last time."

Jack wasn't surprised to hear this wasn't the young blonde's first trip to the ER. "She's a repeat?"

Brant nodded sadly. "Yeah."

Jack sipped at the coffee, thankful for the warmth filling his chest with the evening breeze cutting through the ER alley. He sucked at his teeth. "You weren't kidding. I think I just got a cavity."

Brant grinned and Jack noticed the dimple to the left of his mouth. Mentally, he backpedaled. He shouldn't be noticing anything about the man. He knew he didn't want to be, no matter how tempting Dr. Teller may be. He wasn't tempting for Jack. He remained firm on that. Jack had absolutely no interest in the man.

"Maybe dinner some night?" Brant asked with a flicked look, first at Jack's lips then his eyes.

Jack stiffened. "No."

Brant's green eyes darkened behind the lightweight glasses. Who knew glasses could add class as well as a sense of brains?

"Damn. That didn't even take you two seconds."

"I can't."

Brant hesitated, rolling his steaming cup between flat palms. He readjusted himself to lean more on his ass rather than face Jack. "Oh. I thought you weren't involved."

Jack let out a sigh, gliding to lean against the vehicle with Brant at his side. He braced his arms over his chest, letting steam waft upward. The vanilla sweetness reminded him he hadn't eaten lunch. "I'm not. I don't date either."

Silence sank between them. The sound of traffic drifted to them, the coming of winter making the normal sounds seem muffled. "Okay. Not dinner. Not a date. Football and wings? I'll even scratch my ass if you want, belch like a fool."

Jack managed to not snort coffee, because he happened to be drawing a sip when Brant said that. "Definitely not a date image," he muttered. Coughing, he cleared his throat.

"Exactly." Brant's green eyes were a unique color blend. Mostly green, with a hint of ice blue in sharp streaks, like lightning strikes, and right at that moment, they sparkled with his silent mirth. Jack couldn't remember ever seeing a gaze like his.

The hollow ache was there, reminding him of every reason he should continue to say no, but he was powerless when Brant asked, "So, Sunday good?"

The words slipped out before his brain could cut them off at the pass. "I'm off."

Brant withdrew a card from a pocket. "Call before then, and I'll tell you where to go."

Jack reached for the card before he realized what he'd just done. His heart thudded like a crazed rabbit into his ribs. Fear made his mouth dry.

When he hesitated, Brant slipped the card between two of his fingers. He reflexively tightened on the stiff business card. "Not a date. Just hanging out." Brant stood straight and saluted with his coffee. "And thanks for what you did with Darcy."

"Dr. Teller!" Janet's voice crackled through the exterior speakers of the breezeway.

"Goodbye, Jack."

Then before Jack could argue, Brant was jogging toward the ER doors for the latest emergency.