

Unguarded
By Lou Kelly
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WARNING: This sample contains sexually explicit content which is suitable only for mature readers.

Chapter 1

Derick Britt cringed as he surveyed the newspapers and magazines arrayed on the news stand. Every single headline, with the exception of the *New York Times*, screamed a variation of the same theme: **Scottish Rocker Heath MacFayden Outed in Gay Sex Video!**

"Christ," Derrick moaned, picking up a copy of the *NY News*. He hunched low in his bomber jacket to protect against the bitter January wind whipping through the skyscrapers. "Chloe must be freaking out." His older sister was an entertainment manager, and four months ago they'd toasted with champagne after she'd been hired to manage the career of music's reigning heartthrob.

The same career that was currently flushing down the toilet.

Bart Bartholomew, Derick's business partner and best friend since their military days, glanced over at the headline and the front page photo. It was a still shot taken from the video of a clearly naked Heath MacFayden, half eclipsed by the torso of a man who was obviously fucking him. Most of the photo had been blurred, but it wasn't difficult to tell what was going on. Heath's back was arched, his lips were parted, and his reddish blond hair fell in mussed-up waves around his face.

Bart whistled. "Holy shit. That's porn quality." Then he shrugged. "But the guy's a rock star. Scandals are their bread and butter."

Derick tried not to stare. Tried and failed. "Sex scandals? Yeah. Gay sex scandals? Not so much." He turned to go, but Bart handed the newsstand guy a couple

dollars for the paper.

Bart smirked. "Here. I just bought you hours of late night enjoyment, didn't I?"

Derick punched Bart in the shoulder. "Perv." But then he sighed, brushing his fingers over his cropped black hair and freshly shaven face. "The media is having a field day. Honestly, I feel bad for Chloe, but other than that ..." He shrugged. "The guy's getting what he deserves. Chloe says he's an uncooperative prick when he isn't on stage."

"Aren't they all?"

Derick and Bart headed down 42nd Street side-by-side. Both of them were over six feet of solid muscle, one dark and one fair. The crowd parted, one of the many advantages to being built like linebackers. As they walked, Derick breathed in the smell of exhaust fumes from the morning traffic combined with the scent of strong coffee wafting from the street vendor's carts. If the stuff wasn't such sludge he would've stopped and bought the largest cup available.

"Most of Chloe's clients are decent," Derick said, keeping his head bent into the wind. "I mean, there are always a few divas, but they're not all selfish bastards who refuse to take their manager's advice. Chloe says Heath barely speaks to her even when it comes to business, and he didn't even buy her a Christmas present."

Bart sighed dramatically. "You didn't buy me a Christmas present," he said, "and we've been running B&B Security together for eight years now." He adopted an over-the-top protruding-lip expression. "In fact, I was hurt. Deeply."

"I bought you something," Derick mumbled.

"No. You didn't."

"I didn't?"

Bart shook his head. "Now who's the selfish prick?" He waited a beat, but then he laughed and slapped Derick's chest right where Derick had taken a bullet ten years prior when they'd served together in Afghanistan. "I'm just kidding, man. This is my present. Every Christmas and birthday for the rest of my life. Don't think I forget it."

"Don't start that again," Derick groaned. "If I'd known the bullet was heading straight for your ass, I never would've moved. I thought I was saving you from a head shot."

Bart grinned. He stopped walking and turned, pulling up his trench coat so that his ass was on display. "Yes, but just look at what you saved. Such perfection. I don't know why your sister can't see what she's missing. If she could stop thinking of me as 'her kid brother's little friend', she'd realize what a hunk of manhood she's ignoring. I mean, come on. We're thirty-one years old and there's nothing little about either one of us. The woman is blind."

This was well-worn territory, so Derick just laughed. "I don't know, man. If it's not your ass she has a problem with, it must be your dick."

"As if." Bart made a choking sound, but at least he started walking again. He grabbed the newspaper out of Derick's hand and made a show of flipping through it. The pages crackled in the wind. "Speaking of asses ..." He raised an eyebrow. "Even a straight man can see that this Heath guy could be an underwear model if his music career tanks. Did Chloe ever introduce you? Maybe you and he could —"

"No," Derick said, cutting him off. "Wouldn't want to meet him even if she

offered. I'd probably punch his smug face in for how he treats Chloe."

"Huh. So the Christmas gift faux pas is really that bad? Because I'd say this guy turns you on. It's rare to see you riled up."

"I'm not riled up," Derick spat. "Forgive me if I have a hard time with yet another celebrity playing straight for the fans while taking it up the ass in private. I don't have any respect for that kind of homophobic pandering."

"Hmm," Bart murmured. "Did Chloe advise him to come out once she took over as his manager? Because when your fan base is primarily screaming females who fantasize about being fucked by you, and hard core rock guys who want to live vicariously through you, it can't be an easy call." He stepped up to the curb. "Let's get a taxi. It's too cold to walk."

A few minutes later a yellow cab had maneuvered through traffic and stopped by the curb. Once they'd climbed inside, Derick felt his muscles unclench and his fingers begin to thaw. He sighed, hoping there would be decent coffee at the meeting with their potential client.

"Honestly, I don't think Chloe even knew he was gay or bi, or whatever he is," Derick said at last. "But if she'd known ... yeah. I think she would've told him to be honest, fans or no fans. She's the one who urged me to come out once I got home from Afghanistan."

"True," Bart agreed. "She urged you to come out because before that *you were still in the closet.*"

Derick narrowed his eyes at the pointed words. "That's different. We were in the

military, not the cover of magazines."

Bart patted his shoulder. "Keep telling yourself that if it makes you feel superior."

Heat flooded Derick's cheeks. "Why are you defending this guy?"

"Honestly?" Bart asked. "I don't know. Maybe it's because you're always so damn hard on people, and yes, that includes yourself. So Heath MacFayden hasn't been the poster boy for the gay pride movement? He's what ... twenty-two? Twenty-three? Were you so confident in your sexuality at that age?"

Derick frowned. Truth be told, if it hadn't been for Chloe's unconditional support, he might never have come out. When their mom split, Chloe had taken on a surrogate mother role. Between dealing with their mom's absence and their alcoholic father, their childhood had made them tough as nails, but Chloe had also managed to become one of the most nurturing people Derick knew. The combination was no doubt what made her a natural fit for her job. A job that had gone from struggling start-up to exclusive agency overnight, thanks to a certain rock star client.

Fine. Maybe he *was* being hard on the guy.

"Meanwhile," Bart continued, "Heath MacFayden is both a musical genius and good-looking, so *most* people who had a chance to meet him would consider themselves lucky. They'd finagle an invitation to some star-studded party from their sister, and while they were at it, they'd snag an invitation for their best friend knowing that, as a good entertainment manager, Chloe would be in attendance. Then they'd all drink a lot, live a little, and maybe, just maybe, at the end of the night it could be *you* on the cover of this newspaper."

Derick rolled his eyes. "You're insane. You know that? And all you really want is a date with my sister."

"That goes without saying," Bart agreed. "But it doesn't change the fact that you're too controlled. We have to be for our line of work – I get that -- but when that control extends into your personal life, it isn't healthy. I don't even remember the last time you went out on a date or had a one-off."

"I don't do one-offs," Derick said, gritting his teeth. "They're messy, pointless, and unsafe. And when would I have time for a relationship?"

"There. You've proved my point. You're lonely and repressed, so lighten up. We all know you're a toppy bastard, so finagle a meeting with Mr. Hot Bottom and –" Whatever Bart had been about to say caught in his throat as he flipped the page of the *NY News*. He whistled. "Holy crap. This guy gives sex scandal a new definition."

The largest picture on the page showed Heath bent over someone's desk, with a man's hand gripping his neck. The man's leather-clad hips blocked most of what might have made the photo obscene, but Heath's distinctive tattoos, a tribal pattern that went from his left shoulder and circled around his bicep, made it completely obvious that he was the man being dominated.

And Derick had to admit, Bart was right. The guy was fucking hot. He had a masculine, sculpted physique, with broad shoulders and ripped muscles, but he combined it with tousled, tawny hair, fuck-me hazel eyes, and an almost boyish face. Pure jerk-off material.

If only he wasn't a jerk.

Despite himself, Derick was getting uncomfortably hard, so he shifted in his seat. "Shouldn't we ... uh ... discuss the meeting before we get there? You have the file for ProTech Industries?"

"You mean, the file you're holding?" Bart smirked at him. "Yeah, *we could* discuss the meeting, but what is there to talk about? Paranoid cheating CEO afraid of his vindictive wife. I'd say these photos are a lot more interesting. Like this one. You can see the curve of the guy's bare ass. I'm honestly surprised they printed that without blurring it out. Hell, you can practically glimpse the man's package if you look –"

Derick swatted at the paper. "Okay. Enough. You've had your fun."

"Oh no, my friend," Bart said as the taxi pulled to a stop at their destination. "The fun will be watching you squirm through this boring meeting with a hard-on." He ripped out the picture of Heath from the newspaper and shoved it into the pocket inside Derick's jacket, batting his eyelashes. "Keep him close to your heart, lover boy."

Derick sighed. Some days he truly had to wonder. Would it be wrong to pummel his best friend before he'd even had his morning coffee?

Chapter 2

Derick should've pummeled Bart when he'd had the chance. Just as his friend predicted, the meeting had been pure torture. The CEO of ProTech Industries was an older guy who'd rambled on and on about protecting his assets from the vindictiveness of his scorned wife. During the entire meeting Derick had been conscious of the news clipping burning a hole in his pocket.

Every time he thought about it, he imagined Heath MacFayden bent over a desk, waiting to be fucked, and his hard-on kicked back to life. Now after a solid hour, his balls were throbbing and all he wanted to do was find a discreet place to jerk off. Instead, before they even got out of the polished, high-rise building his cell phone rang.

"Derick Britt."

"Der? It's Chloe? Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"Nope. Bart and I just got out of a meeting."

Bart waved urgently. "Refer to me as your sexy friend Bart."

Derick covered the phone. "What? No. I'm not doing that." He paused, tuning back in. "Sorry, Chlo. I was talking to Bart. What did you say?"

"I asked if we could meet up today. I need to talk to you about something important."

"Family stuff? Everything okay with Dad and Lil? The twins?"

Their father had been sober for a decade now, and a few years back he'd married a younger woman with twin fourteen year-old girls. Derick and Chloe adored Lil and the

kids.

"They're fine. This is about business."

Derick frowned. Chloe never mixed business with her personal life. Despite what Bart wanted to believe about invitations to parties and red carpet events, Chloe had never actually invited him to anything related to her clients. She took their privacy seriously and Derick respected that stance. People who spent their life being stared at didn't need their manager introducing her kid brother for kicks.

"Yeah sure, Chlo. I can come over now if you're not stuck in meetings."

Bart was elbowing him in the ribs. "And you can bring your sexy friend Bart."

It occurred to Derick that Chloe hadn't said whether she meant her business or his. "And uh, I can bring Bart."

Chloe laughed. "Would that be your sexy friend Bart? I can hear him through the phone, you know."

"The one and only."

"Yeah, so how about ... no? Just you, Derick, okay? I want to keep this on the down-low. If you're free, maybe we could meet for an early lunch. I have a meeting at twelve thirty, but if I cancel my conference call I could slip away right now and we could meet up at Main Street Deli."

Derick felt his pulse kick up a notch. Wasn't like Chloe to be vague. She knew he worried too much. This was exactly what made him good at his job, but the habit wreaked havoc in his personal life. "All right. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"You're sure I'm not keeping you from anything?"

"I'm sure. Bart just took on a new client," Derick said, shooting a wicked grin at his friend, "so he needs to head back and take care of the paperwork, but I'm free."

"Bastard," Bart growled. They hadn't actually discussed who would act as bodyguard for the paranoid CEO until the man's divorce was final. Usually they flipped a coin, but hell if Derick wanted this job. The man rubbed him the wrong way. Besides, if Bart didn't want the gig they could always contract it out. They made good money acting as middlemen for other security professionals.

"Thanks, hon," Chloe said. "I knew I could count on you."

They said goodbye and Derick clicked off his phone.

Bart shook his head sadly. "I thought you loved me, dude. How am I ever going to get in your sister's pants without your help?"

Derick stepped up to the curb and hailed a cab. "If you're so desperate to get laid, maybe you could try your luck with the CEO's ex-wife," he said as the cab maneuvered through traffic and pulled up to the curb. "Sleeping with your cheating ex-husband's bodyguard would be pretty solid revenge."

To Derick's dismay Bart appeared to consider the idea. "Kidding," Derick hollered over his shoulder as he slid into the cab. "I was kidding, Bart!"

* * *

The Main Street Deli was where he and Chloe always met for lunch when they got together. When Derick stepped inside, he noticed they'd redesigned the eating area with tall, mahogany tables. Made him realize how long it had been since he and Chloe

had done more than talk on the phone. Ever since she'd taken over as Heath MacFayden's manager, every minute of her time had been scheduled.

Chloe was already there, sitting at a table with her chicken salad and iced tea. Everyone said she looked like a female version of him. Or maybe he looked like a male version of her since she was three years older. Either way, they both had the same ebony hair, smoky blue eyes, strong features, and sturdy build. Chloe was a beautiful woman, but she wasn't a stick figure, which was one of the many things Derick appreciated about her.

Today, she was wearing a gray tailored pant suit with silver heels, and her long nails clicked against the table as she studied a pile of newspapers she'd brought along. Her lips were pursed in a frown, and she looked intimidating. In fact, every table around hers was empty and Derick wondered if that was a coincidence.

Derick ordered a pastrami on rye then slid up beside his sister, wrapping her into a hug. "Hey, sis. Fancy meeting you here."

She finally looked up, smiled, then kissed his cheek. "Hi, stranger. Did you order?"

"Yup." Derick nodded at the papers. "What are you looking at?"

Chloe sighed. "As if you don't know. You and everyone else in America. I swear, this is a PR nightmare. You wouldn't believe what a madhouse the office is right now. I'll probably be working until midnight, and you can be damn sure I wouldn't have left if this weren't important."

"That bad, huh?"

"Worse. It's a perfect storm. If Heath were already out of the closet, or if the video was with a woman, we'd be fine. Better than fine. We'd be basking in the free publicity. Hell, even if he were the one doing the fucking I could spin this using his rocker image, but as things stand ..."

She pinched the bridge of her nose. "I shouldn't have said that. There's nothing wrong with bottoming. If you like to bottom, that's fine. I just meant that people have a double standard about men submitting."

Derick's cheeks were on fire. "Whoa!" He held up both hands. "First of all, I'm *not* a bottom. And second, could we maybe back up?" He took a deep breath. "How's the weather? What have you been up to lately? Seen any good movies?"

Chloe scowled. "See? You got defensive when I implied you might be the submissive partner in a relationship."

"I got defensive because it's not true *most* of the time ... *for me*. And why the hell are we even discussing what role I take when having sex? Christ, Chloe. I do not want to be having this conversation with you."

Chloe scoffed. "Who explained the birds and the bees to you when you were in fifth grade?"

"You."

"And who gave you the safe sex lecture when you were in high school?"

"God, that was mortifying."

Chloe ignored him. "Who knew you were gay before you did?"

"You."

"So if I want to go on the record to say that bottoming doesn't make you any less of a man, then I think you ought to humor me. Lord knows that's what I want to tell Heath right now, but he'd never listen to me. I mean, I'm only his manager. Why should he take *my* advice?"

Derick decided he'd better use this opportunity to steer the conversation in a new direction.

Any direction.

"So the shit's hitting the fan?"

"You could say that. Heath is supposed to leave on tour in six weeks and his sponsors are freaking out. Venues are threatening to cancel his bookings, claiming people won't buy tickets. Religious groups are banning his new album, and get this ... one of his backup singers recently found Allah, so she quit this morning because she suddenly got a 'better offer'." Chloe made air quotes with her fingers.

"Then there's every magazine, talk show, newspaper, and radio station calling for interviews, which, of course, Heath refuses to grant because he's ..." She paused. "Well, I'm pretty sure he's mortified, although he won't admit that to me since that would involve having a conversation where he said more than two words and expressed an actual emotion."

The deli owner called out Derick's name, so he stood to collect his pastrami sandwich. When he'd gotten it and paid, he sat back down, studying the dark circles under his sister's eyes.

"And in the midst of all this you made time to have lunch with your brother?" he

asked, skeptically. "I'm honored but ..."

"I love you," Chloe said with a shrug, "but as you've probably guessed, I need to ask a favor, and you're the only one I'd trust with this job."

Derick had wondered if this meeting were headed in the direction he feared it might be heading. "Chloe," he said, "this is a really bad idea. If you're about to ask what I think you're going to ask ..."

Chloe fixed him with a hard stare. "Heath's manager fired his previous bodyguards, and he hasn't wanted me to hire replacements, but a man in Heath's position shouldn't be left unguarded. I could use a different security firm, but frankly I don't trust anyone else right now. It has to be someone I'm one hundred percent sure won't screw us over and talk to the media."

"Why does he need protection?" Derick asked. "Is he receiving threats?"

Chloe cocked her head to one side. "Well, yes. I mean, a celebrity as big as Heath always receives hate mail and this kind of scandal definitely brings the crazies out, but ..." She paused. "It's more than that. I don't know what it is, but you know my instincts are almost as good as yours, and frankly, I'm worried about Heath. Not just as my client, but as a person."

Chloe's voice had softened, and Derick was surprised to hear the maternal tone creeping in.

"I thought he was the client from hell."

"He's certainly difficult," Chloe said. "The man is uncommunicative and he's acted as if he hated me right from the day he hired me. Half the time he doesn't answer

my calls or show up for meetings. Plus, he fights me on every bit of PR he has to do. But that doesn't mean I want to see him get hurt, and too many things about this situation don't add up."

"What kinds of things?"

For a long time Chloe didn't answer, and Derick had the impression she was trying to piece everything together in her mind.

"Well, the most obvious issue is the fact that Heath refuses to identify the man in the video," she said at last. "You know there's no audio, right? Just five minutes of footage in which the camera is entirely focused on Heath. You only see the other guy's torso. We actually knew about the video two days ago, and the first thing I did was try to convince Heath to prosecute whatever bastard released this thing. Somebody made this public and Heath obviously knows who did it, but he's protecting them. That's weird, right?"

"Maybe he's in love," Derick said, but he couldn't help frowning. If someone he loved released an intimate video of the two of them having sex, he'd damn sure prosecute the person right after he ended the relationship so fast the man's head spun. "Has Heath been seeing anyone?"

"No one that I'm aware of and nothing that the media has reported. Not since that last blond bimbo he took to the Grammy awards, which was probably a sham. That was a year ago."

"Is there more?"

Chloe nodded. "Yes. Heath didn't seem completely surprised about the video

being released. He seemed devastated, but not entirely shocked."

"Really?"

"Resigned is the best word."

"You think someone was threatening him and they finally made good? Have you asked him outright?"

"Yes. When we first got word from the media, he spoke to me, then to the police, and to his lawyer, but he claims he has no idea who's on the film, or where it came from, and he doesn't want to pursue finding out. He's trying to act like an arrogant rock star who parties so much he can't keep track of all the people he's slept with, but Heath is a musician, not an actor. I could tell he was barely holding it together."

Chloe's face melted. "Derick, his hands were shaking the whole time. He kept shoving them in his pockets as if no one would notice."

That image made the breath catch in Derick's throat. "Maybe he'll change his mind once reality has sunk in," he offered.

"I hope so. For both of our sakes. I have to tell you, Der, however this plays out, it might make or break my company. If I can't get Heath through this scandal ... Clients are already threatening to drop me."

"What?" Derick fisted his bottled water so hard he crushed the plastic. The music industry was Chloe's life. She'd worked three jobs to put herself through college and still managed to graduate Summa cum Laude with a double major in business management and music theory. Starting this business was her dream-come-true and she damn well deserved success.

Derick bristled. "How the hell could anyone fault you for a scandal you had no control over?"

"That's exactly it." Chloe snorted. "I'm his manager. I'm supposed to have control over everything. People in the industry are saying that if I'd been a ball-buster, I would've gotten this story suppressed before it hit the papers. If I'd had a better handle on my client, I would've kept his behavior in bounds. And they're partly correct."

"Bullshit. You've only been his manager for four months, and this video could have been filmed long before you met him. Why the hell should you have any control over his sex life?"

"True. But the fact is I *do* think my client knew about this video ahead of time, and if I'd been able to break through his shell, he might have trusted me enough to tell me about it, and then I absolutely would've gotten the video suppressed."

Chloe sat back with a sigh. "It doesn't matter anyway. It's all about perception. Four months ago, rock music's newest phenomenon chose a tiny, New York based management firm headed by an unknown woman, and four months later, he's about to lose all his sponsors right before a major tour. Connect the dots."

"This is *so* not your fault, Chloe." Derick clenched his fists. "We'll figure this out. I swear. Whatever you need me to do ... I'm there."

Chloe smiled sadly. "How about we start with meeting Heath to find out if he'll accept a bodyguard? I've already told you he resists every idea I have, so he'll probably say no and this will all be for nothing, but I can't stop feeling like he could use some help. If nothing else, you could keep the weirdos and paparazzi from getting out of

control. I'm going to suggest that he use your services for a couple of weeks until things settle down. That shouldn't scare him too much. It's not like he hasn't dealt with security before."

Derick nodded. He didn't relish the idea of acting as bodyguard to a man he'd despised for months, but if it would help Chloe out, there wasn't a question that he'd agree.

"I'll let Bart know what's going on. Call me if Heath agrees to a meeting. You're my first priority, Chloe, so I'll work around your schedule. Any time, any place."

Chloe stood and wrapped him in a huge bear hug, and he was surprised to see tears pooling in her eyes. "Thank you," she whispered. "You don't know how much this means to me. Ever since this scandal broke, I've had to be tough, calm, and controlled. Can't let Heath or the staff know that I'm freakin' scared about how things will turn out. But with you ..." She sighed. "It's good to let my guard down with someone I trust."

Derick hugged her tight. "I've got your back," he said. And that was true. No one was going to destroy his sister's career if he could help it.

Not even Heath MacFayden.

Chapter 3

Heath MacFayden wished for the thousandth time that the earth would open up and swallow him whole. He'd been drinking for two days straight, and since he never usually drank, the force of his current hangover was unexpected. His entire body felt as if he'd been slammed by a truck and then dragged over pavement.

The blinds in the bedroom of his lake house kept out the light, and Heath wondered about the time. In a fit of rage he'd thrown his clock against the wall. Actually, he'd thrown a lot of things in the last two days.

Heath pulled his satin comforter over his head and prepared to go back into hibernation, but a minute later his cell phone rang.

"Shut up," he groaned. "Please, shut up."

It rang again.

Heath ignored the phone, but a wave of nausea kept him from going back to sleep. He rolled out of bed and stumbled to his feet, feeling the room sway. Okay, so he was worse off than he thought. His stomach lurched and he swallowed hard.

The phone rang. *Again.*

That would be Miles, leaving more messages, first pleading his innocence, then calling Heath a coward for refusing to return his calls, then offering to be the friend he knew Heath needed right now. No strings attached.

Fuck.

Heath shivered, then cringed at the way his temples throbbed. He wished he were

back home in Scotland where at least he could visit his aunt and cousins, and maybe they wouldn't be too embarrassed to let him crash on their couch. Maybe then the desire to take Miles up on his offer wouldn't be so strong.

Was Miles the one ruining his life? *Please, don't let it be Miles.* Yeah, they'd split up, but did Miles truly have enough motivation to do ... this?

Heath groaned, running his hands through his hair, trying to work out the tangled mess it had become overnight. He fingered one strand nervously, twisting it tight. He'd had a streak dyed black for a while, and that strand had a different texture now even though the dye had washed out.

Maybe Miles hadn't leaked the video to the media. Miles claimed that someone on his cleaning staff must've found the video and stolen it. He'd first mentioned the theft weeks ago. And Heath had believed he was telling the truth. Maybe.

Probably.

Had it been him?

The phone rang yet another time.

"Stop calling me," he growled, his voice coming out raspy and thick. But then he glanced at the number. And the time. "Bloody hell."

One o'clock in the afternoon and his new manager was calling, not Miles. He was supposed to show up for a meeting at her office an hour ago. Something about security measures to deal with the paparazzi.

Heath debated about picking up the phone. What could he say? *Sorry. I overslept because I spent the entire night drinking myself into oblivion.*

Instead, Heath walked into the bathroom, emptied his bladder, and made a stab at brushing his teeth. His cell rang once more. Stopped. Then it rang again. Chloe, both times. He pulled on black track pants and a white T-shirt and this time when the phone rang he picked it up.

"Chloe, I know what you're going to say and I'm sorry about the meeting, but I just can't deal with –"

"We're in front of your house, waiting at the security gate. I've been ringing you for fifteen minutes straight. Our car is surrounded by reporters, so you need to buzz us in."

Us?

"You're at my lake house?"

"Yes. You didn't show up for the meeting and you haven't been answering my calls. No one on staff can reach you, and frankly, I've been worrying that you were dead in there, so if you know what's good for you, you'll open up the goddamn gate right now."

Chloe rarely lost her temper. She wasn't like Miles. Most of the time she was level-headed and calm. In fact, she was Miles's polar opposite, which was exactly why he'd chosen her. But thinking about his manager always made Heath squirm. He never knew how to act around Chloe. Part of him understood that she had a job to do, but another part rebelled against letting anyone have the kind of control over him that Miles had taken.

No. That he'd *given* Miles. He'd signed on the bottom line. All of this was his

own damn fault.

"Yeah. Okay. I'll buzz you in."

He hung up, and then went downstairs to hit the button that would activate the security gate at the end of the long, curved driveway. From his front window he could see Chloe's silver Audi surrounded by reporters, boom mics reaching out over her car. The media had been swarming ever since the scandal broke.

A gorgeous, dark-haired guy got out of the car and herded the crowd away from the gate so Chloe could inch forward. He had incredibly broad shoulders, and the classic tall, dark, and handsome look that Heath could never resist. Heath sucked in a breath, feeling his gut tighten.

There were fans outside, as well as reporters, and they threw things into his yard: flowers, envelopes, and what looked like ... a brick?

He could hear demonstrators chanting in the cul de sac, holding up signs saying *God Hates Fags*, and there were counter demonstrators waving gay pride flags. How the hell had all these people gotten his home address? He supposed the information must've spread like wildfire. As soon as one person had the address, they passed it along to the next.

Heath found he was holding his breath, waiting for the dark-haired man to make it through the descending security gate and back into the car as the tide of reporters surged around him. The guy was built, and he looked like he could handle himself, but ... What if the crowd got out of control? What if the person with the bricks tried to smash Chloe's car window?

Heath felt the hot lick of fear in his belly, and it made him think about Miles's hands around his throat. Despite himself, he pulled at the neck of his T-shirt, sucking in air.

Chloe's car stopped beside his house and she and the gorgeous guy got out. Heath opened the front door a crack, but he didn't linger for photographers to get a shot of him looking disheveled and hung-over. Instead, he planted himself in the living room with his arms crossed over his chest.

Heath had just enough time to fight back the panic attack before they made it inside.

"You shouldn't have come here," he snapped once they were indoors. He was being rude, and he knew it, but his head throbbed and fear still lingered in his gut. He could feel a line of sweat on his forehead.

"Good morning to you, too," Chloe said, glancing around.

This was the first time Chloe had ever been to his home, and Heath was conscious of how the place must look to her and her friend.

Boyfriend? Husband?

Miles had chosen this mansion in the wealthiest lakeside neighborhood he could find outside NYC. The place was all windows with a high-beamed ceiling. Miles had picked out the furnishings, and they were shiny metallic, dark leather, and pretentious, artsy crap.

The place had an open floor plan with a massive stainless steel chef's kitchen, a sunken living room, and a sun room that lead out to a huge backyard with an in-ground

pool that Heath rarely used because the basin was always full of leaves and he'd never gotten around to hiring any outdoor staff. Besides, what was the point of having a pool when you lived by a lake?

The whole place was huge and depressingly empty. The only thing that truly felt like it belonged to Heath was his grand piano, the one item he'd splurged on when he'd gotten his first contract money. Miles had called the place modern and posh, but in Heath's mind it just felt lonely, as if his existence was dwarfed by his own house. He'd meant to buy some new furniture, something to fill the rooms, but he hadn't gotten around to it, and now ...

"I know you prefer to meet at my office," Chloe said from the doorway as she hung her coat on the rack, "but since you didn't show up, you left me no choice but to come to you. Like it or not, I'm your manager, Heath, and right now, you need a manager more than you ever have in your entire career. So you can fire me and go it alone, or you can deal with reality and allow me to help you."

Heath twirled a strand of hair until it pulled tight enough to hurt. She was right, but that didn't make this confrontation any easier. The fact that the gorgeous guy was watching him with his intense gray-blue eyes wasn't helping matters either.

Please don't let him be Chloe's husband.

The man was exactly Heath's type, all Alpha male, six or seven inches taller than Heath, with broad shoulders and a square jaw. He had gentle looking hands, and for a second, all Heath could think about was what those hands would feel like touching his skin.

Unfortunately, the man looked like he'd already decided Heath was worthless.

Heath allowed himself a brief fantasy where this particular guy hadn't seen the video or the pictures of him and Miles, but that was pointless. Of course he'd seen them, and of course that was disdain written all over his face.

"Who's the Neanderthal?" Heath asked, deciding he'd better make the first strike.

Chloe scowled. "The Neanderthal is my *brother*, so be nice."

The man stepped out from behind his sister. "Derick Britt. B&B Security. Nice to meet you."

He'd been wearing a leather bomber jacket when he came in, but he'd taken it off and hung it on the rack beside the door, revealing a long-sleeved white shirt, black pants that hugged his ass, and a slim black tie. The guy looked like he was attending a business meeting, and Heath realized with a start that he was. Crap. This was the security guy he'd been supposed to meet at Chloe's office. And Heath was standing here barefoot, unshaven, and hung-over.

Derick held out his hand, but Heath didn't take it. The last thing he needed right now was to lust after another commanding guy who'd order him around.

"Bullocks," Heath muttered.

Derick let his hand drop and stepped into Heath's personal space, so close Heath could smell the mint on his breath. "My sister has gone to a lot of trouble for you," he growled, "so I'd suggest you show some gratitude. And since we're starting the meeting this way, let's get one thing straight from the beginning. If you disrespect my sister, you'll deal with me, understand?"

Derick's blue eyes burned, and Heath felt all the blood rush to his groin. For one horrifying moment he was sure he'd end up with an erection that would be completely visible beneath his loose fitting track pants, so he pivoted quickly, turning his back to his guests, and headed into the kitchen.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Do you want some coffee? I need some."

Heath busied himself pulling out three mugs, and when he turned around Derick was staring at him with a stunned expression. Apparently, the guy had been expecting him to fight back, but fighting back had never been Heath's strong suit, and today he was too damn tired to act tough.

"Thanks, Heath. Coffee would be great," Chloe said. She put a hand on her brother's arm, as if to settle him, and finally she and Derick sat down in the living room. They were talking too low for Heath to make out the words. Eventually, Derick laughed, Chloe grinned, and she punched him on the shoulder. Heath envied the easy camaraderie between them.

He was grateful to have a task, getting the coffee ready and pulling out cream and sugar. He hadn't gotten groceries delivered in over a week, but he dug around in a cupboard and found a sealed box of cheese crackers. Not exactly breakfast material, but it would do. The smell of Dark Roast filled the air, and finally there was no choice other than going back out to the living room.

"Sorry for missing the meeting," Heath muttered once he'd set the mugs down on the coffee table. "Overslept." He couldn't quite make eye contact with Chloe's brother, his mind working overtime trying to guess the level of the man's contempt.

Why should I care what a perfect stranger thinks about my sex life?

If he were a stronger person, he'd say fuck 'em all. Then again, if he'd been a stronger person he never would've gotten into this mess in the first place, so maybe Miles was right and he deserved contempt. Something was clearly wrong with him. And now the whole world knew it.

"Heath?"

Chloe had been saying something, but he had no clue what it was. He'd been standing in the middle of the living room staring at the closed curtains.

"Sorry. What?"

Was that the third time he'd apologized in the ten minutes since they'd arrived? Completely. Pathetic.

"Chloe was saying that the situation outside is a security risk, and it needs to be dealt with," Derick said, "and I agree. Any one of those people could have climbed the fence by now. You've got protesters clashing with loyal fans, and someone could get hurt."

"Loyal fans, eh?" Heath snorted, sinking down onto the leather sofa. "Think I've got any of those left?"

"Of course you do," Chloe said. "More than you realize. Yes, you've gotten some hate mail, but you've gotten far more support. So many people have called to check on you."

"Really?" Heath couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice. "Who?" He couldn't think of one person in the U.S. who might truly care how he was doing.

"Your guitarist, your drummer, the people from the recording studio, Standish Jones, your stylist from your last television appearance, your personal trainer, Omar Hart ... Not everyone thinks badly of you. I could print a sampling of the e-mails we've received, if you'd like."

"Has my mother called?" Heath regretted the question the minute it came out of his mouth, but it was too late to take it back. His cheeks heated.

"Wouldn't she have called you directly?" Derick asked, and the look on his face was somewhere between confusion and mortification.

"She won't call the house," Heath said. "It's a long story. Forget I asked." His mother was one of the many people that Miles had managed to scare off. Not that she'd ever been a doting mom, but it would've been nice to have a shoulder to cry on.

Heath looked away, but from the corner of his eye, he noticed Derick move and for an insane moment he thought the man was coming towards him. He flinched, then wished he'd been able to suppress that reaction. Derick's gaze was locked on him now, and Heath couldn't stand the tension. He stood up, making a show of walking over to the window to peak past the curtains.

"You're right about the security stuff," he said. "I don't want anyone to get hurt, so do whatever needs to be done. Cost doesn't matter." He glanced at Derick, forcing himself to make eye contact. "I guess that's your department?"

"In a way," Derick said. "I'm a security specialist, but my partner and I don't have the manpower to set up a perimeter guard. I can, however, interview and contract a reliable firm for you."

"Fine." Heath watched Chloe and Derick exchange surprised looks. Did they think he was a heartless bastard who didn't give a damn if innocent people got hurt? *Fuck them*. Suddenly, Heath was so tired he thought he might keel over.

"Is that all?" he demanded. "Because I really want to go back to bed."

"No," Chloe said. "Not by a long shot. We have a lot of other business to discuss. We need to have a strategy for how you want to handle this situation and avoidance isn't on the table. We should figure out how long you want to lay low, and then decide on a reporter to field your first interview, and –"

Heath groaned. "Chloe, I'm begging you. I swear I'll talk to you about this stuff later when I'm not knackered, okay?"

There was no point denying his current state.

"Heath." Chloe's voice was stern. "You can't keep putting me off. Do you think this scandal will disappear if you ignore it? Or are you planning on spending the rest of your life as a recluse? Giving up on your music?"

Music was the one thing Heath couldn't live without, and Chloe knew that.

"Give me four hours," he said at last, "and then I promise I'll call you. I'll listen to everything you say. I just ..." He winced. "My head is splitting and I need a shower."

"Fine." Chloe sighed. "But I want to finish the security discussion while Derick is still here."

Heath glanced up, meeting Derick's gaze. "I thought that *was* finished. I agreed to have your brother do whatever he thinks is necessary."

"That's not all," Chloe said. "I also think you should consider using personal

protection."

Heath bristled. In addition to the very existence of a sex video, there'd been a lot of flack about the fact that he'd been fucked bare. As if he should have intended the video he hadn't known he was making as a safe-sex advertisement. "Is that some kind of joke?"

For the first time since he'd met her, Chloe blushed. She was usually so brash, always issuing directions like a combination of his mother and a drill sergeant. Not that Heath's mother had ever cared enough to have an opinion about Heath's life.

Maybe the presence of Chloe's brother made a difference, or maybe sex just made people uncomfortable, but either way Chloe seemed different. More human. Less polished.

"I meant, a bodyguard," she said, clearing her throat. "In addition to the perimeter guards, I think you should consider using my brother's services as a personal bodyguard."

Heath's eyes had been half lidded with the pain of his throbbing headache, but now they flew open. "You mean I'd have him in my house? Ordering me around all the time? Absolutely not."

"Think this over before you say no," Chloe said. "You can't stay inside forever, Heath. Sooner or later you're going to have to go out and give an interview --"

"No."

"Play a concert," Chloe continued. "Record in the studio ... visit a friend. Something!" She was clearly grasping at straws, but Heath just shook his head.

"No bloody way."

Derick had been quiet, but now he sat up straight. "A bodyguard's job is to stand

between you and any harm that might befall you. We'd draw up a contract with boundaries that you'd feel comfortable with, and that contract would determine what level of invasiveness you'd tolerate.

"Potentially, I could coordinate your home security, accompany you to meetings and events, check your mail if you desired ... I wouldn't be here to intrude on your life, and I'd do my best to make sure my presence was noticed as little as possible."

Heath wanted to groan. *Fat chance of that.*

"I realize you're used to the media," Chloe added, "but this is an entirely different situation. Honestly, I was frightened out there. When you go outside, it's going to be crazy, and you'll need a buffer between yourself and those surrounding you. I trust Derick one hundred percent. He'll keep you safe and he won't sell an inside scoop to the Enquirer. There's no better choice."

Heath stood, his heart pounding in his chest at the thought of Derick being part of his daily routine. Giving orders. "Despite what everyone thinks," he spat, "I don't need anyone to keep me safe. I don't need a babysitter, and I don't need a manager running my fucking life."

Derick was in front of him in an instant, standing between Heath and Chloe. The man's massive chest rose and fell rapidly, and Heath thought he might have actually growled.

"Apologize to my sister. Right. Now."

Heath flinched again, but he held himself together. "Or you'll what?" he dared.

Punish me?

The unspoken words hung in the living room, and the tension was so thick he could choke. He wished Derick would. He could feel his panic attack from earlier threatening to resurface, but he refused to give in.

Not in front of Chloe and Derick.

Chloe stood behind her brother, pulling him backward. "Derick, let it go. I'm a big girl. I can handle this."

"Handle *me*, you mean," Heath said. "Well, guess what? I'm tired of being handled." He turned and walked out of the living room, knocking over a floor lamp that dared to get in his way, and then trying to pretend his clumsiness was due to anger, not panic.

"I'm turning in for a kip," he said over his shoulder, forcing the words to sound cold and disdainful to hide the quaver in his voice. "Show yourselves out. This meeting is over."

Chapter 4

"That went well," Derick said.

Chloe groaned. "Your sarcasm is not appreciated. Besides, I'd say that was par for the course. Heath runs hot then cold."

Derick was driving the Audi this time, steering away from Heath's sprawling lakefront property, relieved to leave the frenetic press behind. "I didn't get you fired, did I?"

The laugh that escaped Chloe's lips was bitter. "No. I'd be worried if Heath wasn't acting like he wanted to fire me. He'll relent. In fact, he'll probably follow through with his promise and call me in exactly four hours."

"So he's always like that?"

"He was a bit colder than usual, but yes." Chloe sighed. "I just wish I understood the hostility. I mean, some manager/client relationships just don't work out. Personalities clash. But I don't think that's what's going on here. Am I fooling myself?"

Derick thought back over the meeting. If that disaster could be called a meeting. The man had been an ass, albeit a gorgeous one with a hot Scottish accent, but Chloe was right. There was something off.

At first Heath's body language had screamed defensiveness, but then he'd relented and for a little while Derick had thought there might be a nice guy lurking underneath the prickly exterior. Heath hadn't offered any fight whatsoever when it came to adding the perimeter guards, but he'd shut down abruptly when they'd suggested he needed a

personal bodyguard. It was as if whatever door he'd almost dared to open had slammed closed again.

Plus, he'd flinched.

"Chloe, before this scandal broke, was there anything that made you feel like Heath might be at risk? Threats or odd behavior?"

Chloe studied the trees passing outside the window.

"Well, the fact that he talks to his manager as little as possible is strange. He hired me and if he doesn't trust me, he could fire me. Yet he doesn't. He just avoids me like the plague." She drummed her fingers against the door handle.

"And I'm not the only one he avoids," she continued. "I've never met a celebrity as isolated as Heath. Most famous people have an entourage. They've got friends, family, significant others, hangers-on, an entire army of publicists, make-up artists, stylists, hair dressers, personal trainers, spiritual gurus..."

Derick raised an eyebrow. "Heath MacFayden doesn't have all of those? How does he keep up with the celebrity scene?"

"He *does* have them," Chloe clarified, "but they're rarely the same people more than once and everyone goes through me to coordinate with him. Hell, you heard him. His own mother would call me before she called him."

"Yeah, and apparently she hasn't done either, which sucks," Derick said.

"I know." Chloe frowned.

"Is he hiding a drug problem? Maybe that's why he's isolated and his behavior is erratic?"

Chloe shook her head. "Heath's father died of an overdose, so Heath is strictly anti-drugs. He ended up taking care of his old man through some pretty grim stuff." She fixed Derick with a hard gaze. "We both know how that is."

Derick frowned. So, dealing with an addicted parent was something they had in common. Not that he was looking for things he might have in common with Heath. "Is his mom still in Scotland?"

Chloe shook her head. "She's American. Heath grew up with her in California, and then he moved back to Scotland to be with this dad when he was in high school."

Huh. That explained why Heath's accent wasn't as heavy as one would expect. There was a sexy lilt to Heath's voice, but none of the thick brogue that would've marked a true Scot. Of course, the media never mentioned Heath's American past, only his Scottish ties. He was always 'The Scottish Rocker'.

Sexier that way.

Derick knew he was probably showing a bit *too* much interest in Heath's personal life, but he couldn't resist asking. "What's his mom like? Have you met her?"

"Once. After a concert. She was awful. Hung all over Heath and begged him for money. Stoned out of her mind." Chloe gave a little shiver of distaste.

"What about his previous manager?" Derick asked. "Any idea why Heath dropped him or her?"

"Him. Miles Reid. He's one of the top agents for Power Plus Management. Built Heath's career from the ground up." She paused. "Still, it's common enough for celebrities to change managers. Everyone says the split was amicable, including both

Miles and Heath."

Derick raised an eyebrow. "That seems unlikely. I don't care what people say. No one wants to lose a moneymaker."

"Mmm. I agree."

Derick sighed. "For what it's worth, I think your instincts are right on, Chlo, but we can't force the guy to take on a bodyguard if he doesn't want one. I left him my card, and I'll follow up about contracting the property guards. In the meantime, you should let my sexy friend Bart take you out on a date."

Chloe's jaw fell open. "Where the hell did that come from?"

"He likes you. A lot. And he's a good guy."

"Bart has the mentality of a sixteen year-old boy. He makes fart jokes."

"True. But you'll have a good time if you go out with him. He'll make you laugh, and you need to relax. Especially now."

"Pot, meet kettle," Chloe said with an accusing glare. "If he's so great, why don't *you* date Bart?"

"You mean aside from him being completely straight? He's not my type."

"And what's your type?"

Derick's mind immediately flashed to Heath. The man was every one of Derick's fantasies come to life. Lean, yet muscular. Gorgeous hazel eyes and long lashes. The exact height to bury his face in Derick's neck if Derick pulled him close. Tattoos. Derick even thought he'd seen the outline of a nipple piercing beneath Heath's white T-shirt. The combination of wild and vulnerable made Derick's dick throb.

Chloe laughed. "Don't even think it," she said. "Heath is everybody's type. At least, he was before he got caught bending over for a leather daddy. But he's a hot mess."

"I didn't say anything about Heath," Derick protested, but Chloe just laughed.

"No, but you were thinking about him." She shook her head. "Now I'm relieved he didn't want you to be his bodyguard."

Derick feigned insult. "I'd never act unprofessionally with a client. Especially one of *your* clients. And you're right," he added. "Top two words to describe Heath MacFayden are definitely 'hot mess'. Trust me, I wouldn't touch him. I've got more discipline than that."

Chloe smiled sadly. "I kind of wish you didn't." Then she sighed. "Tell you what ... how about we throw caution to the wind and go out on a double date? Me and Bart, and you and Heath. We'll call it the World's Worst Couple Extravaganza."

Derick laughed. *Yeah right*. Now *that* was the funniest thing he'd ever heard.

Chapter 5

When Derick finally got home to his apartment in Brooklyn, he found Bart draped on the couch watching *Entertainment News* and eating leftover sausage and onion pizza.

They'd shared the sprawling apartment ever since they started their business, which they ran from an office they'd set up in the extra bedroom. Might have been too much time spent with any friend, except the realities of their jobs meant that one or both of them was usually gone.

"There was further speculation today about the identity of the mystery man in the sex video with Heath MacFayden. Even more men are telling sordid tales of liasons with _"

Derick shut off the TV as images of Heath flashed on the screen. He didn't want the temptation, but he wasn't fast enough. Just before the screen went black, the camera had zeroed in on an image of Heath shrugging out of his shirt. His pants were unzipped, exposing a lack of briefs. The shirt hung off his shoulders revealing his lean, bare torso, and yes, a nipple ring – the kind with a bar and stud. Heath's eyes were heavy, focused on whoever was behind the camera.

That image was the single sexiest thing Derick had ever seen.

"Hey! I was watching that!" Bart protested as the screen flickered off. He picked up an onion and dangled it over his mouth before dropping it in. "So does the fact that you shut off the TV indicate that you now have to be respectful of B&B Security's

newest client, or does it mean that the guy's an ass and you're sick of him?"

"Neither," Derick said. He filled his partner in on the non-meeting. "For Chloe's sake, I'll make a few calls tomorrow to find a reliable security company in that area to guard Heath's house. How about you? Are you taking the CEO job or contracting it out?"

"Nah. I'm giving it to Trey." Bart sighed. "He's young and needs experience, and I can practically guarantee nothing will happen on this job. I'll wait for something better. A man like me needs excitement in his life." Bart waggled his eyebrows. "Speaking of which ... I'm meeting up with Luke, Nhala, and Juaquin and we're going out on the town. Want to come?"

These were their best friends from the Marines, and Derick used to hang out with them, but lately he hadn't felt like dragging himself around Manhattan in the cold. Maybe he was getting too old for the bar scene.

"No thanks," Derick said, plopping down on the couch, slipping off his dress shoes, and putting his feet up on the coffee table next to the now-empty pizza box. "It's been a long day."

He'd checked in on two of their other clients after the meeting with Chloe and Heath – one in Nyack and one in Queens – so he'd been driving all day. His ass hurt for all the wrong reasons.

Bart got quiet, and Derick looked up. "Is it because we always go to straight bars?" Bart asked. "Because we discussed the situation, and we'd be willing to go to gay bars with you. If you want us to."

"What?" Derick's jaw dropped. "You talked about ... what?!"

"You hardly go out anymore, and we figured it can't be all that fun watching the rest of us hook up when your chances are significantly smaller in the places we usually go. And since you don't have any gay friends ..."

"I have gay friends," Derick sputtered.

"Name one."

"Joey Malone."

"When was the last time you talked to Joey?"

Derick thought it over. Joey was another one of their military friends, and they'd kept in touch, seen each other a few times over the years, but honestly, he'd never really liked the guy that much.

"I don't need to go to gay bars, and I don't need gay friends. I have you guys and maybe I don't hook up when we go out, but that's not because the option isn't there. It's not like I'm the only gay man who goes to sports bars and Irish pubs. Besides, I happen to like sports bars and pubs." Derick paused. "Why this sudden obsession with getting me laid?"

Bart shrugged. "I figured if you weren't going to help me nail Chloe, then –"

"Ugh. There. Right there. You don't use the word 'nail' when you're talking about someone's sister! I can't believe I encouraged her to go out with you."

Bart grinned, running his hand over his blond buzz cut. "You encouraged Chloe to let me make sweet love to her? You're the best. I am totally your gay bar wingman from now on."

"I did not encourage my sister to – god, you're freakin' insane. A date. I

encouraged her to go out on a date with you."

"And? What did she say?"

"She said you make fart jokes."

"I would never make a fart joke. Those are so immature." Bart let one rip on cue, filling the entire living room with noxious fumes. Despite himself, Derick cracked up.

He stood, waving his hand and pretending to gag.

"And you wonder why she doesn't want to date you. Gross, man. Totally gross. Now I have to leave because I left my gas mask in Afghanistan." He gave Bart the finger. "Get out of here and have fun. I promise I'll go with you guys next time."

"Yeah, yeah. That's what you always say."

* * *

Derick grabbed his laptop, then sank down on his mattress. Bed frames bothered him, so he always kept his mattress on the floor. Simpler that way. The only other furnishing in the room was a massive leather chair that reclined. Aside from that, he had one entire wall covered floor to ceiling in wooden shelves that housed his vinyl collection and a record player. When it came to music, Derick liked just about everything – blues, jazz, vintage rock, cajun, even classical when the mood struck.

Growing up, he and Chloe had both escaped into music, but neither of them had been any good at playing an instrument. Plus, Derick had always known there was only enough money for one of them to go to college. As it was, Chloe had delayed starting school for three years until he'd graduated from high school.

Derick had never resented the fact that Chloe took her shot at an education. Lord knows she'd given up most of her childhood raising him, and the Marines had suited him fine. He'd always been athletic – star quarterback on the high school football team – and the Marines had given him a way out of town. And a way to stop Chloe from sacrificing her entire life.

Was it possible that he'd lost out on a few things along the way?

Yeah, maybe. But he'd had a good life.

Derick thought about Bart's accusation and shook his head. "I have gay friends," he muttered.

Didn't he?

There was that guy from the gym he'd hooked up with a couple months ago. They saw each other every now and again. Nodded in passing. He'd been ... kind of bland, but okay. And Ramone was gay. He was an actor who'd hired Derick as a bodyguard and they'd kept in touch after the gig was through. Trey might also be gay, and he was absolutely fucking adorable with his blond curls and surfer's build, but since Derick was Trey's employer, he had no plans to ask about Trey's sexual preferences.

He sighed. What did it matter? Friends were friends. Who cared if they were gay or straight?

"Stupid Bart," Derick groaned, his cheeks heating in embarrassment. *I'm not some goddamn monk, and I don't need anyone's help hooking up.*

Derick turned on his laptop, waiting for it to boot up. He hesitated, his fingers hovering over the keyboard. No. He wouldn't. No way.

Except ... he would.

He typed in 'Heath MacFayden'.

Of course, the top links were all about the sex scandal. Pages and pages of them. But Derick was actually interested in listening to the guy's music, not reading about his sex life. He'd heard Heath's songs before, but hadn't paid much attention. Chloe had given him one of Heath's CDs back when she'd first signed him as a client, but Derick had given it to Nahla because the CD had been autographed and Nahla was a huge fan. Derick hadn't cared at the time, only now, after meeting Heath, he was curious.

Wasn't hard to find some concert clips. Derick lay back, the laptop balanced on his stomach, and listened to Heath's gritty, soulful voice soar over the lines of harmony, always balanced on the edge of melancholy but never tipping over. The music was complex, not the simple mass-marketed rock he'd been expecting. Listening to Heath made Derick feel something -- first sad and then angry and then almost joyous, caught up in the refrain.

The guy was talented.

Duh. Way to be the last person in America to figure that out.

Derick sat up and watched more clips, studying them intently. Heath's style reminded Derick of Coldplay, but with more of an edge. The sort of rock ballads that women swooned over with enough grit that men could get into them as well.

Heath sang, but he also seemed to play every instrument except drums, alternating between keyboard, bass, rhythm guitar, and a massive grand piano. When he was on stage, he rarely stopped moving, and his chin-length hair curled behind his ears

when he got sweaty. He had a rich voice, somewhere between bass and tenor, and he practically kissed the mic when he sang. The curve of Heath's lips against the metal grating on the microphone made Derick's pants feel tight.

He stood up and kicked off his slacks, along with his socks, leaving only his black boxer briefs, and then he started yet another video of Heath on stage. A lot of the videos had been filmed with cell phones, and some of them included backstage moments where Heath smiled, hugged fans, and joked with the adoring camera owner.

The guy had a great smile – made his whole face light up – and Derick wished he could've seen one of those smiles in person. He almost wished he'd taken the time to watch this stuff before he met Heath. Maybe then he would've cracked a joke just to make him laugh.

Derick scrolled through a list of YouTube videos and found one with Heath attending a charity event for St. Jude's, playing hoops with a group of little kids. And then there were the interviews: the late shows, the morning shows, the middle of the afternoon and no one watches this crap shows.

In all of them, Heath seemed like a different man from the one Derick had met. Smart, funny, and humble. He bantered about the differences between Scotland and the U.S., blushed about winning a Grammy for Best New Artist, made jokes about living on a tour bus and then readjusting to life in a huge, empty house. He was sharp in a way Derick hadn't expected, but he always seemed unsure, as if he honestly didn't know whether he was doing okay with the interview or not.

Until they asked him to perform.

Then he was all swaggering confidence and in-your-face sexuality.

What the hell am I doing?

Derick groaned. Hours had passed while he was browsing and it was now close to one o'clock in the morning. He'd long since surpassed idle curiosity, and his dick was hard and aching.

Don't do it.

Once again Derick's fingers hovered over the keyboard.

No. This is a crappy thing to do. He's Chloe's client. You've met the guy. He's a real person and he wouldn't want you to see the video.

But Heath had turned down the offer of a bodyguard, so Derick would probably never meet him again. Derick's throbbing balls won out. He typed in **Heath MacFayden Sex Video**.

Immediately, he found the unedited clip. The still image was tantalizing. Heath was standing in front of a large desk in what looked like an office, although the space had clearly been cleaned out for the purposes of this shoot. Or maybe they'd been playing in an abandoned room? The desk was empty and the shelves were bare. Heath was fully dressed, but he gazed at someone through his lashes. Chin down, eyes up.

"This is such a fucking mistake," Derick moaned, but even as he said that he clicked on the arrow to start the clip and watched as Heath nodded to something the man off screen must have said. There was no audio, and the whole video was shot through a peephole of some sort. And since the other guy wasn't visible, he could be anyone.

Anyone at all.

The sight of Heath undressing slowly, sensually, obviously giving the guy a show, had Derick reaching beneath the waistband of his briefs. He fisted himself hard as Heath shrugged off his shirt exposing the rippled chest and pierced nipple Derick had seen in the photos.

Heath's black jeans were already unzipped, and he started to remove them, but the other man must have said something else because he stopped. Instead, he turned around and faced the desk, and the man stepped forward and pulled the pants down roughly, tugging them to Heath's ankles but not taking them off, leaving them so Heath's feet were bound.

The other man was only briefly in the frame, and his features had been blurred. Derick couldn't suppress the business part of his brain that was telling him that this film had to have been meticulously planned in advance. How hard had this asshole worked to protect himself while revealing Heath?

Derick almost shut the computer off, but instead he let out a loud groan as the man shoved Heath forward so Heath was bent over the desk. This was the money shot that every newspaper, magazine, and on-line news site had cashed in on, but the sight was even more powerful live.

The man held Heath's neck with one large hand, his fingers tightening, and he smacked Heath's ass hard with the other hand. *Once, twice, three times.* Each time Heath winced but he didn't move, and then the man's fingers obviously entered him because Heath arched and drew in a sharp breath.

Leather clad hips blocked the view, but Heath was obviously being finger-fucked,

and Derick stroked his cock in the same rhythm as the mystery man's hand. Already he could feel his balls drawing up as the hand at Heath's neck slid around to cup Heath's jaw and feed two fingers into his mouth. Heath sucked them, lavishing the digits with attention and despite the fact that there was no audio, Derick could tell when Heath moaned.

Derick's boxer briefs needed to go. He pushed them off hurriedly and set the laptop on the bed, then turned so he could watch the screen. He spread his legs wider and palmed his balls as the mystery man pulled away from Heath long enough to unzip. The man pulled out an enormous cock and then spread Heath's ass cheeks with both hands. Only one side was visible, but that glimpse was enough.

"Goddamn," Derick groaned.

The man didn't put on a condom and he didn't use any lube. If he spit on his hand it hadn't been visible. He pressed up against Heath's hole and pressed in, hard and fast. Heath's eyes clenched shut and he gripped the desk with both hands, but he didn't protest. Instead, he pushed back until the man slapped his ass again, turning it bright red.

Then the guy was fucking Heath, brutally hard, and Heath was taking it, chest pressed flat against the wood of the desk, cheeks flushed, eyes shut. Derick's hand sped up so he was stroking his own shaft equally fast. He could feel the tension building in his balls and he could hardly keep his eyes open. The man on screen pulled Heath's hips away from the desk so he could reach around and stroke Heath's cock, and then Heath was coming, his back arched and his lips parted.

That was all it took. Derick came hard, unable to suppress his orgasm. Then the

video ended abruptly, and Derick lay there sweaty and spent, feeling guilty as hell.

No one's sex video should ever be leaked against their will, but there was something particularly awful about this footage being made public. Maybe it was the edge of domination, or the way Heath had made himself so completely vulnerable to the other man's wishes. And now Derick had used that same vulnerability. He felt like an ass, glad he'd never have to interact with the man again.

And then the phone rang.

Chapter 6

Do not call Miles. Do not call Miles.

But Heath had to call somebody.

His entire body quivered like a frayed electrical wire. He sat on the floor of his bathroom with the door locked and his cell phone in his hand. The police had left over forty minutes ago with a promise to patrol the neighborhood, but there was no way Heath would be able to sleep. Not with a freakin' hole in his downstairs bay window.

He'd been sitting in the living room playing guitar, writing yet another angry ballad that would never see the light of day, when the window had shattered and a brick landed at his feet. His stomach had leapt into his throat and he'd felt a rush of pure adrenaline, expecting a gunshot at any moment.

Heath had fallen to the ground, giving himself rug burn as an alarm system he hadn't even known he'd owned blasted the air with ear-splitting noise. Apparently, the security system had automatically alerted the police, but Heath hadn't known that at the time.

God, he'd nearly had a heart attack. When the police arrived they'd found him holding his guitar like a baseball bat, crouched behind the kitchen island. As if that would've helped. But Heath hadn't been able to think straight.

He still couldn't.

What an idiot he'd been when Chloe and her brother had suggested he needed a bodyguard. Why the hell couldn't he make good decisions? Hadn't Miles always said that

left on his own Heath was next to useless? If Miles were here ...

Stop thinking about goddamn Miles.

Heath took a deep breath, forcing air into his lungs. He played an imaginary set of chord progressions in his mind until his pulse slowed.

Okay. He could handle an act of vandalism. In fact, he had Derick's number plugged into his cell phone because he'd intended to follow-up about the outdoor security, so he'd leave a message and get the guy to come out the next day.

Good plan. Leave a message on B&B Security's answering machine saying he'd changed his mind about the bodyguard. It would still be a long night, but he'd only have to make it through until morning.

Heath hit the call button and waited for the machine to pick up.

"Derick?" His voice came out shaky after the beep. "It's Heath MacFayden. You left me your contact information? I ... uh ... changed my mind about the bodyguard thing. I wondered how soon you could start, and ... uh." He ran his hands over his face. "Fuck. I know I didn't make a great impression today, but you'll call me back, right? First thing in the morning? Please?"

Even to his own ears, he sounded as if he might hyperventilate. Should he say something else? Heath left his number, and then he tried to force his breathing into some normal pattern, aware of the long pause on the answering machine. Why couldn't he hang up?

"Okay. I guess that's it. Bye."

His finger slammed down on the END CALL button, and Heath dropped his

head into his hands. Maybe he ought to call Miles after all. How many times had Miles told him they could get back together? And Miles was right: Heath *was* falling apart on his own.

He opened the contacts section of his phone and scrolled down, then hesitated.

But what if Miles was the one responsible for all of this?

A noise sounded from somewhere downstairs and Heath's body stiffened. Had that come from inside the house? The police had sealed the front window and sent the crowd home – or at least further away from his property line – but they hadn't caught whoever had thrown the brick and that meant the person might still be nearby. Biding their time.

Heath swallowed hard. No. The noise was surely his imagination. How ridiculous to stay in the bathroom all night. He should go to bed in his own room. Man-up.

The police officers had scoured his yard with search lights, assuring him the property was safe, and he was sure they'd done their jobs, even if they'd been gruff and condescending. Clearly, they'd known exactly who Heath was and what he'd been caught doing, and their contempt had shown through their polite veneer. They'd looked at Heath like he was a coward, which was bullshit. They didn't even know him. Any reasonable person would be scared if a psychopath had lobbed a brick through their fucking window!

Heath got up to leave the bathroom then sat back down again when he heard another noise. He was sure his mind was playing tricks on him. Still ... celebrities were killed by stalkers all the time. Okay. Maybe not all the time, but it happened. They got

shot, stabbed, attacked ...

Heath's phone rang, sending him out of his skin. His hands were shaking so hard he could barely answer.

"Heath?" Derick's deep voice washed over Heath.

"You called back," he breathed.

"Yeah. Is everything okay?"

"But I called your business line and it's one in the morning."

"My office is in my apartment. Getting calls in the middle of the night isn't unusual in this line of work."

"Oh." Now that Derick was actually on the phone Heath wasn't sure what to say.

"You sound scared," Derick said. "What's going on?"

Heath thought about protesting. *Scared? Who me?* He thought about pretending he was one of those macho guys who wasn't afraid of anyone or anything. Someone like ... well, Derick probably. Instead, he just laughed and it came out thin and wobbly.

"I ... uh ... you were right about someone climbing the fence. They threw a brick. Smashed my front window. Police have come and gone, but ..."

He could hear the change in Derick's voice from hesitant to high alert.

"Where are you?"

Should he admit he was hiding? Might as well. Probably too late to salvage his pride now.

"I locked myself in the upstairs bathroom. I keep hearing noises."

Derick swore. "Did the police capture the perpetrator?"

"No. But they're patrolling the area. They said the person was probably just fooling around and they'd run off. Said I could leave if I don't feel comfortable. You know, go to a hotel or something. But if I go out the paparazzi will follow and I don't even know where I'd find a hotel around here, so I figured I'd stay put."

"Is there anyone you can call who'd come over?"

Heath closed his eyes and didn't answer. *Miles.*

"Heath? Are you still there?"

"I ... listen ... forget I called. You weren't supposed to get that message until the morning. I'm fine. The police are right. I should just leave if I'm nervous. I'm overreacting. I'm gonna go."

"Do *not* hang up." The tone in Derick's voice didn't leave room for disobedience. "Listen to me," Derick commanded. "If you're feeling afraid, those are your instincts trying to keep you safe. Pay attention because most of the time, our instincts make the difference between life and death. Now, tell me exactly what happened tonight. Every detail."

"Okay." Heath took a deep breath, then he related the entire incident from the moment the brick landed at his feet to when the cops left. Pouring all the details out to Derick somehow managed to slow his pounding heartbeat. It felt reassuring to connect to someone and have them actually listen.

"Want to know the kicker?" he asked Derick. "After barely hiding the fact that they'll be making jokes about me at the precinct for the rest of the week, two of the cops had the nerve to ask me for autographs for their kids." He laughed bitterly, not sure why

he was telling Derick any of this.

"And I'm sure the paparazzi got a ton of photos. I had to go outside when the police first arrived and then I was out there again when they left. This whole fiasco will be in all the papers tomorrow. As if I need more press coverage." Heath sighed. "I should call Chloe and warn her, but I don't want to wake her up. She's going to hate me for this."

Derick had been quiet, listening carefully, but now he said, "Call her. Tell her I'm on my way over to your place."

Heath had slid onto the floor while he was talking, lying on his side with his head cushioned on one of his extra thick, plush towels, but now he sat up again.

"What? Don't do that. It's the middle of the night and ... just ... no."

"This isn't a debate," Derick said. "It would normally take me an hour and a half, but this time of night I can make it in an hour. I want you to stay on the phone with Chloe the entire time. In fact, I'm going to insist on that. I don't care what you two talk about -- business, your childhoods, favorite foods -- doesn't make any difference. The important part is that someone is in contact with you the whole time."

"Derick ... I ..." Heath ached to agree. "I'm probably just being paranoid. I'm sure the person who threw the brick is gone. They got their kicks scaring the hell out of me, or luring me out of the house for pictures, or whatever they wanted, and now they've left."

"No."

"What do you mean, 'no'?"

"I mean you can't make that assumption. You have to assume the worst -- that the person who threw the brick wants to hurt you and they're hiding somewhere. They're

now aware of your alarm system, so you've lost the element of surprise, and the perpetrator knows exactly how much time they'll have to reach you before the police arrive if they trigger it again. Plus, there's an entryway into your home via the hole through your front window.

"I'm not trying to scare you, Heath, but you need to take this seriously. Hang up. Call Chloe. Don't leave the bathroom under any circumstances. When I arrive, I'll call and you can give me the code for the gate. I'll handle the front door. Don't come to me; I'll come to you."

And to think Heath had been starting to feel better. He closed his eyes. "Wait."

"What?" Derick sounded impatient. "I'm already at my car, so I'm putting you on speaker."

Sure enough, Heath heard a motor start in the background, and he hated how relieved that made him feel.

"I ..." He hesitated. "I still can't let you come here. What if there's someone out there with a gun? I know you're a bodyguard, but I'm not going to let you take a bullet for me."

Heath heard Derick sigh, but when he spoke again his voice was softer. "That's ... thank you. Not many of our clients think that way. But trust me, being a bodyguard isn't about taking a bullet for someone."

"It's not?"

"No. It's about making sure the bullet doesn't get fired in the first place."

Heath heard the soft sound of the car's turn signal. "How exactly do you manage

that?"

"Well, for one thing," Derick said, "unlike you, I have a firearm that I'm trained and licensed to use. Plus, I have hand-to-hand combat skills."

"You don't think I have mad Ninja skills?"

Derick laughed. "Trust me, I'd love to see your Ninja skills, but uh ..."*Had that sounded flirtatious?* "For now I think we ought to stick with more practical equipment, like night vision goggles and bulletproof vests. Unlike the police, I'll set a perimeter, secure it and monitor it, and if anything else happens then the police will deal with me, and I guarantee they'll take me seriously. I've been a Marine, I've worked in security for eight years now, and I can beat the shit out of any officer on their force and they'll know it. This shouldn't be the case, but I'm exactly the type of person police respond to."

Great, Heath thought. *As opposed to me.*

"Listen," Derick said, "I'll be doing some serious speeding, so I'm going to hang up now. Call Chloe and talk to her until I arrive."

"Okay. Does she have a husband or someone who'll be pissed that I'm calling?"

There was a long pause before Derick answered. "You really don't know the first thing about my sister, do you?"

That was true. Heath had wanted it that way. He'd gotten far too close to Miles and the last thing he'd needed was to repeat the same mistakes. "No," he admitted.

Derick sighed. "No husband. Just call her."

The phone went dead, and Heath had the feeling he might have just offended the only person who was willing to help him.

About Lou Kelly

Lou Kelly loves a great romance. Having honed her skills as an author through a decade of writing, she discovered m/m fiction and fell in love. What does she like best? The slow burn.

"No insta-love for me. I adore a well-developed, full-length novel with characters who are believable and sympathetic. My favorite relationships are the kind where suppressed desire sizzles with sexual tension struggling for release. Give me a strong Alpha male who has to fight for his mate, or enemies who are shocked when hate turns into love, or a mysterious stranger who doesn't want his secrets revealed ... I crave books that keep me up past my bedtime."

When she isn't writing, Lou Kelly loves to travel. Sadly, most of her traveling these days happens between the pages of books, but top on her wish list is a trip to Greece. Followed by New Zealand, Ireland, Scotland, and Iceland. *sigh* Someday she hopes to explore them all. Until then, you can find her reading!

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