

Chapter One

Some things never changed: the smell of old socks coming from the boys' locker room; the long line of students blocking the halls while waiting to get on the bus. The way Dillon Carver's heart slammed against his chest every time he saw Jamie Walker.

James, he mentally corrected himself. He'd long ago given up the right to call him Jamie.

Dillon watched from his locker two rows down the hall as the object of his affection loaded books into his backpack. James's white-blond hair was in need of a good combing, as usual, but the messy style suited him. Dillon's heart pounded as he thought of all the times he'd run his fingers through that unruly mop. He grimaced. Jamie was with Ben now, and it was Dillon's own fault.

"You'll wear a hole in that boy with your eyes if you keep staring at him."

Dillon turned to see Megan Nash leaning against one of the lockers, her blue eyes sympathetic.

"I was just wondering where James's pet dickhead is. Hopefully he's slithered back under his rock."

"You mean Ben?"

Dillon snorted. "Who else?"

Megan pushed one long, red curl out of her eyes. "I know you're less than thrilled about James and Ben, but since James is out, if you keep making eyes at him, everyone will know how you really feel about him and they'll start to wonder about you."

Dillon shrugged. "They'll know soon enough, anyway."

"Maybe, but I think it would be better to stick to the plan. It'll be easier if you come out in your own time."

Dillon drew in a deep breath and then let it out slowly. "I hate the fact that you're always right."

"Hardly, but having three gay brothers does make me somewhat of an expert on the subject."

Dillon raised both eyebrows. "Three?"

"When Brandon married Nate, he became my brother, too."

"That's two." Dillon held up his index and middle fingers. "Who's the other one?"

"Randy." Megan smiled. "He came out just before the wedding."

"Only in your family could that ever happen." Dillon laughed, but he envied Megan her family, most especially her parents. They loved their children unconditionally, unlike his own mother and father.

He was so caught up in his thoughts, he didn't realize Megan was still speaking to him until she raised her voice to get his attention.

"So, are we still on for the dance tonight?"

Dillon groaned. "I don't know. I'd planned to ask Jim if I could squeeze in some extra hours at the pharmacy tonight. If and when my folks throw me out, I'll need all the money I can get."

"You work plenty. What you need is one night to take your mind off your worries." Megan flashed him a radiant smile. "What better way to do that than to spend the evening with yours truly dancing your cute little butt off?"

Dillon closed the locker door. "You're deranged, you know that?"

The last bell rang and Megan started for the door. "All part of my charm." She grinned at him over her shoulder but kept walking. "You know you love me."

Laughing as he followed her out, Dillon grumbled, "Yeah, yeah. I love you, though God only knows why."

Jamie watched from the corner of his eye as Dillon and Megan left, laughing and talking as if the rest of the world didn't exist. Knowing the two of them were together was bad enough, but to have it thrown in his face was almost more than he could stand. Before he had time to work up a decent depression, Jamie felt an arm glide around his shoulders. He knew who it was without even having to turn. "Are you pervin' on me in the middle of the hall?"

Ben laughed, moving away to lean against the wall. "Nah. I know a dead end when I see one. What can I say? You have an amazing ability to resist my considerable charms, not to mention an unholy attachment to that fuck-wad ex of yours." He let out a dramatic sigh. "I'd gladly exorcise the spirit of Dillon Carver from you if I could, but I'm fresh out of holy water."

"Keep it down." Jamie looked around to see if anyone was paying attention. "Someone might be listening."

Ben shook his head. "I don't know why you work so hard to front for that prick after what he did to you." Jamie started to speak but Ben cut him off. "Never mind. I've heard it all before, and we're never gonna agree." His expression softened. "You know your secrets are safe with me, J." He gave Jamie a sideways, cocky grin. "Since I can't seem to get into your pants, I guess I'll just have to settle for the thrill of being close to you."

"You are so full of shit."

"You didn't think my eyes were this brown naturally, did you?" Ben jerked his spiky, black-haired head in the direction Dillon and Megan had taken. "I see Mr. and Mrs. Plunkett High are still going strong."

Jamie shrugged, determined not to show how much he was hurting. "I guess they make each other happy. They've been together for almost four months now, so they must."

"If Dillon wants to play it straight, I say more power to him. If I was into chicks, I might even go after Megan Nash myself. As much trouble as I've been in lately, it sure wouldn't hurt to be banging the sheriff's sister." He heaved his tall, slender body away from the wall. "Since I haven't yet found a girl who can rev my engine, I guess I'll just stick with what I've got."

"There you go again, talking about your mystery man." Jamie closed his locker and clicked the lock into place. "Am I ever gonna meet this new guy of yours?"

Ben put his arm around Jamie's shoulders and led him toward the door. "Patience, young Walker. In time, all will be revealed."

"No more *Star Wars* flicks for you."

"Yeah, yeah." Ben squinted against the afternoon sun as they walked out to the parking lot. "I can't tell you anything about him just yet. He's still in the closet. Besides, he and I are keeping things cool for now. We're both free to date other people." He grinned. "Which reminds me, are you going to the Valentine mixer tonight?"

"I've got to," Jamie said. "The Gay-Straight Alliance is hosting it. I have to put in an appearance, being the G.S.A. president and all."

"How did the G.S.A. get stuck putting on a dance?"

"Principal Morgan insisted. He thought it would help boost Plunkett High's 'gay friendly' image. He wants the world to know that gay and lesbian students are free to express themselves at Plunkett, whatever the hell that means." Jamie shrugged. "At least ten same-sex couples have signed up to go, so Morgan's idea must be working."

Ignoring that last statement, Ben motioned Jamie toward his car. The 1985 Firebird was a sleek black beauty, into which Ben poured every dime he earned doing odd jobs for his foster mother.

Looking at the car almost made Jamie wish he knew how to drive.

"You waiting for an invitation?" Ben opened the driver's side door. "Get in so we can blow this place."

"I hear you." Jamie opened the car door and sank down into the bucket seat. He closed the door and waited until Ben was seated behind the wheel before saying, "Weren't you about to ask me something?"

"Yeah." Ben turned to better see him. "I was thinking...since you have to go to the dance tonight anyway, maybe you and I could go together."

“Like a date?”

“Not really. Just you and me hanging out, as usual.” Ben whipped his sunglasses from the overhead visor and slipped them on. “If a guy can’t go to a dance with his best friend, what’s the world coming to?”

“What about the guy you’re seeing? Won’t he care?”

“Like I told you, him and me...we’re casual.” Ben’s smile was arrogant. “Just think about the chance it’ll give me and you to rub our illustrious presences in Dillon Carver’s face.”

“Ben—”

“The guy fucked you over six ways from Sunday. The least you can do is show him you aren’t pining away while he’s off playing the happy hetero.”

Jamie laughed, won over as always by Ben’s uncommon brand of charm. “All right then. If you really want to do this, you’ve got yourself a date.”

Ben pumped his fist twice in victory, then started the car and peeled out of the parking lot.

Jamie’s great-aunt Sadie was waiting in the kitchen when he got home. He dropped his backpack into a chair and bent to kiss her wrinkled cheek. Sadie smiled up at him, her green eyes crinkling at the corners. “How was school?”

Jamie went to the fridge and scrounged around until he found the package of cold cuts. Taking out the package, he snagged a loaf of bread from the counter and slapped together three ham sandwiches, grabbed a bottle of Coke from the door, and closed the refrigerator with his foot. Settling into a chair on the other side of the table, Jamie crammed his mouth full of sandwich. It wasn’t until he was halfway through the first one that he registered he’d been asked a question.

“Same as always,” he answered around a mouthful of ham and cheese on rye.

“You don’t have to gobble your food.” Aunt Sadie clucked her tongue. “No one is going to take it away from you.” She watched him for a moment. “So...do you have plans for this evening?”

Knowing this was the tricky part, Jamie choked down a large chunk of bread and said, “Yes, ma’am. I’m going to the Valentine dance with Ben.” Seeing the look of displeasure on Sadie’s face, he placed the remainder of his sandwich on the table. “I know you don’t like him, but—”

Holding up her hand in a signal Jamie took to mean “shut up”, Aunt Sadie stood. Grumbling as she crossed the checkerboard tile floor, she stopped at the white double-sink and made a show of washing the dishes.

Jamie winced at the sound of banging pots and pans, but he was used to it. Over the years, the Queen Anne home Sadie inherited from her father had seen more than one of her hissy fits, and so had Jamie. For someone so short and slight, Sadie was a force to be reckoned with.

After a full two minutes of dish rattling and pan clanging, Sadie turned back to Jamie, a dish cloth clutched tightly in her hand. “I wish you could tell me what you see in that hooligan.”

Jamie almost laughed at Sadie’s old fashioned term. Her short, iron-gray curls had frizzed during her tirade, framing her rosy face. Even though he could tell she was fuming mad, Jamie marveled at how lucky he was to have ended up with her instead of in a foster home like Ben. No matter how fortunate he considered himself, though, Jamie knew his aunt well enough to know how stubborn she could be when she took a dislike to someone. He leaned back in his chair.

“Are you forbidding me to go out with him tonight?”

“You know better than that,” Sadie said. “You’re eighteen, old enough to pick your own friends. I just wish you had someone in your life other than Ben Lewis.”

“Ben’s a good guy.” Jamie took a hefty swig of his Coke. “He just hasn’t had the same advantages as the rest of us.”

"That doesn't give him the right to do half the things he's done since Nora Slater took him in." Sadie shook her head. "You'd think he'd be grateful to have a home after living in foster care for most of his life. Why Nora didn't send that boy packing the day he turned eighteen is beyond me."

"I could ask you the same question." Jamie traced his finger along the edge of the scarred oak table. "Why didn't you throw me out when I turned eighteen?"

Aunt Sadie tossed the cloth into the sink and went back to the table. Using one short finger, she tilted Jamie's chin until he was looking directly at her. "How can you ask me that?"

"Why not?" Jamie shrugged. "Ben's only lived with Nora for three years; I've been sponging off you a heck of a lot longer than that." He turned out of her grip and looked away. "At least the state paid Nora to take care of Ben. What did you get when my mom dumped me here fourteen years ago?"

Sadie sat down in the chair next to his. "I got you, and I've never regretted it, not for an instant." She sighed. "By the time you came along, I was fifty years old and had given up hope of ever having children of my own. I assumed I'd spend the rest of my life alone." She gave him a sincere smile. "I've cursed my niece a thousand times for choosing drugs and that worthless boyfriend of hers over her own child, but not a day goes by that I don't thank her for bringing you to me."

"Then why doesn't Ben deserve the same chances I've been given?" Jamie asked. "Can't you even try to like him?"

Never one to concede defeat easily, Sadie stood and smoothed the wrinkles from her slacks. "I'll do my best to get along with him for your sake, but if he hurts you, he'll answer to me." She paused. "I wish you and Dillon could have patched up your friendship. He was a good influence on you. You were always so happy when the two of you were together."

Jamie held back a sigh. "It was Dillon's choice. There's nothing I can do about it."

"I still can't believe Dillon dropped you the way he did. So what if you're gay? You're still you."

She didn't know the half of it, and Jamie wasn't about to enlighten her. He couldn't resist ribbing her a little bit. "You didn't exactly jump for joy when I first told you I was gay."

"Nonsense. I admit, I was shocked at first, and I'm still not sure I understand it exactly." She gave him another of her warm smiles. "But I love you for who you are, not for whom you're attracted to."

Jamie nodded. Sadie's love was the one constant in his life. He only wished Dillon could have been as accepting. With a shake of his head, Jamie finished his sandwich, silently adding Dillon's abandonment to the long list of things he couldn't change.

Dillon stuffed the college acceptance papers into his desk drawer and locked it with relieved satisfaction. He'd done it. He'd been accepted to Garman College in upstate New York. It was prestigious, private, and known for its policies protecting gay and lesbian students. It was also James Walker's school of choice.

Once again, Dillon went over the plan in his head. Even if his parents cut him off, he'd still be able to swing tuition, and room and board, using student loans and the college fund his folks had made the mistake of putting solely in his name. It wasn't a lot of money, but once he got a part-time job to pay for books and living expenses, it would be enough. It would have to be. Living a lie was no longer an option.

He glanced at the clock. Five-thirty, time to get ready if he wanted to make it to Megan's by seven. He was heading for the shower when the phone rang. Grabbing the cordless from his desk, he pressed the talk button.

"Yeah?"

"Great phone manners, Carver."

Dillon grinned. "Since when do you give a rat's ass about manners, Barnes? Aren't you the same guy who can belch the Star Spangled Banner in three octaves?"

“A man’s got to have a wide variety of skills to make it in this life, or so my dad always says. I’ll have you know, there’s more to Mr. Ashton Barnes the Third than the handsome, athletic specimen I present to the world. I believe in being well rounded.”

“Uh huh. So, to what do I owe the pleasure of this phone call?” He and Ash were friends, but phone conversations between them were few and far between. Dillon knew something was up when Ash’s voice dropped and all traces of the teasing tone he’d answered with disappeared.

“I stopped at Hailey’s to get a bite to eat after school. Rooster and his boys were there, and I think they’re planning something for tonight.”

Dillon went rigid. “Rooster” was Roy Carmichael, the biggest homophobe on campus. If he was involved, it couldn’t be good. “What kind of something?”

“I’m not sure. They shut their traps when they realized I was listening, but I’m pretty sure I heard the word ‘fag’ tossed out a couple of times. My guess is they’re pissed about the G.S.A. hosting tonight’s dance and they’re looking to start trouble.”

“Why did you call me?” Dillon tapped his fingers on the back of the receiver. “Why not Morgan or one of the teachers?”

“I know you and James Walker used to be tight, so I figured maybe you’d get in touch with him for me.” Ash swallowed loud enough for Dillon to hear. “I would do it myself, but...”

“You’re afraid everyone will think you’re queer if you get caught sticking up for a bunch of gays. Is that it?”

Ash went on the defensive. “Look, I was just trying to help. I should have known better than to come to you with this. Everyone knows you ditched James the minute he came out.”

Dillon felt like a total ass. He knew Ash was only trying to help, but there was no way Dillon could explain his overreaction without complicating things further. Instead, he said, “Wait...”

Ash didn’t hang up, so Dillon took that as his cue to continue. “I’m sorry, man. You did the right thing by calling me. Thanks.” When Ash didn’t respond, Dillon figured there were only two things he could do: hang up or change the subject. He went for the subject change. “So, you got a date tonight?”

“Yeah. Chad and I are doubling with Blair Dees and Nina Ivan.”

The two easiest girls in school. Given Ash’s reputation with the ladies, Dillon should have known. “Who gets who?”

“Who cares?” Ash snorted. “We’re only going to be at that lame-ass dance long enough to put in an appearance, then it’s straight down to Pepper Road. You taking Megan?”

“To Pepper Road?” The thought of taking Megan to the number one make out spot in Reed didn’t even bear repeating.

“To the dance, dumbass.”

Dillon held back a sigh of relief. “Yeah. I was about to hit the shower when you called.”

“Hey, don’t let me keep you. I had P.E. with you three years running. I know how nasty those pits of yours get.” Ash laughed. “I’ll catch you tonight. And Carver?”

“Yeah?”

“Sorry for that crack about you dropping James.”

“Hey, the truth hurts. You and me, we’re good.”

“Sweet. See you tonight.”

Dillon disconnected as he debated his next move. He could call Principal Morgan or any one of a dozen teachers and let them handle it, but as president of the G.S.A., James had a right to know trouble was brewing. Dillon turned the phone back on and punched in the numbers. Even after two years, his fingers wove an automatic pattern over the keys. James answered on the second ring, his voice rich and smooth.

“Hello?”

The moment James spoke, Dillon’s mind went blank. James said hello twice more before Dillon was able to say, “James?”

“Yeah, this is James.” He hesitated. “Dillon? Is that you?”

“Uh...yeah. Have you got a minute?”

“Just one.” The surprise Dillon had first heard in James’s voice turned to wariness. “What do you need?”

Dillon needed a lot of things from James, but nothing he could say out loud. Not yet, anyway. Instead, he said, “I just got a call from one of the guys at school. He thinks the G.S.A. could have trouble from Rooster Carmichael and his crew at tonight’s dance.”

James was quiet for a minute. Finally he said, “Why did you call me?”

Dillon silently cursed his own stupidity. He should have known James would be suspicious of his motives. “I was just trying to give you a heads up.”

“Not to seem ungrateful, but since when do you care what happens to a bunch of fags?”

“James, I—”

“I’ve got to go. Thanks for the warning.” James hung up before Dillon could say another word.

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