



Sample Chapters for

HOW TO SAVE A LIFE
by Sloan Parker

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Prologue

"You're mine now."

The eerie whispered voice from behind him urged Seth Fisher into action. He scrambled onto his hands and knees and lunged for the nightstand. If he could just reach a weapon from the table, the phone or a lamp—

The man wrapped his hands around Seth's ankles and tugged him backward. Seth surged forward again with everything he had, ignoring the scrape and burn of the carpet on his bare elbows and knees. He clutched the leg of the nightstand in both hands and added several hard, backward kicks, desperately trying to connect with the face of the creep behind him.

The kicking wasn't working. He made contact with the empty air more than the man. Too late now to get in any more good kicks. The creep's weight pressed down on Seth. Heavy, warm breaths hit the skin at the back of his ear.

"Fighting with me won't stop the inevitable."

Oddly, that time the whispered voice didn't sound as threatening as the words implied.

This guy was having fun.

Fuck you, asshole. Seth wasn't about to give up because this guy told him to.

He opened his mouth to scream, and a hand cut off the sound.

Not just a hand. A moist cloth covered Seth's mouth and nose. He squirmed harder, struggled to get leverage with his knees, but he couldn't move an inch.

His head spun, and his grip on the leg of the nightstand relaxed. He clawed at the wood, struggling to grab hold again.

Instead he watched with disbelief as his hands let go. The edges of his vision darkened. The last thing he saw was the creep's large hands wrapping around his own and pulling them away from the nightstand.

And the last thought he had was he really should've listened to his friend Toby. He never should've come to the Haven.

The next time Seth Fisher awoke, he lay naked on an oversize pillow on the floor of a tiny, locked metal cage with nothing to do but wait for the man who'd taken him to return.

Or for someone else to find him.

Chapter One

Stupid leather pants.

Kevin Price stood in the aisle of the crowded downtown bus and tried not to draw attention to himself.

Hard to do while attempting to get the most ridiculous, tightest pants known to man out of the crack of his ass.

Why the hell had he listened to Myles about what to wear?

"It's a sex club. You gotta look sexy."

Asshole.

Why would anyone wear pants like this?

To get laid.

If he could remember when he'd last had sex, he might've contemplated that longer.

The bus neared Kevin's stop. *Thank God.* He tugged on the legs of the pants and took a step forward. The elderly woman he'd given his seat to ten minutes earlier halted her knitting and gripped his wrist with a cold, bony hand.

"You don't want to get off here." Her grip tightened as she leaned in and hissed her next words in a low whisper. "It's not safe."

Could the universe please help him out?

Like walking into a gay sex club wasn't hard enough.

He smiled down at her and gave her hand a pat. "I'll be all right." When she didn't let go, he tried another smile and pat.

She had her gaze locked on his, but it was as if she didn't see him. Like she was in a trance. Then she squinted. The whites of her eyes grew smaller until there was nothing left but the gray of the irises. "You can't hide from him. He'll find you there. He'll find you anywhere."

Why did he always attract the weirdest people wherever he went?

"Okay," he said. "Thanks for the tip."

Finally she released him. He hurried away before he missed his stop, or before the creepy old woman gave him another obscure prediction. His skin was still crawling from that first one.

She was right, though. It wasn't safe where he was headed. Three missing young men. Another beaten. And no one was doing anything to find out why – or to stop it.

Until now.

The bus lurched forward and then came to a sudden stop. Kevin rushed the rest of the way to the front. *Great.* The leather pants now rode even higher up his ass. He stepped onto the curb, and the stifling heat slammed into him, knocking the breath from his chest. The sun had been down for hours, and still the heat hung over the city, draining the life and motivation from everyone.

Well, almost everyone.

He blew a strand of hair out of his eyes and tugged at the leather again.

No matter what, he had no intention of giving up on his plans. He'd never forgive himself if he walked away before he got to the truth and kept someone else from getting hurt – or worse.

He turned and headed north into the darkness of the old downtown factory district, thankful the crappy streetlamps and shadows of night would help cover the waddle in his stride as he tried to work the leather out of his ass with each step.

He took in the details of his surroundings. The unending cracks in the sidewalk, the smell of garbage and urine from the deserted alley, the shuffle of the homeless man's steps across the street.

The bleak locale had to be intentional. Only men serious about what they wanted would come to this neighborhood, would go out of their way to reach the Haven, a membership-only club where gay men could find – according to the club's Web site – “a safe and sane environment where every fantasy comes true.”

Fantasies? Kevin had rolled his eyes when he'd read that part. No one actually wanted their fantasies to come true. Did they?

What kind of people paid to go somewhere to fuck strangers?

Yet the mere thought of what he might see inside the club had his body thrumming with excitement, his blood heading south.

Stupid. Fucking. Dick. The traitorous thing never did listen to him.

He wiped the sweat beading at the nape of his neck. It was hot as hell walking the streets during the worst heat wave the city had seen in years. Of course, wearing the long-sleeve shirt and too-tight leather pants didn't help. The sweat now dripped down the crack of his ass, making him even more aware he'd skipped underwear since he hadn't been certain he could fit them on underneath.

He was going to kill Myles.

Like Kevin would look sexy walking in there with the stupid pants up his ass, his stomach twisted in knots, and his brain warring with his dick.

If only he hadn't made himself one promise years ago.

He'd fucked up, and it had cost him too much. That was all he needed to remember.

That, and the fact that he was not gay.

Not gay. Not gay. Not gay.

Another few strides, another run-down building, and he neared a five-story brick structure. The place had the same exterior as the abandoned buildings surrounding it, with graffiti and chipped, aging bricks. No sign with flashing red neon letters announcing HOT MAN-ON-MAN ACTION HERE. No sign of any kind.

Kevin made his way toward the building's front door. His phone rang, and his steps faltered as he shoved his hand into the front pocket of the tight-as-hell pants without thinking of the consequences. He did a little shimmy with his hips, but his hand wouldn't budge.

He couldn't walk into a swanky, underground sex club with one hand stuck inside his pants. He'd probably look like he was trying to grope himself as soon as he stepped inside. He might as well paint a sign on his forehead: GAY VIRGIN HERE. FIRST NIGHT IN A GAY BAR.

Well, not his first, but pretty damn close.

He gave another tug and breathed a sigh of relief when both his hand and the phone slid out. The movement, however, sent him tripping over a raised crack in the sidewalk. He flung forward, smacking his palm on the brick wall, just stopping his face from the same outcome.

A cab pulled up to the front of the club. Kevin leaned his shoulder against the brick and tried to appear casual, like he hadn't just tripped over practically nothing.

Smooth. He was so not going to fit in at the Haven. He couldn't even walk inside without making a fool of himself.

His phone rang again, and he checked the display. Perfect timing.

Guys walking into a sex club did not get calls from their mommies.

She probably just wanted to ask for the twentieth time if he planned to get back with Sondra. He hit the button to send the call to his voice mail.

A burly guy wearing a leather vest and pants got out of the cab and went to the Haven's front door. Two more men passed by Kevin.

No way they had missed his stellar trip into the brick. Both men gave him a sidelong glance as they entered. One winked at him.

Another man on foot appeared from around the far corner of the building. A tall, dark figure slinking toward him from out of the shadows. Kevin set his phone to vibrate and stashed it in his pocket, twisting his hips to get his hand out. The action was getting easier. Maybe the leather was stretching and he'd be able to get out of the pants later without anyone's assistance.

He got out the key card he'd received the day before and took a step closer to the door. His phone vibrated in his pocket. His mom had probably gotten cut off by his voice mail and she was calling to leave part two. She had the worst timing. She always called him right as he was about to get laid.

That had him frozen in place with his hand on the club's door handle. No way would he be getting laid tonight. Not in *there*.

He threw open the door, made it one step inside, and froze again.

He'd been in the Haven the previous day for an interview, but that had been an hour before they'd opened for the night. The brief tour of the posh club hadn't prepared him for the live show.

Men were everywhere. Dancing. Talking. Kissing. Grinding body against body. Practically fucking in the lounge chairs and on the dance floor while more men filled the dining room, eating their meals like they dined in any other upscale restaurant in the city.

The music was slower than he expected, softer. The lighting subtle. Not the dark corners, flashing strobe lights, and sea of strung out, desperate losers he'd pictured.

"Excuse me," came a deep voice from behind him.

Kevin spun around. The dark-haired man from outside had stopped in the club's doorway, staring down at him. He stood over half a foot taller, wearing jeans and a snug black T-shirt that showed off every firm muscle and looked both casual and dressy at the same time. Or maybe it was the man underneath. Short dark hair, slicked back. A

touch of gray at his temples. He reminded Kevin of a vampire. Sleek, sophisticated, ready to attack.

A sexy-assed vampire with a concentrated stare. Serious. Beautiful.

Was it offensive to call a man beautiful?

Or to call him a vampire?

“You in or out?” the guy asked in a low voice that gave credence to the vampire imagery.

Kevin could not stop staring. He also couldn't get his jaw to cooperate. He just stood there with his mouth hanging open.

Gay virgin here.

Yeah, he was doing a hell of a job blending in.

The guy hadn't looked away yet. He raised his eyebrows and pointed behind Kevin. “There's the dining room. That's for talking and eating.” He pointed to his right. “There's the bar. That's for drinking and dancing.” He gestured in the opposite direction. “There's the lounge. That's mostly for making out.” He leaned closer and pointed over Kevin's shoulder to the far side of the first floor, his breath brushing Kevin's earlobe as he said, “There's the stairs. That's where you head up to the rooms for more than making out.” He pulled back. “Pick your poison.”

Poison? Interesting choice of words. Wasn't the guy a member? Didn't he enjoy coming here?

Kevin clamped his mouth shut and breathed deep through his nose. Not a good idea. The guy smelled amazing. All male. Deeper, richer than any cologne he'd ever purchased. Kevin squeezed his eyes shut, and his body responded to the lust thundering through him.

Not now.

He opened his eyes.

The dark-haired man waited a moment, smirked, then stepped around him and walked off.

Kevin ran a hand down his chest, smoothing his shirt. He finally got moving and rushed for the bar. Everyone watching him cross the room had to know exactly what state his body was in.

Stupid, stupid pants.

How had he ended up here?

For years now he'd forced himself to stop checking out the porn sites. To stay clear of the locker room at the gym. To make a weekly date with Sondra even if work kept him busy.

He'd done all he could to forget that night. To move on.

Five minutes inside the Haven, one sexy-as-fuck older man, and that was all blown to hell. He was in serious trouble.

Kevin picked up the pace, then caught a glimpse of Vampire Guy's ass as the man walked toward the back of the club. Kevin wanted to grab that ass in his hands and sink his mouth over the guy's dick.

Oh God.

He turned away.

Not gay?

Right. Nice try.

Chapter Two

Walter Simon headed up the flight of stairs and noted the hush of the crowd behind him. Then the whispers started. Even the thumping beat of the music from the bar didn't mask the muffled mentions of his name as he made his way up.

His visits to the Haven had been anything but regular in recent years, and yet it was always the same thing.

Every instinct told him to turn and stare them down, keep his back to the wall and his eyes on the crowd.

He would always be a cop. Always be on duty. No matter how long ago he'd turned in his badge.

He sighed and kept on climbing.

Vargas stood waiting for him at the top of the staircase. He held out a hand. "Simon."

They'd been friends for as long as Vargas had owned the club, and in all that time they'd never called each other by their first names.

"Thanks for coming right over."

They shook as Walter said, "Not a problem. Did you keep everyone out of the room?"

"Yeah. No one else is going in there until you say so."

"No problems with the new security system?" Walter's company had done the installation.

"Seems to be working fine, despite what's been going on." Vargas swept his arm through the air like everything around him had been turning to shit.

“The extra cameras we put up last week should help.”

“I hope so.” Vargas’s phone rang. He checked the display. “Hang on for a minute? I’ve got to take this.”

Walter gave a nod, and Vargas went to the reservation desk situated at the top of the stairs to answer his call.

Despite how concerned Vargas had sounded on the phone earlier when he’d called Walter, he didn’t look it. He appeared as unruffled and confident as always, even with the dress shirt open at the top two buttons and the tie he usually wore long gone.

Everyone said the two of them could be brothers. Same height, same dark hair, although Vargas didn’t have the gray running through his, and Walter didn’t have the tattooed phrases hidden under his shirt that Vargas had.

They’d worked out at the gym together enough times over the years that he knew it’d be a toss-up if the two of them ever had to settle a disagreement with their fists. As it was, they’d likely kill themselves one day trying to outdo the other on the weight bench or the track.

The years after forty only intensified that drive. For both men.

Walter turned and scanned the crowd on the first floor below, taking note of who he recognized, who was new, who looked like they’d come for reasons other than a hookup.

Walking toward a table in the bar was the man he’d spoken to at the entrance. Still looking shocked, with a curious, nervous scan of his eyes. This guy was definitely hiding something. He was also so far in the closet he’d need a road map and a compass to find his way out.

The young man fumbled with a chair and plopped into the seat, all while he stared at the crowd of dancing men in the bar.

He had wavy – or more accurately, disheveled – light brown hair, a little too long for the style, like he only bothered to get it cut when the hair got to the point where it

hung in his eyes. Or maybe not even then, judging by the way he blew the strands from his face. An adorable move.

Wait. When had Walter last found anyone adorable? Had he ever?

The leather pants had probably never been worn before and were at least a size too small. The long-sleeve blue dress shirt was one too big. More fabric covered the young man's body than was typical for the Haven. The dining room could be reserved at dinner, but the bar leaned more to the casual side, shirts falling off as the night went on.

This guy was modest. Uncomfortable, even.

He shifted in his seat and yanked on his pant legs with both hands.

Walter smirked, barely holding back the laugh. He stilled the reaction and forced down a stiff swallow. He was done with the casual thing, and if he hooked up with a guy that young, it could never be more than a one-night stand. By the time a guy like that turned forty, Walter would be storing his teeth in a cup at night and using one of those motorized carts at the grocery store to pick up his adult diapers.

He gave up on the crowd as soon as Vargas returned. He couldn't stop from asking the question, though. "Who's that guy sitting alone in the bar? The one in the leather pants?"

"Kevin Dennison. He's a paralegal at a law firm. You know him?"

"No. Just getting the lay of the land, checking out who's here."

"You ready to head up?" Vargas gestured to the elevator.

The Haven had five stories. The first floor held the public areas. The other floors had the private rooms, most equipped like a hotel. The reservation desk sat at the top of the stairs on the second floor and was visible to the dining room and bar below. An elevator was located on the first floor to the right of the main staircase for those who'd already reserved a room where they'd spend the rest of the night. Or a half hour. Whatever they preferred.

Vargas hit the fourth-floor button. "Here's Seth Fisher's info." He handed over a thin folder.

A single sheet of paper with a photocopy of a driver's license lay inside. "This is his file?"

"No." Vargas pointed at the paper. "That's what I'm giving you of his file. I'm not about to violate my member's privacy any more than I have to. You only get what you absolutely need."

That's one of the reasons Walter liked Vargas. The man was honest and trustworthy. And he genuinely gave a shit. About his friends. About the club's members. About honor and integrity. There weren't many men like him around these days.

Didn't that thought make Walter feel old?

He examined the copy of the license. At least he had a name, Seth Fisher, and an address.

"He's twenty-five," Vargas said. "As you can see from his picture, he looks younger than that. Been a member for a year."

The photocopied picture of Seth was dark but clear enough. He looked like...

"Yeah," Vargas said in a low voice. "I thought so too."

Walter glanced up, and Vargas added, "They kept running his picture in the paper."

Right. Five years was a long time to remember one kid's face, but the story had been in the news for weeks after the shooting. Walter carefully folded the photocopy, slipped it into his pocket, and gave Vargas back the empty folder.

The elevator chimed, and the doors opened.

"If this is too much—"

Walter held up a hand. "No. I'm fine." He followed Vargas into the hall. "So I gather from what you said earlier there have been more missing items?"

“Yeah. Nothing major. Linens, towels, liquor. Like the others. Some shipments messed up too.” He hesitated. “Maybe that’s what’s got me thinking this is more than it looks like.”

Walter laid a hand on his shoulder and stopped him from continuing down the hall. “You okay?”

Vargas huffed out a laugh. “I was hoping this would be over by now. That I’d find out the thefts were the work of an employee. Then I could fire his ass and get back to my normal, boring routine.”

Funny a guy who owned a sex club thought his life was boring. Or normal.

It probably was. Walter had seen a lot of nasty shit during his years on the force. Most people didn’t know how abnormal the world could be.

He tipped his head, indicating farther down the hall. “This is more serious?”

“I’m no cop, but yeah, I think so.”

“Okay. Let’s take a look.”

They walked again. Vargas stopped at the third door from the end of the long hall and swiped a key card.

“Wait.” Walter gestured for him to hold back. He stepped in first and scanned the room.

A double bed, unmade. Sheets and bedspread rumpled, half on the foot of the bed, half on the floor. He crossed to the opposite side of the room, surveying the space from a different angle.

Two lamps, one on each nightstand. The far lamp had a crack from the top of the shade to the bottom and sat close to the back edge of the table. One side of the nightstand was farther away from the wall than the other.

He crouched and examined under the bed. Nothing. He straightened and moved to the bar in the corner. It was made of solid wood, sturdy. He checked under there as

well. The leg closest to the door was shifted backward from its usual indent in the carpet, the indent still perfectly pressed in. A recent move.

Vargas spoke. "Two guys came in here after we first opened and found it like this. Same as the other rooms last month, but..."

Walter stood and kept looking over the space. "What?"

"I had a bad feeling this time. That it was more than someone sneaking in here for a quickie. Last night only one person came upstairs without stopping at the desk. Seth Fisher." Vargas turned his head and stared through the room's open door to the empty hall. "He never came down or scanned his ID on his way out. I haven't been able to get a hold of him since." He gave up on the door and focused on Walter again. "If he was in this room, something happened to him, didn't it?"

"Maybe." Walter pointed to the bar. "This was pushed back. One side of the nightstand was dragged three inches. The lamp fell over, and the shade was crushed in, but someone popped it back out. Those all indicate a struggle someone tried to clean up after, but a few details were missed." He pointed to the bed. "Employees hanging out in the rooms before or after hours wouldn't leave the bed unmade. They'd try to make the room look as it did before they entered. Whoever was in here wanted to clean up the part that indicated a struggle but didn't care if you knew someone had been in the room."

"Which means?"

"He wanted you to think it's about sex. Maybe the cleaning crew would come in and take care of things, unaware the room hadn't been reserved. Then no one would know his real reason for being here."

Vargas looked ill. He drew in a deep breath. "If I call the cops with all that, they'll laugh their asses off and hang up on me, won't they?"

"Probably. They'll just say Seth could've been here to meet an employee who helped him sneak out after hours. They'll file a report, at most. Maybe knock on the kid's door. There's not enough here to suggest foul play, not at a sex club."

Vargas shook his head. “They won’t even look for him.” He stormed across the room and slammed the door shut, keeping his palm flattened to the door. “I want to know what’s going on in my club.” He held his hand against the surface of the door for a moment more, then faced Walter.

Whether it was instinct or his old training resurfacing, Walter knew something was wrong here. Very wrong. He couldn’t walk away without knowing what had happened to Seth Fisher – without knowing if he was okay.

“I’ll find him.”

Continued in *How to Save a Life* by Sloan Parker

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