



Lyrical Press, Inc.

DESPERATION

Dancing



— *Cita Powers* —

LYRICAL PRESS, INCORPORATED



Desperation Dancing
Copyright © 2009 Cita Powers
Edited by Piper Denna
Book design by Emma Wayne Porter and Renee Rocco
Cover Art by Renee Rocco

Lyrical Press, Incorporated
17 Ludlow Street
Staten Island, New York 10312
<http://www.lyricalpress.com>

eBooks are not transferable. All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE:

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party Web sites or their content.

Published in the United States of America by Lyrical Press, Incorporated
First Lyrical Press, Inc. electronic publication: January, 2009

DESPERATION DANCING

Cita Powers

DEDICATION

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER 10

ABOUT CITA POWERS

ALSO FROM LYRICAL PRESS, INC.

Dedication

The adage that it takes a village to raise a child is equally true for writing a book. I am deeply indebted to Beth H., Kellie Matthews, Penelope Whistle, Twistedchick, Rustler, and Maria Lima, as well as my Lyrical Press editor, Piper Denna. Their advice and suggestions were invaluable, strengthened the story, and made it far better than it was originally. Of course, I am responsible for all errors and omissions.

Chapter 1

Tina knocked on the open door. “Mike? I’m off.”

“What?” Mike looked up from the schedule he’d been studying. Was it that late already? “Oh, right. Thanks, Tina.” He stretched his arms high over his head, enjoying the pull on muscles aching from sitting too long in one place.

She hesitated, her usual smile sagging into a frown as she tied a scarf over her grey curls. “Don’t forget to eat a proper dinner tonight. You’re still too skinny.”

Covering his face with his hands to hide a grimace, he groaned. Not the ‘eat something’ lecture again. He did eat, but with a job like his, it was hard to keep his weight up, even when he hadn’t lived alone. “Yes, Mom. And after I finish my homework, can I borrow the car?”

“A little more respect, please.” Her brisk tone softened. “I *am* old enough to be your mother, and I worry about you.”

He lowered his hands, a prickle of guilt banishing his annoyance. Not many people worried about him these days, and Tina had stuck by him through the bad times. She didn’t deserve his resentment over such a little thing. “I know,” he said with a smile. “Thanks.”

“If only things had worked out between—”

“Well, they didn’t.” He tried to keep the bitterness from his tone, but he didn’t want to talk about it. Not now. Not ever.

Tina looked as if she wanted to say more. Instead, she nodded. “See you tomorrow.”

“G’night.”

He leaned back in his battered leather chair, worn but still comfortable, frowning as he looked out his second-floor office window. Dark at seven fifteen. That was one of the things he

hated about September. He liked the leaves changing color, he didn't mind Chicago's brand of biting cold, but for the past three years he'd hated—really, really hated—the long, lonely nights.

Seven fifteen. He had a few minutes before the evening's class. Long enough to finish his coffee and straighten the papers littering his desk. He was no neatnik, but if he didn't do it last thing at night, Tina would do it for him, and then he never could find anything. He tossed out the calendar she insisted on printing every single day. In fifteen years he'd forgotten only one class, but she'd decided he couldn't be trusted to remember his own schedule and every morning when he'd come in, the damned thing would be sitting there in the center of his desk. She was a fantastic administrator, though. He was willing to put up with her little quirks in exchange for not worrying about registration and schedules and substitutes, and he liked that she cared.

He stood and gulped down the last of his coffee before heading to the bathroom. One of the perks of being the boss was his own private dressing room and toilet. Sure, he still had to do the locker room thing when he was competing, but at least he could take a leak or change his trousers in his own dance studio without a student breathing down his neck. He smiled, remembering a couple of persistent admirers from more than one competition ogling his ass.

After he'd washed his hands, Mike glanced at his watch. Five minutes. Time to check out the students. He went through the connecting door to his dressing room. A corkboard panel pinned with choreography notes and programs from past competitions hung between shelves filled with trophies, ribbons, engraved plaques, and other keepsakes. He turned out the lights. It was pitch black in the windowless room, but he had no trouble finding the latch by touch, then swinging the panel away from the back wall.

He felt like a voyeur. He couldn't help it. Even though he'd long ago rationalized the installation of the one-way mirror into the main studio, he still got a little flutter in his stomach when he peered through the glass, a little thrill. Watching students when they didn't know they were being observed let him spot a lot of technical problems in their dancing, but it was a two-edged sword: Sometimes he saw things he wished he hadn't.

Mike wiped a hand over his face. He wasn't going to remember watching Fiona waltzing in the arms of that scumball champion-wannabe Simpson. Nor was he going to remember Simpson pulling her into a kiss, which she met with equal passion. His hands had cupped her ass, squeezing her close, and she wrapped one leg around his waist, as if she wanted to crawl up his body. One of her arms curled around his neck, the other snaked between them. Mike shook his

head, as if he could shake those memories out of his brain. No. He was not going there. Not tonight.

So, who had shown up? Crissy was already in the room, checking names off the roster and handing out nametags. Good.

They had been dancing together competitively for almost two years now. According to one judge Mike had overheard, Crissy's "long-legged, slender grace complemented Mike's lean power." However you wanted to say it, they were good together. When she wore heels, their two pale blond heads were almost at the same level, and despite the fact that his hair was its natural color and Crissy's came from a bottle, many people had asked if they were brother and sister. The funny thing was, he did feel like her older, if not wiser, brother. Pushing his fingers through his thick waves, he focused on the scene before him.

It looked like the usual crowd. A few young couples who wanted to learn to waltz for their weddings, two middle-aged couples chatting familiarly—probably corporate types who were climbing the social ladder at the country club and needed to dance with the boss and his wife, and the usual sprinkling of singles, both men and women. He squinted an experienced eye at them and sighed. Not a very promising lot. But he was tired of the dramatics and neuroses that often accompanied the pursuit of trophies, and had decided to teach this class because the students weren't aspiring champions.

The clock on the wall said seven-thirty. Time to haul ass and turn on the charm. He shut the panel, checked that his white shirt was neatly tucked into his black trousers, and left his dressing room.

He stood in the reception area outside the studio door for a minute, while Crissy gave the usual rundown about being on time, missing classes, and where the bathrooms were located. The sound of pounding feet echoed from the hall, the door banged open and a man ran inside.

"Whoa!" Heart hammering in his chest, Mike held up his hands. It couldn't be a robbery. They didn't keep any money in the office.

The man pulled himself up short, squaring his shoulders and raising his chin. Mike sized him up quickly: not a thief. Big, but not muscle-bound. Good-looking, in a clean-cut, Arrow shirt way. Almost-black hair and deep brown eyes contrasted with fair skin, except for two bright spots of color high on his cheeks. He was wearing jeans and a well-worn leather jacket, and—Mike noticed with a mental sigh—hiking boots.

“I beg your pardon,” the man said.

Mike interrupted before he could continue. “You here for the class?”

The man nodded. “I’m afraid I’m a little tardy. There was a small child with a dog who— Never mind.” He blushed and closed his mouth quickly.

Mike smiled and the man blinked at him. “Don’t worry. You haven’t missed anything. What’s your name?”

“Alasdair—” He closed his mouth again with a little frown, then started over. “Al Lovat.”

“Good to meet you, Al.” Mike held out his hand, and Al shook it firmly. “I’m Mike. Let’s go on in.”

Mike was proud of his studio. Spacious, with a proper wood dance floor and walls covered with mirrors, it could hold a large class comfortably without feeling cavernous. He’d worked long and hard to get to a point where he could afford this place, despite Fiona’s reservations about the rent. Well, he didn’t have to listen to her worries any more.

Crissy gave him a smile as they walked in, turning up the wattage as she spotted Al. “This is Al Lovat.” He clapped Al on the back. “He got hung up with a kid and a dog, but he’s here now.”

“Pleased to meet you.” She held out her hand, her eyes trailing down, then back up Al’s body. “So, you have a child?”

Mike stifled a grin. Crissy was so predictable.

“Uh.” Al shook her hand and darted a glance at Mike. “No. The child was trying to cross the street and—It doesn’t matter.”

Mike winked at him. “Okay, let’s get this show on the road.” He turned to face the others. “Welcome to ‘Desperation Dancing,’” he began. “I’m Mike Pulaski, and this is Crissy Warner. Over the next eight weeks, we’ll help you feel more comfortable on the dance floor. Now, I’m not saying you’ll win any awards when you finish this class, but you should be able to get up to dance without making a fool of yourself or your partner.”

He was off and running, spouting the patter without too much thought. By the time he’d finished his introduction, composed of equal parts reassurance and humor, everyone was smiling and looking a lot calmer.

“So, let’s partner up and see what you can do. If you came with someone, take their hand so we can see who’s up for grabs.” He looked around as the three young and two middle-aged

couples paired off. There were one, two, three women. No. Hang on. Two of the women were holding hands, chins set, looking defiant. “Okay,” he said, “that leaves one lady and two men.” The two women holding hands relaxed a little. “You...” He peered at the nametag of a tall, gangly man with a beard. “Harold. Why don’t you go with...” Another squint at a petite brunette. “Ann. Crissy, would you partner with Al?” He grinned at her as if to say, ‘Don’t say I never do anything for you.’

She dimpled in acknowledgement.

“I’m going to put on some music, and I want you to dance.” He walked over to the stereo cabinet. “It’s not a test. There’s no right or wrong here. Just dance the way you usually would.” He checked the CD and hit play. An innocuous melody with a steady bass beat started up.

Everyone stood around for a minute, looking uncomfortable again. Then Crissy towed Al to the middle of the dance floor. Mike suppressed a smile and flapped his hands at the others.

“Go on. Get out there. You can’t learn to dance unless you’re willing to move to the music.”

It took another minute before everyone was dancing. Mike looked them over. All of the younger couples were in the ‘full body contact,’ ‘no air between them’ position: girls with their arms around the necks of their partners; guys, and the taller of the two women, with their arms wrapped around their partner’s waist. They swayed from side to side in a tight circle, shuffling their feet. The older couples were trying a standard closed position, but they weren’t really sure where to put their arms and hands. They shuffled their feet, trying to avoid stepping on each other’s toes.

He turned and stared. Crissy and Al were moving slowly but competently around the floor—and, interestingly enough, Crissy wasn’t leading. She did look as pleased as a cat that had cornered a fat, tasty mouse, though, and winked at Mike as they executed a neat circle around Harold and Ann. So Al knew some basic social dance steps, and enough about leading to avoid bumping into the stationary couples. And he managed to dance with hiking boots on. Mike rubbed the back of his neck and tilted his head. Yeah, he knew the steps, but man. The guy had all the grace of a block of wood.

When the music finished, Mike applauded briefly and the couples faced him. “See, that wasn’t too painful. You can move to the music, which is good.” He grinned. “Now, before we start teaching steps, let’s talk about leading and following. Anyone know what we mean by

leading and following when you're dancing?"

He looked over the class. Most of the students were avoiding his gaze. Al started to raise his hand, then quickly put it down. Finally, one of the middle-aged women raised her hand tentatively.

"Yeah." Mike checked her nametag. "Dana."

"Doesn't the man lead," she said quietly, holding the hand of the balding man beside her, "and the lady follows?" She glanced over at the two women, then quickly away.

Mike nodded. "Yeah, that's the traditional way. Nowadays, that's up to the couple, unless you're dancing competitively. So, what do we mean when we say lead? What does the lead do?"

Al opened his mouth and shut it again. Everyone else looked at the floor or out the window.

"Al? You were leading Crissy when you danced. What did you do?"

Al cleared his throat and squared his shoulders, clasp his hands behind his back, assuming parade rest position. Ah. Military training. Probably just received a promotion and now had to do the social thing. "I was responsible for leading my partner around the dance floor and avoiding collisions, and for choosing the speed of our steps."

"Yeah, that's good." Mike nodded and Al relaxed a little, a smile touching his lips. "Those are some of the things a good leader needs to remember when you dance."

"But that's not fair," said one of the young women, her long auburn ponytail swinging as she shook her head. "Why can't we share leading?"

"Yeah, you could do that," Mike agreed. "Let's see how it works. Dana and... Tom? Would you stand there?" He pointed to the center of the dance floor, then started the CD again. "Okay," he said, holding out his hand to Crissy, "let's see how this works."

With a glint in her eyes, Crissy came into his arms and immediately started a foxtrot. Mike stumbled, not entirely intentionally, and they set off across the floor. As they approached Dana and Tom, Mike tried to steer them to the right, and Crissy tried to steer them to the left. They only avoided a collision when Dana and Tom jumped out of their way at the last minute. Continuing around the floor, they moved awkwardly, each one trying to control the other. Finally, Crissy released Mike's hand and moved into a sweeping curtsy while Mike was finishing a step. He was only prevented from landing on his face by his quick reflexes and some luck.

The class was laughing, and he ran his hand through his hair and grinned. “That didn’t work too well. Why?”

“Too many chiefs and not enough Indians,” muttered Tom, with a meaningful glance at his wife.

“Don’t know if I’d put it that way,” Mike said, “but that’s the idea. Someone’s got to be responsible for those decisions, and they’re the person who leads. But following doesn’t mean you’re a rag doll who’s being hauled around. You’ve got to pay attention and follow the lead.” He beckoned to Ann, who came forward with a shy smile. “Let me show you what I mean. May I have this dance?” he said, holding out his hand. Ann put her hand in his, and Mike pulled her toward him. Her hand moved, then her arm, then she leaned forward and finally she took a step toward him. He then pushed her hand back, and she reversed her movements. “It’s going to be hard to dance that way,” he said. “Let’s see how Crissy does it, then we’ll try again.”

He held out his hand to Crissy, and when he pulled her forward, she came in one smooth movement. “See the difference? Okay, Ann, let’s try again.”

This time Ann stepped forward smoothly, and only stumbled a little as he pushed her back. “Good. That’s what we’re looking for. You’ve got to have energy when you follow. Okay, everyone. Stand with your partner, and try this a couple of times.”

The students talked and laughed as they practiced. Mike heard a number of critical comments from several of the men, and one young woman looked near to tears. He narrowed his eyes. “Right. You’re looking good, ladies. Now, men, it’s your turn.”

“Our turn?” A burly guy named Ian frowned. His girlfriend Terry looked at the floor, her face pink, her freckles standing out sharply.

“Yeah.” Mike bounced a little on the balls of his feet. Wow. Tough guy. He almost snorted. “Yeah. You can’t be a good lead if you don’t know how to follow. Now,” he turned to the rest of the class, “ladies, lead your partner.”

He kept an eye on Ian. When he stumbled as he was stepping back, Mike pressed his lips together to stop grinning. He looked away and met Al’s bright gaze. The corner of Al’s mouth lifted, and he nodded once. Mike winked in return and smiled as he watched Crissy lead Al. Al was moving correctly, but damn, the man was still as stiff as a board. From the predatory look in Crissy’s eyes, though, that might not be a bad thing, depending on exactly where he was stiff. Mike chuckled.

“Good. You’ve got that part down. Now, let’s up the ante and try something a little harder. This is closed position.”

Mike and Crissy demonstrated. “Face to face, see? But the lady’s a little to your right, men. Ladies, look over his shoulder. Hold each other lightly, but don’t have floppy arms! Remember, keep the energy whether you’re leading or following.” They went from couple to couple, correcting their stances. Al looked steadily at Mike, eyebrows slightly raised, until Crissy joined him.

“Everyone in position?” Mike looked over the class. “Okay. Men, you’re going to walk forward and steer your partner around the dance floor. Use the hand on the lady’s back to indicate the direction you want to go. Press lightly—don’t try to haul her around. You’re going to start with your left foot. Everyone know which one that is?”

There were the usual stumbles and near-misses, but after ten minutes and several lead-switches, they were beginning to get the hang of it. Most of the students were smiling, but Terry’s cheeks were still flushed, and Ian kept muttering under his breath as they moved. Mike frowned. Time for a little intervention.

“Great. Now that you’re used to each other, find another partner, decide who’s going to lead, and try it again.” Several of the students looked panic-stricken, and glanced around the room. Mike held out his hand to Terry, Crissy snagged Tom, and they moved across the floor. Mike looked around, his feet on automatic. Good. The students were pairing off.

Except for Rita and Abby, who were hanging onto each other as if they going to be swept away in a hurricane. Ian, Harold and Bill stood stiffly against the wall, not looking at the women.

“Hey, guys, start dancing,” Mike called across the room. They looked at him like he had suddenly pulled on a frilly pink tutu.

“They,” said Ian with a jerk of his head, “won’t dance with us.”

“So dance with each other.”

“Dance? With him?” Bill snapped. “Men don’t dance together.”

“Yeah,” said Mike, steering Terry toward the men, “they do in lots of places.” He gave Terry a little bow and turned to Bill. “Like here. It’s good practice to dance with someone who’s a different size than you’re used to, so ladies, choose another lady, and men, find a man.” He held out his hand to Bill, whose brows beetled. “Come on. You can lead, if that’ll make you feel better.”

Bill stared at him a moment longer, then stiffly held out his hand. Mike nodded, keeping his face solemn, and they moved off together. He checked out the class. The ladies were pairing up, but not the men. Mike's eyebrows lifted as he watched Al stride up to Ian and hold out his hand, his body inclined politely. Ian said something, but Mike couldn't hear what it was. Al's cheeks darkened and he dropped his hand. Uh oh. Mike started to pull away from Bill. Al replied quietly, and Ian's head jerked back; he looked offended. Al added something, and Ian suddenly burst out laughing. Mike relaxed a little but watched them closely as they moved onto the dance floor, Ian leading.

After a few minutes, he had them switch to a partner of the opposite sex, ladies leading, and this time even Rita and Abby danced with men. Mike moved around the room, quietly correcting a few positions, then called for everyone to dance with a partner of the same sex again.

A tap on his left shoulder startled him. He turned full into the face of Al's dazzling smile. "May I have this dance?" Al held out his hand.

Mike grinned back and moved into position. "Sure. You lead." Al's hand was warm and dry in his, his shoulder broad and hard under Mike's fingers. Raising his eyes, Mike surreptitiously studied Al's face. He was handsome enough to be a model, and almost too good-looking to be a movie star. Most guys with faces like his would be aware of just how fine they looked; Mike had been around enough to know how to spot the self-absorbed. He'd see them checking themselves out in the mirrors, or preening as they stood, waiting for someone to admire them. Al didn't seem to be conscious of his looks, or else he didn't care, and that unselfconsciousness was even more attractive than a handsome face and well-built body. Although from what Mike could tell, Al's body was as appealing as his face. The guy wasn't bulky, but he was a solid presence, firm and enduring. Mike's stomach did a little flip-flop.

Al steered him across the floor. Amazing. All of a sudden, the guy moved fluidly, gracefully. What the hell happened to the stiff block of wood who'd been dancing with Crissy? Mike glanced at the mirror, watched the way their bodies fit together, the smooth transitions and easy elegance. Yeah, they looked good.

"So, what did you say to Ian to get him to dance?" Mike asked softly.

Al gave him a solemn look, but his eyes twinkled. "I just pointed out that American football players manage to survive huddles, tackles, hugs and pats on their backsides with their

manhood intact, and I expected the occasional dance would not irreparably unman any of us.”

“Good one. Thanks for helping out.”

“You’re very welcome.”

It was easy to follow Al’s lead, easy to follow the subtle but firm pressure of a sturdy hand against his back. Mike relaxed, aware of the movement of his thigh against Al’s, of the occasional brush of their hips and the warm pressure of their fingers. The music faded into the background. He could feel the rhythm between them, strong and sure, something he hadn’t felt for a long time. Something he hadn’t even known he’d missed until that moment.

After Fiona had left, and after the disastrous two months of rebound that still heated his face whenever he thought about it, he’d kept busy in the studio and with competitions. He couldn’t feel lonely in the middle of a class, or on the dance floor, watched by judges. So what if there were times when he was alone in his apartment when the sadness took over? Wasn’t feeling bummed all by yourself like a tree falling in the woods? If no one’s there to see, it never happened. According to that philosophy, a lot of Mike’s life in the past three years had never happened.

Was that about to change?

Wrapped in his thoughts, enjoying the simple act of holding and being held by an attractive guy, Mike contentedly moved around the floor until Crissy passed close by. “Mike?” She raised her eyebrows. Breathing quickly, flustered at Crissy’s reminder, Mike stepped away from Al with a nod.

“Okay, people. Don’t forget to thank your partner for the dance.” He moved to the stereo, trying to regain his fractured composure. They’d just been dancing, that’s all. Ignoring the marrow-deep quaking in his bones was a damned sight easier than admitting anything. “Now, let’s add some actual steps to the mix. We’re going to start with a waltz.”

He forced himself to focus, and the rest of the lesson passed quickly. By the end of the class, everyone could lead and follow a simple box step and a left box turn. He praised them all, and Crissy reminded them to be on time Thursday evening.

“Oh, yeah,” Mike added, carefully not looking at Al’s hiking boots. “It’s a good idea to dance in a pair of leather-soled shoes, like mine. They make it easier to feel the floor, and if you do step on your partner’s foot, it’s not going to break.”

A few of the women looked pointedly at their partners before leaving. Mike popped the

CD out of the stereo and put it back in its case.

“Mike?”

He jumped, startled, and the CD case landed on the floor with a crash. “Oh, damn, Al, don’t do that.”

“I’m sorry.” Al picked up the case and handed it to him. “May I ask you a question?”

“Sure.” Heart pounding—from surprise, that was all—Mike slid the CD back into the rack.

“Night, Mike.” Crissy stood in the doorway, her coat on. “Goodnight, Al.” Her voice dropped half an octave, a little husky. She looked at Al, her head tilted, a faint smile on her lips. “I’m going now. Will you lock up, Mike?”

Mike darted a glance at Al, who had nodded politely to Crissy, but was now looking solemnly at the far wall. Didn’t look as if he was going to take her hint. Mike almost said something, almost encouraged him to walk her to her car, but no. For some reason he couldn’t—or wouldn’t—identify, he didn’t want to play her game, not with Al.

“Yeah, I’ll take care of it. See you tomorrow.” Mike waved. She hesitated for a moment, then raised her chin and whirled around. Her heels clattered as she stalked off. “You got a question?”

Al ran his tongue along his full lower lip, a gesture so unselfconsciously sexy it seemed almost practiced. Almost.

Mike’s body reacted before his brain had a chance to catch up; his legs buckled, his face burned, and his dick began to take an interest. He leaned against the wall, locked his knees, and pretended to check the stereo.

Damn.

Damn, damn, damn.

Do not do this. Not another guy.

Not another guy who looked like he was in the military—and especially not another student. He’d done that once, and had vowed he would never do it again. Their few moments of joy hadn’t been worth the ultimate grief and pain. He swallowed with an audible gulp, and shoved his shaking hands into his pockets.

“I wondered,” Al hesitated, “if you could recommend a store where I might purchase appropriate shoes.” He sounded a little breathless, and when Mike glanced at him from under

half-lowered lids, he looked away.

“Sure. Tina keeps a list at her desk. C’mon. I’ll get you a copy.” Mike flicked off the lights as he followed Al out into the hall, shutting the studio door behind them.

Immediately locating the right folder, a testament to Tina’s superb organization, Mike pulled out a sheet and turned to Al. He was standing in front of the display case, hands clasped behind his back, studying the trophies and plaques that lined the shelves.

“Got it.”

Al pulled his gaze away. “Most of these awards are yours.” He turned back to the case and tilted his head to one side.

Mike shrugged. “Yeah. You dance enough years, and you’ll have a case full of trophies, too.”

“I hardly think so.” Al leaned forward, his nose almost touching the glass. “You won first place at Blackpool?” There was awe in his voice. “Four years in a row?”

Mike let out his breath in a gusty sigh. Jeez, the guy knew something about competitive dancing—enough to be impressed by the name Blackpool. “We didn’t win everything.”

“No.” Al’s tone was as dry as a Kansas county. “Just the Standard and Latin competitions.”

Remembering the paper he still clutched, Mike awkwardly held out his hand. False modesty wasn’t one of his faults, but he felt strangely reluctant to acknowledge his achievements to this man. “Here you go.”

Al looked blank for a moment, then nodded. “Thank you.” He carefully folded the paper and slipped it into the back pocket of his jeans. “Would you...” He turned back to the display case, but Mike would have bet any amount of money that he wasn’t looking at the contents. “Would you like to join me for a bite to eat?”

A bite to eat? Al was asking him out for a meal? It was suddenly hard to breathe. What did that mean? No. No, he wasn’t going to read too much into the invitation, no matter how much he wanted to.

“Yeah.” The corners of his mouth turned up, and he hoped he didn’t look as stupid as he felt. Gormless, they called it in Blackpool. “Yeah, I’d like that. Let me just change my shoes.”

He dashed around the corner and down the hall to his office. Kicking off his shoes, he eyed his black trousers. Nah. Mike stepped into his dressing room, shimmied out of his trousers

and into his jeans. Leaving his trousers in a heap on the floor, he pulled on his favorite boots, scuffed black motorcycle boots—about as far as you could get from dance shoes unless you had a thing for Doc Martens—and grabbed his leather jacket.

Resisting the urge to check his hair—for Christ’s sake, this wasn’t a date—he shrugged on his jacket and returned.

Al was still studying the stuff in the case.

“You have a restaurant in mind?” Mike allowed himself to slouch just a little, weight on one leg, one hip thrust forward.

Al turned to him, his eyes going wide. He did that lip-licking thing again.

Mike swallowed. Why had all the oxygen been sucked out of his lungs? Was this really how fish felt when they were hooked and pulled flopping onto the shore?

“No,” Al replied. “I don’t know this neighborhood.”

Mike smiled. Okay. “Then I know just the place.” Al returned his smile, and this time Mike’s heart did a little two-step in his chest and his gut tightened.

Oh, man. This was bad.

He’d felt like this before, and he shouldn’t be standing here, planning where to go for dinner. He was breaking his most important rule: never date a student. Well, technically this wasn’t a date, but he was way too interested in Al for it to be just a casual night out. He’d made his rule for a damned good reason, and he’d better remember that. He wasn’t proud of how he’d acted after his divorce, and he’d promised himself when the dust had finally settled that he’d never get into such a mess again.

But he wanted to go. He wanted to hang with Al for a while, get to know him better.

All he had to do was to keep cool, not get involved. Have a good time, but remember his rule. Sure, he could do that, no problem. Never mind the whisper of warning in his mind.

He locked up carefully. There wasn’t much to steal, except the trophies and the stereo, but dance floors were expensive and easy to ruin, not to mention all those walls of mirrors. It was a good neighborhood, but he’d spent too much money to see the studio get trashed by a bunch of kids in party-wreck mode.

“We can walk there, if you want to leave your car,” Mike said as they clattered down the stairs.

Al shook his head. “I don’t have a car. I took the bus.”

“The bus?” They walked out the front door and Mike locked it after them. He frowned. “I thought they didn’t have late service out this way.”

“Well.” Al fell into step beside him as they set off down the sidewalk. “There’s a route that passes a mile and a half to the southeast. I can easily catch that.”

“A mile and a half, eh?” Mike’s shoulder bumped Al’s as they walked, sending tingles along his arm. He ignored them. “That’s pretty far to go to catch a bus.”

“Not particularly. I enjoy walking.”

“Good thing.”

“Indeed.”

Mike shoved his hands into his pockets and led Al down a little side street lined with neat brick houses. They continued on in companionable silence. The air was crisp, but not yet cold. A sprinkling of leaves crunched softly under their feet. Occasionally a car passed with a roar, stirring up a small tornado of leaves, but there wasn’t much traffic away from the main road. After a few minutes, they turned the corner. The restaurant looked rather dingy and worn, but lights in the windows shone warmly and the sign above the door was freshly painted, the name *Stosh’s* in white on a red background.

“Here we are.”

Polka music played in the background as they entered. Of course, polka music was always playing at Stosh’s. It was one of the constants of the universe—that and the smell of sauerkraut and sausage that permeated every corner.

Mike shrugged off his jacket and hung it one of the hooks that lined the wall beside the front door, waiting patiently as Al did the same. He waved at Danuta, co-owner, hostess, and occasional cook, and led the way to an empty corner booth, greeting several couples and families who called out to him.

“Don’t know how hungry you are,” he said as they settled on opposite sides of the booth, “but pretty much everything on the menu’s good.”

Al glanced at his hands, clasped on top of the table. “When I said a ‘bite,’ I was perhaps understating the issue. I didn’t have time to stop for dinner before class.”

“Gotcha.” Mike leaned forward. “You trust me?”

Eyes widening, Al hesitated, then nodded.

Feeling as if he’d been entrusted with more than just a choice of dinner, Mike’s mouth

was suddenly dry. “Okay. Let me order. I promise you’ll like it.”

Al licked his lower lip again, but at least this time Mike was sitting down when his knees turned to water.

Danuta bustled up, her round face creased in a smile, her corn-yellow hair twisted into its usual bun.

“So, Casimir, finally you come to see me!” She winked at Mike. Her accent broadened, like it always did in front of a stranger. “And you bring a nice boy to make my heart beat like bird’s wings.” She beamed at Al, who looked confused.

“Danuta, this is Al Lovat.” Mike wrinkled his nose. “And I’m hurt—did you forget I was here last week?”

“Not last week. At least two weeks ago.”

“Nah, it was last Thursday,” he said, then continued before she could interrupt. “We’re hungry. Al’s a dancer, too, and—”

“Of course!” Her smile disappeared. “I get you *kapusniak* and *paluszki*, so you don’t starve, and then maybe *golqbkki* and *kielbasa*?”

Mike nodded. “Great.” He turned to Al. “What do you want to drink? Beer? A soda?”

Al blinked, looking slightly stunned. “Tea, please,” he finally said.

“And I’ll have coffee.”

With a pleased nod, Danuta headed for the kitchen.

“Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“Why did she call you Casimir?”

Mike grimaced and shifted on his seat. “That’s my name.”

“Ah.” A tiny crease appeared between Al’s eyebrows. “But you introduced yourself as Mike. All of your trophies are engraved ‘Mike.’”

Mike rubbed the back of his neck, the corner of his mouth tilting up. “Michael’s my middle name. My folks named me Casimir Michael after the Polish soldier who fought in the Revolutionary War. I dropped Casimir a long time ago, ‘cause who would want a dance partner named Casimir Pulaski? But that’s the name Danuta’s always known me by.” He shrugged.

“And you don’t wish to offend her by insisting she call you by the name you prefer. I certainly understand that.” Al met his eyes and smiled, all white teeth and sparkling eyes, open

and generous.

It felt like a blow. All Al did was smile. Mike's heart pounded, beating against his ribcage.

"Mike? Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Just hungry." Definitely his loneliness speaking. Al was being friendly, that's all. It was his own damned fault if he read something more into a smile. Mike mustered up a grin. "So, where'd you learn to dance?"

Al pressed his lips together. "My grandmother. According to her, every person should know how to make bread, recite a poem, sew on a button, and dance a waltz."

"She sounds nice."

"She was." Al's mouth relaxed and he raised an eyebrow. "And where did you learn to dance?"

Mike laughed and leaned back, stretching out his legs. His booted feet stuck out into the aisle. "Here. Friday night is polka night. My parents would come to dance and they'd bring me and my brother along. So I learned to polka."

"How old were you?"

"He was three years old," Danuta interrupted, setting their drinks on the table. "Such a little thing! All arms and legs, with hair like flax and eyes as big as plates." She winked at Al and left.

Mike closed his mouth. His cheeks burned.

"How did you become interested in competitive dancing?" Al's voice was quiet, his eyes intent on his cup of tea.

Clasping his hands around his coffee mug, Mike stared at the drops of oil shimmering on the surface. "I begged my parents for lessons like some kids beg for a puppy, and when I was six they finally gave in. After a while, I met a girl there, Fiona. We were good together, so we became partners."

"She's the Fiona on the trophies?"

Mike's throat tightened, the familiar reaction to her name almost comforting, and he took a quick sip of his coffee. It burned going down, but the warmth eased the tightness. "Yeah."

Al hesitated. "It must be remarkable to partner with one person for so long." He sounded wistful.

With a shrug, Mike set down his mug. “It was good for a while. Comfortable. We each knew what the other would do almost before we did it. But then she got bored, and decided she wanted a new partner.” He turned the mug around in his hands, around and around.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up a painful subject.”

Mike shook his head and summoned up a smile. “Nah, it’s okay. Water under the bridge.”

Some of the worry left Al’s eyes. “Who are you dancing with now?”

“Crissy and I are working on some routines. I’ve had a couple of different partners since Fiona left.” He took another sip. “Crissy’s a good partner, but I’m thinking about retiring.”

“Retiring?” Al sounded shocked. “But you’re young!”

“Not for competition.” Mike huffed out a snort. “I’m almost forty, starting to slow down, and my knees aren’t what they used to be. I’ll teach, maybe become a judge, something like that.” He couldn’t summon up much enthusiasm for the thought, though.

“So, now you eat,” Danuta said as she set down their bowls of *kapusniak*. She turned to Mike and raised an eyebrow. “Stosh, he says for you to come and dance this Friday. Bring your friend,” she smiled at Al, “and show these people how to polka.”

Mike laughed and picked up his spoon. “Tell Stosh I’ll try to be there, as long as he sticks to Frankie Yankovic and doesn’t play any Lawrence Welk.”

“No Lawrence Welk!” Danuta placed a hand on her ample bosom and heaved a sigh, then bustled away, shaking her head.

Mike grinned at Al, ignoring the tight knot in his stomach. “You up for an evening of polka?”

“That sounds delightful.” The wistful note had returned. “I have to point out, however, I don’t know how to polka.”

“No problem. I can teach you in half an hour.” Mike gestured toward Al’s bowl. “It’s sauerkraut soup. Eat, or you’ll insult them.”

Al hesitated only slightly before putting his spoon to his mouth. “Delicious.”

“Yeah. Knew you’d like it.” Mike started in on his own bowl. The broth was rich, the cabbage tangy. “If you can stay after Thursday’s class,” he said between mouthfuls, “I can show you then.”

They finished their soup and *paluszki* quickly, and Al leaned back with a sigh. “That was

wonderful, Mike. What did you call the potato sticks?”

“*Paluszki*. Means ‘little fingers.’”

Before he could say more, Danuta whisked away their bowls and set two large platters in front of them. Mike laughed as Al’s eyes widened.

“Don’t worry, we don’t have to eat it all right now.”

“I should hope not.” Al looked relieved.

“No, no,” agreed Danuta. “You take some home. Dancers are always hungry.”

“Thanks, Danuta.” Mike dug in. “Neither of us’ll have to cook for a couple of days.”

They ate in silence, and Mike was pleased when Al had second helpings of both the *golqbkki*—cabbage rolls filled with meat—and the flavorful sausage called *kielbasa*. Finally Mike shoved his plate away and took a deep breath, patting his stomach with both hands. “I couldn’t eat another bite.”

Al paused, his eyes following Mike’s hands, his fork halfway to his mouth. With a start, he blinked and set it down on his plate. “Me, either. Everything was very good.”

“Told you. Danuta’ll put the rest in two doggy bags. You can have yours for lunch tomorrow. And dinner.”

“I may have to fight for it.” Al shook his head. “Mac takes the term ‘doggy bag’ literally.”

Danuta appeared and cleared the table, clucking over the amount of food left. She gave Mike a cool look. “You’re still too skinny,” she said, before returning to the kitchen.

“She always says that.” Mike chuckled, remembering Tina’s earlier words. “Mac? That your dog’s name?”

“Well, he believes he’s my guardian angel, but he’s eager to assume canine perquisites when it suits him, as long as he can avoid the concomitant responsibilities.” Al looked faintly annoyed.

“Uh, yeah.” Mike stared at him for a minute, processing the sense of Al’s words. Then he grinned. “Cool. So, how come he thinks he’s your guardian angel?”

Al rubbed his forehead. “I took shel—” He closed his mouth and stared at the table top. “It doesn’t matter.”

Mike leaned forward and folded his hands together, elbows on the table. “Yeah, it does. I’d like to know.”

“You would?”

“Yeah. So spill.” Jeez. The guy sounded as if he didn’t expect anyone to want to hear stuff about him.

The corners of Al’s eyes crinkled, and the sight sent a trickle of warmth down Mike’s spine. “There’s nothing much to tell,” Al began. “I was hiking in the mountains when a storm blew up unexpectedly, so I took shelter in a small cave. Mac was already there, soaked and half-starved, but he welcomed my company.” He paused. “Briefly, we rescued each other, and Mackenzie has chosen to remain with me since then.”

“I get that.” Mike grinned. “You owe each other. That’s great. I never had a dog as a kid, and Fiona didn’t think it was fair to have a pet, ‘cause we were away at competitions so much. Maybe when I retire I’ll get one for company.”

“I’ve never inquired why Mackenzie chooses to stay with me.” Al looked dubious. “Perhaps it’s one of those times when illusions are preferable to reality.”

Danuta returned with two bags. Mike sighed. Each of the bags contained considerably more than what had been left on their plates. When Al looked at the bags and opened his mouth, Mike shook his head.

“Thanks, Danuta.” Mike slid out of the booth and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “I think we’ll live ‘til Friday, at least.”

“Thank you,” Al added. They picked up their bags and Mike led the way to the door, waving goodbye to the other diners. “We haven’t paid our tab,” Al whispered as they put on their coats.

“I know.” Mike glanced at Danuta, standing by the kitchen, beaming at them. “They won’t take my money. So I find other ways to pay them back.”

“I could offer—” Al began.

“Don’t. You’d just insult them.”

“Very well, if you’re certain.”

“Yep. Very certain.”

They stepped outside. Mike buttoned up his jacket, then squinted up at the stars. If he wanted to see them clearly, he would have to put on his glasses. Call him vain, but he didn’t want to wear them in front of Al unless he had to. “Nice night. Getting chilly, though.”

Al fell into step beside him. “I was just thinking how balmy the air is.”

“Yeah.” Mike laughed. “Just like Florida.”

“Well, perhaps not.” Al took a deep breath and let it out in a soft sigh. “I’ve never been to Florida.” His words had the air of a confession.

“Really? Parts are okay.” Mike’s shoulder bumped Al’s, and he suppressed a shiver. “My folks moved outside Sarasota a couple years ago, but I haven’t had time to fly down more than once a year. We used to go there a lot for competitions, but we didn’t get much of a chance to sightsee. Maybe someday I’ll drive down and have a look around.”

“When you retire?”

Mike glanced over at Al, who was smiling gently. “Yeah. I can hang out with all the other old people there. They call it God’s waiting room, you know.”

They walked on in comfortable silence, and if their shoulders brushed occasionally, Al didn’t seem to mind.

Mike stopped at the entrance to the small parking lot beside the studio and made his decision, shifting the paper bag to his other hand. “I’ll give you a ride home.”

“There’s no need.”

“It’s a long way and who knows when the next bus’ll come by.” Mike walked over to his car, its black paint making it almost invisible in the shadows. Only a stray gleam on the carefully waxed hood and roof betrayed its presence. He unlocked the door. “Come on.”

Al hesitated, then rounded the car to the passenger side. “Thank you,” he said after he slid into his seat.

Fishing his glasses out of his coat pocket, Mike slipped them on, trying not to feel self-conscious. A lot of people wore glasses, and Crissy had helped him pick out the frames for these. He still hated them, though. “No problem. Where to?” He pulled out of the space, stopped at the parking lot entrance and looked at Al.

Al turned to stare out the window and gave an address on West Garfield, near Sherman Park.

Mike pursed his lips in a silent whistle. Interesting neighborhood. “Okay.”

Al relaxed back against the seat and looked around the interior of the car. He ran his fingers over the smooth lip of the dashboard.

Mike pulled his eyes away from Al’s hands and concentrated on the road. “You like classic cars?”

“I don’t know much about them. A friend of mine has a 1976 Gran Torino.” Al checked out the interior, craning his head. “I’ve never ridden in a Dodge Charger, however.”

“Oh, yeah?” Mike smiled. “Sixty-nine was the high point for Chargers.”

Al made a noncommittal sound.

“A ‘76 Torino?” Mike nodded. “Not bad. Starsky and Hutch car, right? Candy apple red? But this baby’ll beat the pants off a Torino any day.”

“In point of fact—”

“You don’t think I can leave any car made in the seventies in the dust?” Mike pressed his foot down and wove in and out of traffic. “Listen to that engine. Purrs like a kitten. They don’t make ‘em like that anymore.” The light ahead was red, but he didn’t slow down. Al put a hand on the dashboard.

“Mike.”

Mike pressed on the accelerator.

“Mike.”

The light stayed red.

“Mike!”

Slamming his foot onto the brake pedal, Mike pumped it quickly and brought the car to a halt at the entrance to the intersection.

“See? A Torino can’t brake like that. It’s got the wrong weight distribution.” Mike patted the dashboard and looked over at Al. “You can let go now.”

“Thank you.” Al sounded relieved.

“Don’t worry.” The light turned green, and Mike set off at a decorous pace. “I’m not a maniac.”

“I think I’ll reserve judgment on that for the moment.”

Mike laughed. “Fiona always said I drove like I danced.”

“Wildly?”

“Nah. Passionately.”

Al didn’t reply. Mike glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. Al was staring out the windshield, face solemn, hands clasped tightly. *Ah, shit.* Mike’s cheeks burned. *Way to go, Pulaski. Open mouth, insert foot. Go ahead and frighten the guy off.* It was one thing to get all hot and bothered when the guy was just trying to be friendly, but the least he could do was keep

it to himself. Sometimes he forgot most people weren't used to the constant flirting that went on among most dancers, male and female, and Al seemed like a pretty buttoned-up guy.

Several times Mike started to break the silence, but he couldn't think of anything to say. Which was stupid, because he always had a snappy comeback. Well, a comeback, at least. And Mike couldn't just ignore him. He was aware of every movement Al made, of every breath he took. Mike's skin itched, like it didn't fit him right, and he stared glumly at the street ahead. Would Al bother showing up for the next class? Or had Mike's own stupidity and big mouth made things too uncomfortable for him?

"Which building is it?" Mike finally asked, once they were on West Garfield.

Al's head jerked, as if he'd forgotten Mike was there, and he glanced around. "It's the next block down."

When he pulled up in front of the building, Al turned to him. "Thank you for the ride." His voice was cool.

"Sure." Before he could help himself, Mike blurted out, "See you on Thursday, right?"

Al met his eyes for a moment before his face relaxed into a smile. "Of course. I'm anxious to learn to polka."

He couldn't help it, he really couldn't. Everything was okay. Mike grinned broadly, and the tight bands that had squeezed his chest suddenly loosened. He took a deep breath, dragging oxygen into his starved lungs. "Great. See you Thursday."

"Thursday," Al repeated with a nod. "Good night, Mike."

"Night, Al." Mike waited at the curb until Al disappeared inside the building. He didn't even try to wipe the smile from his face.

Chapter 2

The music was perfect. A little plaintive, kind of yearning, with a strong, steady beat and a hint of vulnerability—like Al.

Mike started out simple, an easy forward progression. No strain, no expectations. Just moving across the floor. He half-closed his eyes and held out his arms. Al. Yeah. He could almost feel the smooth muscles of Al's shoulder under his fingers, the warmth of his callused hand.

The steps changed, became more challenging. But Al followed him easily, still no pressure. Mike's feet slid across the polished wood, his quads contracted as he rose and fell, one step leading to another to another, chained together in a complex pattern that somehow defined and encompassed the two of them. They were pressed together, ribs, hips and thighs. Heat flared in Mike's gut, his dick swelling, straining inside his trousers as Al's firm warmth rubbed against him. He could feel a matching bulge in Al's jeans and pulled him closer. Al ground his hips into Mike's, panting softly as he repeated Mike's name over and over, voice tight with desperation. Mike shook with the knowledge that Al wanted him and he leaned forward, his eyes closing.

"Mike? Mike. Earth to Mike."

His eyes flew open. Crissy stood in the doorway, hands on her hips, one eyebrow raised. "Oh." He blinked and turned toward the stereo, adjusting his trapped erection and trying to catch his breath. "Hey, Crissy." His hands shook as he punched the stop button, then he folded his arms across his chest. "You're early."

She glanced at the clock. "No, not really." Placing a hand on the wall, she bent her knee and lifted her foot, twisting to check the laces on her practice shoe. "What were you doing?"

Something new with the waltz?”

“Yeah.” He welcomed the excuse. “Thought of something late last night, and wanted to give it a try.”

“It looked pretty good.” She brushed back her hair and checked her reflection in the mirror. “Except for that last thing, with the lean? Too awkward.”

Mike’s cheeks were hot. What the hell had he been thinking? “Okay. It wasn’t working anyhow.”

Crissy started her warm-up stretches. “You’re right, though. We need something new for the waltz. It’s getting stale, and I know Sasha and Elena have got something big up their sleeves. You know how mysterious and Russian Elena gets when she’s excited? Well, she was all...”

Mike faced the mirror and started his own series of stretches. He tuned out Crissy from habit, focusing on his breathing and the tight muscles in his neck, shoulders and lower back, ignoring the tingle in his arms and legs, an echo of lust from his stupid daydream. Concentrate on what he needed to do, not what he wanted. He leaned forward in a lunge, careful not to strain his knee. Damn thing would need a brace soon, and wouldn’t that suck. He snorted and closed his eyes. Al might laugh, but in a very few years retirement wouldn’t be an option. Mike sighed. He loved competitions: the pressure, the tension, the adrenaline rush of performing in front of the judges. One shot, hazard it all and win or die trying. Yeah, he liked teaching, too; he was good at it. And if he wanted, he could be a choreographer. But the thought of doing nothing but teaching for the next thirty years, or creating dances for other people to dance, was damned depressing.

He sighed again. Okay, enough with the pity party. Maybe he’d see Al again tomorrow—God, he hoped so—but right now he had a waltz to work on. Competitions were looming, and they needed something with the old Pulaski touch.

“Right.” He shook out his arms. “We’re going to start out big, blow ‘em out of the water right off, make ‘em keep their eyes on us, then keep building.”

*

Seven twenty-six.

Mike stared at the letter in his hand. He hadn’t understood a word, even though he’d been staring at it for at least ten minutes. It was in English, wasn’t it? He looked again. Yeah, but right now, it might as well be in Chinese. Wrinkling his nose, he dropped it back down on his desk.

Tomorrow. He'd deal with whatever it was tomorrow.

Right now he had a class to teach.

He was tempted for a second to run back to his dressing room and look through the one-way mirror. See who had shown up. See who was late. He glanced at the clock again.

Seven twenty-seven.

No time.

His throat felt like sandpaper. Maybe he was coming down with a cold or the flu. He tucked his shirt into his trousers and rubbed his damp palms on his thighs.

Seven twenty-eight.

Taking a deep breath, he walked down the hall and around the corner. He hesitated for a moment in the reception area, but no one burst through the front doors. Okay.

Mike pasted on his competition smile and stepped into the studio. He scanned the faces turned toward him.

Standing toward the far wall, his hands behind his back, his expression solemn. Al.

Mike was so relieved that he stumbled, recovered fast and turned it into a showy little hip-swivel and glide. The class applauded.

God, he was an idiot.

"Thank you." He bowed. "Okay. How many guys were able to get dance shoes?"

Four hands went up, including Al's.

"Great!" Mike looked at the other three men. "The rest of you try to get your shoes this weekend. You'll find dancing a lot easier with the right equipment." And he winked as a couple of women giggled. "First, a refresher. We're going to review what we learned on Tuesday, then we'll try a few more waltz steps. Any questions?"

He forced himself to pay attention to the class, to explain and respond, but he was just going through the motions. Under the surface, he was constantly aware of Al, where he was, what he was doing. Mike would look up and Al would be watching him demonstrate the steps, or dancing with Crissy. Al kept to the back of the class, just at the edge of Mike's sight, as if he didn't want to get too close to Mike. As if only having a room full of people between them could make him comfortable.

Had he screwed up so bad that Al couldn't even stand to be near him?

Al wasn't going to stay after class. Mike knew it. Al had had a chance to think about all

Mike's pushy weirdness and he'd freaked. And Mike couldn't blame him. What the fuck was he thinking, anyhow? Flirting with a guy? A straight guy? Okay, so everyone flirted at competitions. Before he and Fiona got married, he'd fooled around with guys occasionally, when she was going through her 'dating outside the partnership' phases. At most it was a quick blowjob in the john, hurrying before anyone else came in. All hot, sloppy mouths and swollen lips. If he and the other guy had time and a quiet place to sprawl, maybe they'd jerk off together, watching strong hands gripping hard dicks, teasing looks and eyes full of promises they both knew would never be fulfilled. Nothing serious, nothing long term, not until after the divorce, when he'd fucked up so spectacularly. And yeah, at first Al had acted as if he'd liked the flirting. After all, he was the one who'd asked Mike to go out in the first place. But now he'd obviously changed his mind.

Get with the program, Pulaski.

With a mental shake, he pushed aside those thoughts and smiled at Abby, steering her across the floor. "You're doing good," he murmured. "Want to lead for a while?"

"Okay." She sounded doubtful as they stepped to the edge of the floor. Frowning, Abby led them back into the stream of moving couples.

Mike glanced across the room. Al and Ann were dancing together, and Mike sighed. Al danced as if he had a stick up his ass. Heat suddenly washed over him at the thought of Al's ass. At the thought of the things he could do with that ass. *Stop it.* Bill and Dana were approaching them fast from the side, and Mike craned his head.

Abby's feet briefly tangled with his and he turned back to her. "Sorry." She gave him a rueful grin.

"It's okay."

A shout, a bitten-off yelp, and several thuds made him swallow a ripe swear word. He made sure Abby had her balance before releasing her and turning.

Damn. Bill, Dana, Ann and Al were sprawled on the floor.

"Hang on." He ran over to them. "Don't get up just yet." He squatted down by Dana and helped her turn over. "You twist anything?"

"No, but I landed pretty hard on my knee." She moved her leg gingerly and winced.

"Okay. Stay there for a minute." Crissy was already helping Ann to her feet and checking on Bill.

He turned to Al, who was gravely watching Mike from where he lay, splayed across the polished boards.

“Anything twisted?” Mike’s hand hovered over Al’s shoulder.

“No. Other than a small cut and bruise on my elbow where I hit the floor, I’ve escaped unscathed.”

“Good.” He gave Al’s shoulder a tentative pat.

The corners of Al’s mouth rose a fraction of an inch and his eyes warmed. “May I get up now?”

“Yeah. Sure.” Mike swallowed hard as he turned back to Dana.

Ten minutes later he called the class back to order. Dana hadn’t needed any medical attention, just a couple of minutes’ rest before she stood up and declared she was fine.

“Okay. You all officially know enough to be dangerous,” Mike announced. “So the next thing we’re going to work on is floorcraft and how to avoid an accident.”

He had the two couples re-enact their collision. It was clear Al had seen the other couple at the last minute and had tried to lead Ann out of the way, but Bill wasn’t paying attention and had moved in the same direction. Mike didn’t say that to the class, however.

“So, how could they avoid an accident in the future? If you’re leading, you don’t have eyes in the back of your head. You’ve got to rely on and trust your partner. If you’re following, keep your eyes open,” he said. “You can warn your partner about another couple by saying something quietly, or tapping gently on his shoulder. This is what I mean.”

He led Crissy onto the floor. “Al and Ann, would you dance toward us? Keep coming like you don’t see us.”

Al nodded and Mike turned his back to them. He and Crissy started a box step in place. “Okay.” Crissy tapped his shoulder in an exaggerated manner, and they stepped to the side, just as Al and Ann barreled past.

“See? If you’re leading, don’t try to do it all. Let your partner help out. Trust them.”

*

They practiced avoiding collisions for the last half-hour of the class. Mike and Crissy checked with Dana before she left, but her knee wasn’t swollen and she insisted it was fine.

Al hovered near the door.

“Al? How’s your elbow?” Mike asked, as Crissy went to change her shoes.

“As I said, it’s only a small cut and slight bruise. I have some ointment at home that I made from—” He pressed his lips together. “It doesn’t matter.”

Mike’s ears pricked. There was that stupid phrase again. Al kept repeating it as if it’d been hammered into him. But Al was wrong, it did matter—to Mike, at least. “You made an ointment?” Mike tilted his head. “Cool. What’d you make it from?”

Al looked startled. “The main ingredient is an herb with medicinal—”

“Good night, Mike!” Crissy stood in the doorway. “Night, Al.” She paused for a moment, longing written clearly across her face, then she sighed and disappeared. Mike waited until the outer door slammed shut before turning back to Al.

“So, you still up for learning how to polka?”

Meeting his eyes, Al nodded solemnly. “I am.”

“It’s going to be brutal.” Mike pursed his lips and shook his head. “They don’t give any quarter at Stosh’s. You sure you’re ready?”

Al squared his shoulders. “I believe I’m capable of meeting that challenge.”

“Great.” Mike led the way to the middle of the floor. “Okay. The most important thing about the polka is the hop.”

Al raised an eyebrow. “The hop?”

“Yeah. Polka’s in two-four or four-four. You know what that means?”

Al sniffed. “I’m familiar with time signatures.”

“Thought so, but I wasn’t sure. Anyhow, the hop comes right before the first beat. Kinda like a... whaddaya call it, a gracious note?”

“A grace note.”

“Yeah, that’s it. Even if you mess up the rest of your steps, as long as you get the hop right, you’ll keep the time and do okay. Lemme show you the basic steps first.” Mike demonstrated as Al watched his feet intently. “*And* one, two, three, four. *And* one, two, three, four. See?”

“I see what you mean about the hop.”

“Now, some people don’t even put the hop in, or make it into a little bounce, but to me, that’s what makes a polka fun. And it gives you lots of momentum to get going fast. Okay, you try it.”

They went through the steps several times, side by side, faster and faster. “And left, right, left, hold,” Al murmured, moving quickly with Mike beside him, “Hop, right, left, right, hold.”

“You’ve got it.” Mike leaned back against a mirror. “Go ahead. Across the room and back. I’ll give you the beat.”

Al took a deep breath and shook out his arms. He looked at Mike and nodded.

“One. Two. Three. Four.” Mike chose a fast, but not impossible, tempo.

Al moved confidently across the floor, but there was no grace in his movements, no elegance or style.

“How was that?”

“Good. Good.” Mike mustered up as much enthusiasm as he could. “You’ve got the steps down just fine.”

Al’s face fell. “I didn’t do it right.”

“Yeah, you did.” Mike pushed away from the wall. “But it’s easier when you’ve got a partner.”

“I don’t see how having a partner makes much of a difference to one’s dancing abilities,” Al replied. “Either you know the steps or you don’t.”

Mike chewed the edge of his thumb. “Believe me, it does. There’s something about the give and take, about working together that changes how you dance. And if you can find the right partner...” Mike ruthlessly cut off the stale memories of Fiona, but he couldn’t snuff out the tiny flame of hope that had flared into existence when he had danced with Al. “It’s magic, right?”

“I hardly see that dancing with a particular partner can affect the overall quality of the dance.” Al’s chin jutted out.

“Take my word for it, it can.” Mike rubbed the back of his neck. “Let’s give it a try. Since you know closed position, we’ll try that one first. You lead.”

He held out his arms and Al slowly, almost reluctantly, stepped into them. God, he felt good. Mike concentrated on keeping his breathing even, on keeping his touch cool and professional. Eyes focused over Al’s shoulder, Mike pressed his fingers gently into Al’s back and Al gave his hand a little squeeze. Mike’s breath caught in his throat and he cleared it noisily.

“Ready? Okay, one, two, three, four. And here we go...”

They were off, crossing the room, hop, step, close, step, hold, hop, step, close, step, hold, hop, step, close, step.

Damn.

They were good. Al moved smoothly in his arms as they circled the room, his body swaying a little, following the beat, feeling the rhythm. The corners of Mike's mouth curved, then curled into a grin. Unbelievable.

Al brought them to a halt back where they had started, and they stood, panting a little, still in each other's clasp. Mike turned his head, smiling broadly, and met Al's eyes.

He looked terrified.

Biting back a curse, Mike stepped out of Al's arms, his smile melting like butter in the sun.

"That was good." He struggled to keep his breathing even. "You've got the hop down, you're good to go."

"Mike?" Al's voice was barely a whisper.

"You're doing great." He walked toward the stereo.

"Mike." He could hardly hear the word.

"So now let's try it with some music, okay? And I'll show you the side by side position." He knew he was babbling, but felt completely incapable of stopping. "Some people like to start with the Beer Barrel Polka, 'cause everyone knows it, but I'm not real fond of it. So—" He turned. The sight shut him up.

Al stood, arms wrapped around his chest, shoulders slumped, head bowed.

"Hey, you okay, buddy?" Something sharp and powerful plucked inside his ribcage.

"Yes, thank you." Al's voice was muffled. "I think I should go home, now. I'm... tired."

Every part of Mike's body suddenly ached, as if he'd been pounded with a two by four.

"Yeah?" Breathing hurt. His knees were stiff and sore. "Okay. Long day, huh?"

Al made a strange noise that sounded oddly like a chuckle. "You could say that."

Lifting his chin, Mike nodded. "Sure, I know what you mean. Let me drive you home."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Yeah, well, I don't think leaving a buddy to walk however many miles to catch a bus is a good idea."

"It's really not necessary."

Mike rubbed the side of his nose. "Come on. Let me drive you home. I'll—" He stopped himself before he could finish.

Al hesitated, then nodded. “Thank you. I’d appreciate a ride home.” When he lifted his head, the thin skin beneath his eyes looked bruised.

Mike spun around. “I’ll change my shoes and meet you by the front door.” He jogged down the hall. What had happened to the guy? Mike hadn’t done anything, just looked at him. It wasn’t as if he’d been holding Al really close, or rubbing his crotch against him, or anything.

But whatever it was, it had hit Al hard.

Mike kicked off his shoes and shoved his feet in his boots. He liked Al. Well, yeah, he liked Al, his stupid fuckin’ body wouldn’t let him forget that. But he also *liked* him, the sweet, kind of weird guy he was just getting to know. He wanted to know him better, be friends, maybe. He’d have to stop freaking Al out, figure out a way to keep his unruly libido under control and act like a friend.

He could do it.

Mike grabbed his jacket. Al was waiting by the front door. He still looked pole-axed, but Mike pretended nothing was wrong.

“I’ve just got to get the lights.” He bustled around, making sure everything was turned off. “Okay, let’s go.”

They were in the car before Mike spoke again. “So, did you have to fight—what’s his name?—Mackenzie? for your left-overs?”

Al huffed, sounded disgusted. “It wasn’t a fair fight. I did manage to save a few cabbage rolls, but Mac claimed all the *kielbasa*.”

“Too bad. Stosh makes his own *kielbasa*. It’s the best.” Mike paused. “But it goes to prove that your dog has good taste.”

“I suppose you could look at it that way.” There was a definite bite to his words. Mike nodded, pleased that Al was sounding more like himself. “Although Mac isn’t mine, by any stretch of the imagination.”

“What kind of dog is he? Heinz fifty-seven?”

“No. He’s clearly an Irish wolfhound.”

“Yeah? What’s an Irish wolfhound look like, anyhow?”

When Al hesitated, Mike held his breath. Would he take the bait?

“Would you like to meet him?”

Suppressing his urge to cheer, Mike shrugged. “Sure.”

“If you’re expecting thanks for the meal, however,” Al snapped, “I should warn you that Mac is appallingly lax at fulfilling his social obligations.”

Mike’s eyebrows lifted. Wow. Where did that come from? He kind of liked it, though. It meant Al wasn’t always all good-tempered and nice. More like a regular guy.

“That’s okay. I’m not too good at the thank-you note thing either.”

“Then you two should get along fine.”

Mike found a place to park down the street and followed Al up the stairs to the third floor. The building wasn’t a slum—the hall was clean and neat, the doors freshly painted—but it wasn’t the Ritz by a long shot.

Al unlocked his door. “Please, come in.” He opened the door and ushered Mike inside.

Mike scoped out the apartment, trying not to look like he was snooping. It was small and tidy, a little sofa faced a portable TV on a footlocker, an old wooden table and mismatched chairs stood beside the kitchen. Through an open door, he could see a plain bedspread neatly covering the double bed. Not particularly homey, but comfortable, if you didn’t mind your comforts on the spare side.

“Mac?” Al called. “We have company.”

A big dog uncurled, and uncurled, and uncurled itself from a blanket in the corner. Mike’s eyes bugged out. He’d never seen a dog that huge.

With a woof, the dog got to its feet and trotted across the room. He didn’t have to go very far.

Mike wiped his palms on his jeans. *Don’t show fear. Oh, yeah, like that’s possible with a dog the size of a pony.* He held out his hand. “Hey, Mac.”

Al stood next to Mike and took Mac’s muzzle in his hand. “This is Mike. He’s the one who provided your lunch yesterday.”

Mac stared intently at Al, then pulled free. He turned to Mike and lunged forward, putting his front paws on Mike’s chest, knocking him backward. Mike sprawled on the floor with two tons of dog on top of him.

“Hey!” A large, wet tongue lapped at his face, and Mike shoved hard at the furry bulk looming over him. “Get off me, dog!”

“Mac!”

Yawning widely, Mac stepped off Mike and turned away, crossing to the kitchen.

“Damn.” Mike grimaced and wiped his damp face with his sleeve. “I wish he hadn’t bothered with the thanks.”

“I know it was unexpected and slightly messy, but I’m glad to see he hasn’t completely neglected the social niceties.”

Mike grinned up at him. “That’s because it wasn’t your face he was licking.”

“True.” Al slowly returned his grin. He extended his hand, and Mike stared at it for a moment before grasping his strong fingers and being hauled to his feet.

That wasn’t so bad. He could do the friendship thing—and if his hand tingled from touching Al’s, he’d just have to deal.

“Well, I’ll let you get some rest.” Mike shoved his hands in his pockets and turned toward the door. “Thanks for letting me meet the dog.”

“It was my pleasure.” Al didn’t sound entirely convincing, but hey, the guy was tired. He’d cut him some slack.

“Will I—” Mike winced and started again. “Think you’ll make it tomorrow evening?” He could see the answer on Al’s face, but he plunged ahead regardless. “You could bring the dog. The kids would love him, if he’s okay with kids, I mean, and doesn’t try to eat them or anything.”

“Thank you.” Al’s voice was gentle. “But I don’t think I’ll be able to make it.” He paused. “Please extend my regrets to Danuta.”

“Sure.” Mike smiled. Damn it, he would smile, even if it cracked his face in two. He hurried to the door, then turned back. “No problem. If you change your mind, things get started around eight and go ‘til midnight.”

“I’ll remember that. Thank you.”

Mike could read Al’s eyes. They were kind, full of regret, and couldn’t wait to see him leave.

“Okay. See you around.”

He made it to the hall before the pain hit, squeezing beneath his ribs. Pressing his hand over his chest, he made it back to the car. He drove home carefully, as if the tiniest careless movement could put a crack in his façade. And if one crack appeared, it would all be over.

For the second time in his life, Casimir Michael Pulaski took a bottle to his bed and drank himself to sleep.

Cita Powers

Desperation Dancing

Chapter 3

Busy.

Keep busy.

Busy, busy, busy, *damn it*.

“Mike!” Tina’s no-nonsense tone pierced his distraction, and he came to a standstill beside her desk.

“Yeah?” He rubbed his burning eyes. “Sorry.”

“Are you coming down with something?” She peered at him. She’d raised three children on her own, and now had six grandchildren. Tina could spot a cold or a lie at ten paces.

“Nah. I just didn’t sleep well.” He parked a hip on the corner of her tidy desk. “What’s up?”

After another searching look she nodded, apparently satisfied. “I need you to finalize the schedule for next semester.” She handed him several papers. “And here’s the list of competitions you’ve been invited to. I’ve checked the most important ones. Let me know which invitations you’ll accept, so I can get back to them.”

Mike rifled through the papers. “Okay. When do you need this by?” He glanced at the clock. Five to six. “I can get it to you in an hour.”

Tina chuckled. “No overtime for me tonight. I’m babysitting Brenda’s kids, and it’s their anniversary, so I can’t be late. Monday will be fine.” She opened a drawer and pulled out her handbag, then paused. “Why don’t you go home and get some rest? You’ve been on your feet all day, and if you’re coming down with something—”

“Thanks, but I’m fine. I’m going to Stosh’s tonight, so I’ll hang around here until it’s

time.”

“Well, at least they’ll feed you. Go early, so you can eat before the dancing starts.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

Tina stood and slipped on her coat. Mike turned down the hall toward his office. “Mike?” He stopped but didn’t turn back. “Go now. Have a beer and some food. You need to get out more.”

“Yeah. Sure. Bye,” he called over his shoulder, rounding the corner and continuing down the hall.

He sat down at his desk and picked up a pen, staring at the papers. Schedule. Right. Time to concentrate.

Two minutes later he popped out of his seat and stood by the window. The sky was clear, but shadows already spread along the sidewalks and crept across the street. The wind sent multi-colored leaves scuttling, collecting in drifts against the curbs and under the cars parked along the road.

He wasn’t hungry. Hadn’t been all day, but a beer sounded good.

A few minutes later he’d grabbed his coat and closed up. He enjoyed walking in the crisp air, the soft crunch of leaves underfoot. The breeze had that slightly musty smell of fall. Yeah, Tina was right. He needed to get out of the studio more often. Do something other than work.

Except that was what he was going to do. No doubt Danuta had already spread the word that Mike would be there tonight, and they’d have a larger crowd than usual, and people would stay longer. Which meant more food and drink orders. Which was one of the ways Mike could pay them back for all they’d given him over the years.

Mike sighed. He enjoyed doing this for Stosh and Danuta, he really did. But he already knew exactly what everyone would say and how they’d act. He knew how he’d respond. He knew who’d tell which jokes, and who’d flirt with whom. It was comfortable, familiar.

But it was also dull. Boring. Predictable.

That was the thing about Al. He was different—a little weird, but still attractive.

And not interested in being friends, much less anything more.

That was that. He frowned at the restaurant’s façade and ran his fingers through his hair. Right. *Time to get over yourself, Pulaski. You’ve got a job to do.*

*Bah dee BAH dee dum, bah dee BAH dee dum, bah dee dum dum DEE dah dum dum.
Bah de BAH dee dum.*

As they circled the large room, Mike glanced at the clock. Just after nine. The dance was pretty much in full swing, with at least twenty couples stomping around the dance floor. He stifled a sigh and looked down at his partner. Mrs. Darlak was seventy if she was a day, a hair over five feet tall and almost as wide, but she was a terror on the dance floor.

“You go too slow, Casimir!” she bellowed over the blare of music. Frankie Yankovic, Mike had been pleased to note, and not Lawrence Welk. “We dance faster!”

So they danced faster.

They whirled around the room, Mrs. Darlak screaming with laughter, her face as red as the old Soviet flag. Out of the corner of his eye, Mike caught a flurry of movement by the door. He turned, but it was only a group of young girls clustered together. Their shrill voices rose above the music.

Mrs. Darlak gave a peremptory tug on his arm, and Mike forced his attention back to the dance. They circled the room, but as they passed the door again, Mike looked over and stumbled. Al.

Suddenly breathless, Mike kept dancing, his body on automatic. Al was here. He’d come, even after saying he wouldn’t. That was good, wasn’t it? Mike snorted in disgust. God, how the hell should he know? He didn’t even understand himself, much less Al.

They passed the door again, and Mike glanced in that direction. Al was standing beside the wall, his hands in his pockets, watching the dancing. Okay. He’d finish this dance, because Mrs. D. wouldn’t let go of him before it ended, then he’d walk up to Al, all casual like, and ask him what the fuck he was doing here.

No. He’d say hi, how’re you doing, glad to see you. Yeah. Something like that. He’d be cool.

They were on the far side of the room when the music finished, and Mike walked Mrs. D. back to her husband, absently thanking her for the dance. The place was packed, and he squeezed through the crowd until Al appeared next to him.

“Hello, Mike.”

“Oh, hey.” His voice was raspy. He coughed and tried again. “Hi. I didn’t expect to see

you here.” Shit. He wasn’t going to say that.

Al’s jaw tightened and he scanned the room. “Well, I...”

A cluster of bubbly, pre-adolescent girls converged on Al. “Oh, mister, is that your dog? Can we pet him? Can we play with him? Can we feed him?”

Eyes wide, Al turned to Mike. No problem.

“Yeah, he’s Al’s dog. Name’s Mac. Nadia,” Mike addressed the oldest of the group. “Go ask Stosh for some kibble, and take Mac out back. You can play with him there for a bit.” He turned to Al. “Okay?”

Al nodded, his cheeks darkening as the girls darted through the crowd, taking Mac with them. “Mike, is there anywhere we can speak that’s quieter?”

Mike nodded. “Sure. C’mon.” He led the way through the door, back into the almost deserted front room. “I could use some fresh air,” he said, and Al followed him silently out onto the sidewalk.

The cold air felt good. Mike’s shirt was damp, and he wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

“It’s like an oven in there.” He walked over to the curb and leaned against Wally Golmulka’s Ford pickup. The cold metal raised gooseflesh across his back.

“It seemed warm,” Al agreed. He looked at Mike and ran his thumb over his eyebrow. “I owe you an apology.”

That surprised him. “An apology? What for?”

“For two things.” Al tilted back his head, staring at the sky. “First, I was unconscionably rude to you yesterday.”

“Hey, I—”

“Mike, please.”

Mike shut his mouth. Al glanced at him and ran his tongue across his lower lip. Christ. Mike squeezed his eyes closed for a second, then wrapped his arms across his chest, tucking his hands into his clammy armpits. He nodded encouragingly.

Al stood up straight, clasping his hands behind his back. “I repaid your kindness in giving me a private dance lesson and in driving me home afterwards with thoughtless words and actions. I was upset, and I’m afraid I took out my anger and frustration on you. Please forgive me.” The words came out in a rush, but there was no denying the sincerity in Al’s voice.

“There’s nothing to forgive.” Mike shrugged. “You were tired, I was tired. Stuff happens.”

“Mike.” There was a pleading note in Al’s voice that Mike didn’t like at all.

“If it makes you feel better, I forgive you. But I—”

“Mike, please,” Al said, his voice harsh. “This is difficult enough without you making it more so.”

“Okay, okay.” Mike pushed himself away from the truck. He’d cooled off so much that his back and ass were frozen now. “Go in peace, my son. What’s number two?”

“Ah.” Al swallowed with an audible gulp. “The second reason I must apologize to you.”

“Yeah?” Mike shifted from one foot to the other. He was getting pretty cold now. His damp shirt felt frosty against his skin, and his hands shook a little. He tucked them tighter against his sides.

Al opened his mouth.

“*Pomoć!* Oh, *proszę*, help!” The woman’s shrill scream carried down the street. “Help!”

Their eyes met, and without a word, they both set off at a run. Mike was fast, but Al kept up as they reached the corner. A woman stood two houses down the cross street, her white hair haloed by the streetlight. “Help!” she screamed again. “My purse!”

Two dark figures darted up the sidewalk. Mike and Al took off. One of the thieves glanced over his shoulder, gestured wildly, and they split up at the alley; one made a sharp right and disappeared into the darkness, while the other continued up the street.

“Follow him,” Mike panted, pointing down the street. “I know the alleys.”

“But Mike—”

Mike didn’t stop. He careened around the corner and pelted down the narrow passage. He could hear running footsteps ahead, and there was just enough light from houses and streetlights for him to avoid garbage cans and the occasional pile of boxes.

He squinted and could make out the fleeing figure. Suddenly it darted to the left, and Mike would have cheered if he’d had the breath. *Gotcha!*

Putting on an extra burst of speed, he followed the figure around the corner. He was going so fast that he couldn’t stop or avoid the neat row of garbage cans in front of him.

He hit the first one hard. “Damn it!” Before he could catch himself, he tumbled over the top and landed with a crash into the others. A dog barked frantically in the distance, but no one

called out. He lay there on his back for a minute, gingerly moving his arms and legs. Nope, nothing broken. Scrapes and bruises, though. And he'd torn the knee of his trousers.

There was a shuffling sound, and Mike scrambled to his feet in time to tackle the dark figure as it tried to pass. They landed on the gravel, Mike on top. With a faint cry as they fell, the figure lay still.

Winded maybe, but Mike didn't trust him. Before he scrambled to his knees, Mike got a good grip on the figure's collar. Good thing, too, because as soon as he moved, the small body tried to wriggle out of his grasp. Mike gave it a shake and towed it into a patch of light spilling into the alley from a back porch.

He peered at the grubby face and his heart sank. "Aren't you Billy Czupta?"

"Fuck you, *bydlak*," piped a clear soprano voice.

"I don't think so, *maly chtopiec*." Mike started back to the street, hauling the boy along.

"Who're you calling a little boy?" Billy sounded indignant.

"I don't see anyone else around." Mike hurried them both down the alley.

Billy kept trying to wiggle free, so Mike finally twisted Billy's arm up behind his back and frog-marched him back to the street. He looked around. The street was deserted. He might as well go back to Stosh's and see if the lady who'd been robbed was there. Hopefully she could identify Billy.

As they turned the corner, he could see her standing there with Al and another small figure Al held firmly by the shoulder. They were talking earnestly, but neither of them looked up until Mike and Billy approached.

"I thought you might return here." Al's gaze traveled slowly down Mike's body and then back up to meet his eyes. "Mrs. Pietrzak insisted that I notify the police, despite the youth of the apparent offenders."

"The cops?" The boy Al was holding turned to Billy. "*Cholera jasna!*"

"Frankie Liszka! Watch your mouth!" Mrs. Pietrzak stiffened with shock, then smacked the boy on the cheek. He yelped, but didn't reply.

Whoa. Mike wasn't surprised a kid that age would know that particular term, but couldn't believe he'd say it in front of adults. Frankie was lucky he'd only gotten a smack. His old man would've probably used a belt on his backside.

"Please, ma'am, that's not necessary." Al quickly stepped between the two. "As I told

you, I've called the police, and they'll be here soon."

"Did you find her purse?" Mike asked.

"Yes. Frankie had it. He was able to return it undamaged."

"Please, Mrs. P." Billy sounded frightened. "We didn't mean nothing. It was a joke."

"Yeah, a joke," Frankie chimed in. "We would've given it back."

Al looked at the boys, then at Mrs. Pietrzak. Her lips were compressed into a thin line, but there was a little crease between her brows, and she looked worried.

Frankie looked up at Al, eyes wide. "What will the police do to us?" His voice shook.

"I'm not sure." Al frowned. "That depends on what crime you're charged with."

"My dad's gonna kill me," Billy whispered.

"Mine, too," echoed Frankie.

Mrs. Pietrzak looked at the two boys. She slowly raised her eyes to meet Al's.

"Let them go." She glared at the boys. "But you two had better stay out of trouble, or I'll tell your parents."

They nodded their agreement, and when Al and Mike released them, they shot down the street and disappeared into the darkness.

"Thank you." She sighed. "Those boys are a handful, but they're not bad."

"No, they aren't. I remember being pretty wild around that age." Mike thought for a minute. "I think I'll have a word with Father Szczypula. He can help keep an eye on them."

She nodded and thanked them again, then settled the strap of her handbag into the crook of her elbow and continued down the street.

"Are you all right?" Al turned to him. "What happened?"

Mike waved his hand dismissively. "Had an argument with some garbage cans."

"Who won?" Al's eyes glittered in the streetlight, and the corners of his mouth twitched.

Mike poked a finger into the hole in his trousers and shrugged. "It was a draw."

"By draw I suppose you mean you lost badly."

"Hey!" Mike tried for outrage, but his grin kept surfacing. "I didn't lose by much."

An engine revved, and Mike turned. A big car, a silver Ford Gran Torino, rumbled slowly up the street. Al raised his hand and stepped toward the curb. The car nosed into a space across the street and the engine cut out.

A guy stepped out of the car and leaned his forearms on the roof. Close-cropped hair

accentuated the gleam of scalp at the top of his head. “This better be good, Alasdair.”

Alasdair? Mike turned.

“I’m sorry to have brought you out on a wild goose chase.” Al lifted his hand in greeting. “We’ve already dealt with the matter.”

The guy sighed and shook his head once, then shoved away from the car and crossed the street. “Just out of curiosity, what matter are we talking about this time?”

Al shot Mike a quick glance, and Mike stepped forward before Al could continue. “A couple of neighborhood kids were messing around.” He met the stranger’s eyes. “Al and me, we took care of them. They won’t get into trouble again.”

“Oh, you took care of them? You and *Al*?” The guy’s eyes slowly raked over Mike, and he would swear that the guy’s lip curled. “And you are?”

“I’m sorry.” Al stepped forward. “Vince, this is Mike Pulaski, champion ballroom dancer and my dance instructor. Mike,” he turned back, “this is Vince Bertini, my partner and friend.”

“Your partner?”

“Your dance instructor?”

Mike eyed Vince warily. Partner? What the hell did that mean? Partner and friend? What kind of partner? Legal partner? Business partner? *Life* partner?

“You gonna explain why you’re in this neighborhood with your dance instructor?” Bertini looked up at the sign on the façade of the restaurant. The strains of polka music were clear even out on the sidewalk. “No, wait a sec. Pulaski?” He snorted. “Well, that explains it.”

“You got a problem with this neighborhood, buddy?” Mike raised his chin and glared at Bertini.

“No. Not if you like cabbage.”

“Why you—” Mike started toward him, arm raised, fist clenched, when Al stepped between them.

“Vince.” He looked at Bertini. Then he turned and met Mike’s eyes. “Mike. There’s no need for this kind of childish behavior from either of you.”

Jaw set, Mike lowered his arm. “Okay. But another crack like that, and I’ll pop him one.”

“Ooh, I’m scared.” Bertini gave him a cocky look. “You gonna wear a tutu when you—”

Mike launched himself forward, taking Bertini by surprise, and pinning him to the side of the pickup. Bertini let out an “oof!” as he hit the door, then raised his fists.

“Oh, for God’s sake, will you two stop it?” Al yelled. “Vince, stop goading Mike!” Strong fingers dug into Mike’s shoulder and tugged him back. “And Mike, don’t even think about hitting Vince. He’s a detective at the Seventh District, who would be justified in arresting you for—”

“A detective?” Mike stared at Al. “That guy’s a detective? But you said he was your partner.”

Al nodded at Bertini. “Unofficially, of course. We’ve worked together on a number of cases, as my time and duties permit.”

Bertini brushed the front of his jacket and grinned at Mike. “Good choice, Pulaski. I wouldn’t want to have to bring in Alasdair’s dance teacher for assaulting an officer.”

Mike ignored him, focusing his attention on Al. “Your duties? So, what, you’re in the military, right?”

“Many people consider the police force a quasi-military organization, but I suspect that’s not what you mean by the term.”

“The police?” He looked helplessly at Al. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Bertini made a rude noise. Al looked faintly surprised, then tugged on his earlobe. “I’m sorry I didn’t explain earlier. I’m a former detective in the Fairbanks Police Department, currently an employee of Tate & Tate Private Investigations.”

Mike blinked. Wait a sec. “You were a detective? And now you’re a P.I.?”

“Yes, Mike.”

“Give the dog a bone,” Bertini muttered, but Mike couldn’t be bothered with him right now.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” *God. Way to go, Pulaski. Talk about sounding pathetic.*

“It never seemed germane to our conversations.”

“Germane?” Mike ran his fingers through his hair. “Okay. So. You’re a P.I. working in Chicago. With him.” He jerked his head toward Bertini.

“Unofficially,” Al said.

“Yeah. Unofficially.”

“Everything clear now?” Bertini said. “All hunky-dory?”

Mike narrowed his eyes. “Got it, Detective.”

“Good.” He turned to Al. “So, Alasdair. What are you doing here?”

“I came to speak with Mike,” he said, “and Mackenzie came in the hopes of sampling more of Mr. Stosh’s fine cuisine.”

“What? No Lottie? She’d love this scene.” Bertini winked at Al.

Al’s face flushed and he stuck his finger in his shirt collar, pulling at it. “No. That is, yes. I mean, Charlotte is not here. She’s working this evening.”

“Her hours are almost as bad as mine,” Bertini said. “She going to stay there after you’re married?”

Mike stared at Al. His stomach lurched. Married?

He must’ve said it out loud, because Al swallowed and glanced away. “Yes, Mike.”

“Yeah,” Bertini agreed. “Why else do you think Alasdair’s been taking dance lessons? So he can look good at the reception.”

“I see.” Mike was suddenly aware of all the aches and pains he’d received in his fall. “Lots of couples do that.” He shivered, his skin crawling with goosebumps. “I guess I better get back inside.”

“Mike.” Al stepped toward him, and he backed away.

“Bertini’ll take you home, right?” He rubbed his hands over his chilled arms.

“Mike, wait a minute.”

Mike backed up another step. God, he was cold, so damn cold. He shivered again. “I’ll find Mac and send him out, okay?”

“Mike, I was going to tell you about it.”

“You should bring your... bring Charlotte to class one day. On the house. So you two can dance together.” He forced himself to meet Al’s gaze.

Al’s face was pale and drawn. “That was the second thing.”

“Yeah. Okay.” He rubbed his forehead. His eyes burned. “Stay here. I’ll get Mac.”

“Mike, would you—”

“Bye, Al.” Mike glanced at Bertini. “Detective.”

“Pulaski.”

He found Mac on the back stoop, basking in the attention of half-a-dozen admirers. “Hey, dog. Al’s ready to leave.”

Mackenzie looked at him and licked his muzzle, while the girls voiced their disappointment.

“Now. Bertini’s here.”

With a yawn, Mac got to his feet and, accompanied by his groupies, disappeared inside.

Mike stared out into the darkness. Another song started, and there was a burst of laughter. He took a deep breath of cold air, welcoming its sting. If he was frozen, he couldn’t feel anything. It was easy to stay cold; he’d had lots of practice. Time to get back to work.

*

Mike shifted his weight onto his right leg and winced. He hadn’t blown out his knee, but last night’s fall had left it discolored and swollen, along with a couple more bruises on his thighs and a big one on his right hip. Not to mention the scrapes on his hands and a cut under his left eye, right on the cheekbone. He shifted back onto his left leg and shook his head at the young couple arguing in the middle of the dance floor.

“Okay, I see what you’re trying to do.” He walked over, trying not to limp. “Russell, you’re rushing Katie. She can’t get around completely before you start the twinkle.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell him for the past five minutes.” Katie put her hands on her hips and sighed theatrically.

“If you stick a hesitation in between, it’ll look a lot smoother,” Mike said.

“But I like the look of it the way it is.” Russell’s chin jutted out.

“Yeah, *you* look fine.” Mike grabbed Katie’s hand. “But you’re making your partner look bad. This is what I mean.” He swung her around and smiled as she relaxed into his arms. “One. Two. Three. First. Box. Step. Under. Arm. Turn. Hes-i-tate. And. Then. Twinkle.” He stepped back and hissed as pain shot up his knee. “Damn.” He dropped her hand and held his knee gently.

“Are you all right?” Russell sounded worried.

“What happened?” Katie asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just twisted my knee.” He grimaced around gritted teeth. “Give me a sec.” The pain settled into a dull throbbing, and Mike straightened. “Okay, let’s try that again.”

An hour later, he waded through a sea of small, chattering bodies as he left the room. Normally he’d hang around for the Tiny Tots class, but he needed to sit down for a while.

“Got a message for you,” Jennifer called as he passed. “And a package.” She was sitting at Tina’s desk, open textbooks covering the surface. He changed course and limped over to her.

“You should see a doctor about that.” She handed him a pink slip of paper and a small paper bag.

“Nah. It’ll be fine.” Mike raised his eyebrows as he looked at her books. “How’s the semester going?”

“Pretty good, so far.” She tossed back a fall of shiny blonde hair and smiled. “I could use more hours if you need me.”

“Okay. Talk to Tina and see if she’s got the weekends covered. And if they’re full, maybe you could come in an evening or two a week and cover the phones.”

“Thanks.” He nodded as she picked up her pencil and turned back to her studies.

When he reached his office he sank into his chair gratefully, groaning at all the aches and twinges. Closing his eyes, Mike leaned back. That felt good. He probably should get up and get some ibuprofen from his bathroom—he still had two more classes and a private lesson to go before he could go home and soak in a hot bath. With a sigh, he sat up and gazed blearily at the message slip.

Time: 10:07

To: Mike

From: Al

Message: Wants to know how you’re feeling. Physically. If you were hurt last night.

From the garbage cans. (No, I didn’t get the message wrong. That’s exactly what he said. Jenn.)

Mike grimaced as he shifted in his seat. Damn. He crumpled the note into a ball and tossed it into the trashcan, then picked up the paper bag and looked inside.

A folded piece of paper rested on top of two small jars, one with a white lid, and one with a blue lid. Mike unfolded the note.

Dear Mike,

I telephoned your office to inquire after you, and the receptionist informed me that you were in the middle of teaching a class. I hope this means that you suffered no ill effects from your encounter with the garbage cans last night.

However, in the event that you have experienced some injury, no matter how minor, I have enclosed two ointments, one from a recipe of my grandmother’s, the other of my own

devising. The jar with the white lid contains an unguent with antibiotic properties, which is efficacious on cuts and scrapes. The jar with the blue lid contains a salve that eases the pain of bruises and other deep tissue injuries. Perhaps one or the other will prove helpful to you, if not now, then at some future date.

Thank you for your kind invitation to Charlotte. I have conveyed it to her, and she appeared delighted. I am not sure when we will be able to take advantage of your thoughtful gesture, as her work schedule remains somewhat unsettled.

Vince and I are leaving in a moment for Hammond, Indiana to continue an ongoing investigation. It is very likely that we won't return until late this evening. If you wish to leave me a message, I have included the telephone number for Tate & Tate Private Investigations. Mr. Lyle Tate is on duty this weekend, and he will be able to convey your message, if you choose to leave one. On second thought, I have also included Vince's work telephone number. He has voice mail.

*Very truly yours,
Alasdair Lovat*

Shit, Al.

The note followed the message slip into the trashcan. He unscrewed the lid of the white jar and sniffed the glistening cream cautiously, pulling away with a grimace. Damn! The stuff reeked. He picked up the jar and hefted it, ready to toss it after the notes, then hesitated. Al had made this. With a sigh, he put it down on his desk and opened the other jar. The stuff inside looked like runny green snot, but it smelled okay. He replaced the lid and stared at the two jars.

It was a nice gesture—as if Al still wanted to be friends.

Groaning, he got up and rummaged through the trashcan until he found the note. He put it on the desktop and smoothed it out with both hands. Al had attractive writing. Neat, but not prissy, unlike his own messy scrawl. He picked up the phone and dialed the number for Tate & Tate.

The guy on duty read his message back to him.

“Thanks for the stuff. See you Tuesday. Mike.”

Mike started to ball up the note, then stopped and shoved it in his top drawer. He limped into his bathroom, swallowed four ibuprofen and splashed his face with cold water. He could

catch the end of the Tiny Tots' class, and maybe get in some careful stretches before the advanced Latin class.

By six o'clock, tired and aching, all he wanted to do was go home and soak in hot water for the rest of his life. He grabbed his coat from his office. The two jars were still sitting on his desk.

"Al, you freak." He shoved the jars into his coat pockets and headed out the door.

The hot bath, along with a beer, helped dull the pain. After hauling himself from the tub, cursing and groaning, Mike stood in front of the bathroom mirror and inspected the damage. The bruises were doozies. The one on his hip looked striped, kind of like the ripples on the sides or lids of the metal cans. He bent his knee cautiously. It moved okay, but still ached.

What the hell. He padded into the living room and looked around for his coat, finally finding it on the floor beside the couch, where it had slid after he'd tossed it over the arm. He searched the pockets, pulling out both jars and returning to the bathroom.

The green stuff started out cold, then gradually warmed his bruised flesh, but he unquestionably felt better. The cuts and scrapes on his hands and cheek looked okay, though, and he didn't want to stink like whatever Al had used to make the other ointment. He put the jar with the white lid to one side. Maybe another time.

After making himself a sandwich, he carried it out to the couch and stretched out. A pile of competition videos awaited him.

When he turned off the TV and checked the clock, he was surprised to find it was already eleven.

He crawled into bed, wondering if Al was back from Indiana. When would he bring his fiancée to class? Mike punched his pillow into a more comfortable shape and rolled onto his side. Why hadn't Al said anything? Lots of people got married; it wasn't a national secret. One student or other in the class was always going on about their wedding plans. Why couldn't Al have piped up and said, "Yeah, I'm engaged, too," instead of making a big deal about it?

Al was engaged to a woman named Charlotte. Bertini had called her Lottie, but Al had definitely said Charlotte. Then again, Bertini had called Al 'Alasdair,' so what did he know about names? More important, what did Charlotte look like? Mike tried to imagine Al's dream woman. Brunette? A red head? Maybe he liked platinum blondes with dark blue eyes.

Fuck.

Mike rolled to his other side. Don't think about it. What's done is done. No law said Al had to confide events in his personal life to anyone, much less his dance instructor. No reason why he should. It wasn't as if Mike was his best friend, the way Bertini was.

Damn. Thoughts like these weren't helping him relax, and he had to get some sleep. What Mike needed right now was a good session with his right hand—that would send him to sleep, no problem.

He settled on his back, legs splayed, and ran his hands over his chest, across the ripple of his ribs and along the lower edge of his breastbone. Danuta was right, he was too skinny. Al wasn't skinny, but he sure wasn't fat, either. His skin would be soft, stretched over smooth muscles, with just enough padding so he wouldn't feel all bony, like Mike. His hand slid lower, teasing, brushing against his hardening dick. What was Al's dick like? What would it feel like, wrapped in Mike's fingers? What would it taste like?

Stop.

Mike jerked his hand away and opened his eyes. Shadows striped the far wall, the light from a streetlight spilled through the blinds and painted bars across the floor and furniture. What the fuck was he doing? Getting off while thinking about a friend? A straight friend, who only looked at him as a comrade, not a lover? Talk about pathetic. And disgusting.

Rubbing his hot face—jeez, could he be any more sleazy?—Mike ignored his dick, still hard, brushing against the sheets as if it was searching for his hand. Or Al's.

A minute later, head bent under the spray of cold water, Mike stifled his yelp and bit his lip until he tasted warm saltiness. At least he didn't have to worry about his dick. At the first icy blast from the shower, it had turned tail and tried to crawl into his body.

Served it right.

Chapter 4

Charlotte wasn't going to be there. Not tonight. Al had said her schedule was weird, so chances were she wouldn't show.

But just in case, Mike slipped into his dressing room five minutes before class began. He turned out the lights and swung the panel away from the wall. Through the framed opening, the studio looked like a lighted stage.

Mike scanned the class, letting loose the breath he was holding when he saw Al alone. Okay.

He closed up and walked quickly to the studio, working through the stiffness in his hip and knee, trying not to limp too obviously. When he entered, he glanced at Al, who was frowning. Mike turned away, his heart squeezed tight in his chest, torn between embarrassment and overwhelming pleasure. What the hell had he been thinking last night?

He turned to Crissy. She looked strange, her brows drawn together in a line, as if she were thinking something through. *Ah, hell.*

"Okay. Anyone remember what we did last Thursday?" Mike examined the now-familiar faces. A few met his eyes, but most of the class stared at the floor or the corner of the ceiling or at each other. "Ann?"

"We learned the waltz progression and hesitation, and how to put the steps together," she replied promptly. "Oh, and how to avoid bumping into people."

"Right." Mike smiled. She blushed and dimpled. "Would you and Harold like to demonstrate?"

They did a credible job with the steps, and Mike had the rest of the class go through all of the step sequences they had learned so far.

“Good. There are just a couple more things to cover for a basic waltz, then on Thursday, we’ll move on to another dance.”

They spent over an hour practicing turns and putting the steps together in various combinations. He tried to keep his eyes off Al, but they seemed to stray to him of their own accord. Once or twice Al caught Mike watching him, and Mike quickly turned away, his face warm.

Mike looked at the clock and felt a wave of relief. Twenty minutes left.

“Now that you’ve got all the pieces,” he told the class, “let’s try putting them to use in a social setting. Choose a partner and get out on the floor. Use all the steps we’ve learned, and avoid collisions. Remember your floorcraft.”

He put on a selection of waltz music and leaned against the wall beside the stereo. His hip still ached and his knee throbbed, and when Ann asked him to dance, he gently turned her down. “I’d like to watch what everyone’s doing.” He searched to see who wasn’t paired up yet. “Why don’t you ask Al? Looks like he’s still free.”

Ann gave a little sigh, but she snagged Al and they joined the other couples on the floor. Mike suppressed a smile. Al was still stiff and awkward, but he let Ann shine, focusing on the steps she did well. The others looked pretty good, and although there were a number of near-misses, everyone managed to avoid any collisions.

At the end of the class, Mike caught Al’s eye. “Wait a sec, will you?” he said softly as Al pulled on his jacket. “Did you get my message?”

Al nodded and looked over at the doorway. “I hope the ointments were helpful.”

“Yeah, the green stuff was good on the bruises, like you said.”

“I noticed you’re limping.” There was a surprising hint of accusation in his tone.

“Told you I’m not as young as I was.” Mike shrugged and led the way to the door. He paused to switch off the lights and shut the studio door behind them. When he looked up, Al was halfway to the front door, his back poker straight, shoulders stiff. Damn. “Need a ride?” Mike asked before he could stop himself. What the hell did he think he was doing? Mike stuck out his chin and crossed his arms over his chest. Hey, he was just trying to do the guy a favor.

Al stopped and slowly turned. His eyes swept over Mike, who suppressed a shiver.

Strange, how a look could make you feel as if warm honey dripped the length of your spine.

“Well?” Mike’s voice was hoarse, and he shifted his weight onto his other hip. Al’s steady gaze unnerved him.

“Thank you. I’d appreciate that.” Al broke into a smile.

“Okay.” Christ. The warm honey trickled down his chest, too. “Let me change my shoes.” He spun around and walked quickly around the corner to his office.

Once they were in the car, he put on his glasses and started on the now familiar route.

“So,” Mike said, when it became clear Al wasn’t going to speak, “how did your investigation go?”

“My investigation?” Al frowned for a moment before his brows rose and he shook his head. “Not well, I’m afraid. None of our leads panned out.”

“Too bad.” Mike drove another block. “What’re you investigating, anyway?”

“We usually work on several cases at a time,” Al said. “On Saturday, however, we were pursuing leads regarding several pieces of jewelry that had been stolen.”

“Jewelry, huh? Like diamonds and stuff?”

“Yes, indeed.” He warmed to the topic. “There have been three robberies, and the pieces stolen include a sapphire and diamond necklace insured for seven million dollars and an emerald and diamond parure, with a total value of over twenty million.”

“Whoa.” Mike blinked. Imagine spending all that money on jewelry. Imagine *having* all that money to spend on jewelry. “What’s a parure? Some kind of tiara?”

“No.” Al chuckled, but not in a way that make Mike ashamed of asking. “It’s a matching set of jewelry, often a necklace, earrings, bracelet and brooch.”

“Ah. How’re you trying to track them down?”

“That’s the problem. Vince has a wide range of contacts throughout the city, but the fences and others in the fringes of the criminal underworld he’s acquainted with are not equipped to handle that type of merchandise.”

“Yeah. Joe Smith down at the local pawn shop isn’t going to touch anything like that.”

“Exactly.”

“You think the thieves would break up the jewelry and try to sell the stones separately?”

“It’s possible, but unlikely. The pieces are worth far more intact.”

“Yeah, but they might not care about keeping the things intact if they could still get a

couple of mil from the stones. There'd be less risk that way, too, right?"

"We are, of course, considering that possibility." Al sounded pretty condescending.

Mike's face grew warm. "Yeah. Course you are. I was just yakking."

"I appreciate your observations," Al said quickly. "As Vince keeps telling me, it's often useful to get a fresh perspective on a problem."

"Sure. I see that." It was nice of Al to pretend to listen. Mike turned onto West Garfield. "How'd you and Bertini hook up in the first place?"

Al hesitated. "It's a long story."

"So? I'd like to hear it."

"It really is a long story. And my building's just ahead."

"Oh." Mike looked around. Talk about driving on auto-pilot. "Yeah. Okay. Maybe some other time."

"Unless..." Al swallowed, the sound loud in the quiet car. "That is, I'd be delighted if you came up for a cup of tea." He paused. "And we could talk."

Mike pulled into an empty parking space and turned to Al with a grin. "Tea, huh?"

Al faced him, his lips slowly curving into a smile. "I'm afraid I don't have anything stronger."

"Guess I'll have to make do, then." Mike got out of the car, then pulled off his glasses and folded them, slipping them into his coat pocket. "Mac at home?"

"As far as I know." Al looked dubious. "But he doesn't always deign to tell me his plans."

"I don't blame him. A dog's gotta have some privacy." Mike followed Al inside and up the stairs. "Will he be pissed off that I didn't bring any food?"

Two steps above him, Al turned and looked down. "It's possible. You might want to keep your hands in your pockets until he's settled down."

Mike stared at him for a second before the glint in Al's eyes gave him away. "Al, don't do that!" He ran his fingers through his hair as they continued up the stairs. "You, my friend, have a weird sense of humor."

"Some people have said so," Al replied placidly.

When they entered his apartment, Al nodded toward the sofa. "Have a seat, please. I'll just put the water on."

Mike shrugged off his coat and dumped it over the back of the sofa, then sank down into the cushions with a sigh. It was good to take the weight off his knee.

Mackenzie padded over from his bed by the window.

“Hey, Mac.” Mike scratched the top of Mac’s head as he snuffled inquiringly at Mike’s trouser leg.

“Yes, the scent is quite distinctive.” Al rounded the sofa and sat down.

“What scent?”

“The scent of the salve I sent you. You used it on your bruised knee, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s what Mac is smelling.”

“Huh.” Mike leaned back. “It helped a lot.”

“Good. I’ve always found it efficacious.”

“Yeah. Real efficacious.” Mike kept his face solemn, but when Al caught his gaze and grinned, he couldn’t help himself. “Whatever that means. But it did help bring down the swelling.”

A whistle sounded from the kitchen, and Al excused himself. Mac allowed himself to be scratched a little longer, but when Al returned with two mugs, Mac padded out from under Mike’s hand and curled up on the floor on the other side of the coffee table.

Mike took the mug and held it up to his chin. The steam felt good, but it smelled different from any tea he was used to. He sipped it tentatively. There was a little bite, something herby, but it was tasty.

“So, you were going to tell me about how you and Bertini started working together.”

Al leaned forward, his mug clasped in both hands, his forearms resting on his knees. “It all started with a case of fraud brought before my father. He was a superior court judge in Fairbanks, well respected for his integrity.”

“A judge?” Wow. Mike didn’t know anyone whose father was a judge. No wonder Al was so uptight. Imagine having a dad who judged people for a living. He remembered all the trouble he had gotten into when he was younger and offered a brief prayer of thanks that he hadn’t been the son of Judge Pulaski.

Al nodded. “My father had some questions about the investigation. The nature of his questions made him suspicious about following the proper channels, so instead he asked me, as a

detective, to investigate the investigators, as it were.”

“I bet the other guys on the force didn’t like it when they found out what you were doing.”

“They certainly didn’t.”

Mike waited. Al was staring into his cup, his expression hidden in shadows. Maybe Al had decided he really didn’t want to talk about it after all. Mike couldn’t blame him; telling someone about a bad patch in your past was as painful as reliving it. After all, Mike didn’t want to spill his guts about the whole Fiona-and-Simpson business, or the fiasco with Jim.

“You want me to go?”

“No.” Al raised his head and looked as if he were trying to smile. “I apologize. In short, my investigation was discovered and I was disciplined.”

“But you were just doing what your dad asked you to do. Couldn’t he explain?”

“Unfortunately, by that point he had been murdered and—”

“Murdered?” God. No wonder Al didn’t want to talk about it. “How?”

“Shot.” Al’s voice was a whisper. “And evidence was uncovered that indicated he was involved in the fraudulent scheme.”

“No way.” Mike couldn’t believe it. This just kept getting worse and worse.

“It was very compelling evidence.”

Mike stared at Al. Yeah, of course there were crooked judges, but he couldn’t believe that Al’s dad was one of them. Not after knowing Al. “I bet he was framed.”

“Thank you.” Al ran a hand over his face, and if he wiped his eyes, Mike wasn’t going to call him on it. “Thank you for your confidence. You display more faith in my father than those who knew him his entire life.”

“Hey, I know you. If you think the evidence was hinky, then it was.”

“That wasn’t the general consensus, however.” Al’s brows drew together. “It was up to me to clear my father’s name.”

“Lemme guess. You kept on investigating.”

“Exactly. Since I was on administrative leave from the Department, it wasn’t difficult. One of the leads brought me to Chicago, where I met Vince. He was instrumental in solving the Chicago end of the case, and he even returned with me to Fairbanks, where we confronted the perpetrators.”

Even if he didn't want to, Mike had to admit Vince had been a good friend to go all the way back to Alaska with Al. "So the bad guys got locked up?"

"Not exactly. The alleged ringleaders were pillars of the community, and had taken care to cover their tracks. Three of their underlings were convicted, but the instigators were never charged." Al didn't try to hide his bitterness.

"That sucks." It did more than suck. Mike wasn't surprised at the corruption—hey, he'd lived in Chicago all his life, where corruption was par for the course—but for someone like Al, whose interest in justice in this case was personal, it must've been a real blow. Still, Mike had another question. "Why aren't you back at the Fairbanks P.D.?"

"Oh, I was cleared," Al's lip curled in disgust, "but how could I resume my position and remain in the Department when the men who had ordered my father's death were still enjoying life and liberty?"

"I get that." Life wasn't fair, and all those other platitudes. But the whole thing stank of injustice, and he could see what it had done to a good man.

Fuckers.

"But couldn't you have gotten a job in the Chicago P.D. with Bertini?" Hang on a minute. What was he just thinking about Chicago and corruption? Of course Al wouldn't want to jump from the frying pan into the fire. "Nah, of course not. Not with Chicago's rep. That's why you're working as a P.I., right?"

Al smiled, his first real smile in a long while. "Right. The Tates are distant relatives of my mother's, and when they heard I was in Chicago and looking for a job, they offered me a position on their staff, subject to gaining my private investigator's license."

That made sense. "And you could keep working with Bertini."

"Yes." Al's voice was a little hoarse. He raised his mug to his lips and grimaced. "My tea's cold. Would you like more?"

Mike glanced at his watch and stood. Was it that late? "Uh, damn. It's after eleven. I better get going."

Al rose. "Thank you for listening."

"Hey." Mike summoned up a grin. "That's what friends do, right?"

"True. Good night."

"Night. See you Thursday." Mike clattered down the steps, his hands in his pockets. He

could do the friend thing with Al. No problem. Easy as pie.

*

Mike whistled under his breath as he walked into the studio. The class was already assembled, and he glanced over at the students.

Wait a minute.

He checked the clock. Seven thirty exactly.

He scanned the room again, but his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. Al wasn't there.

Okay. He'd been late before. Maybe he was helping some old lady cross the street or something.

Mike pushed away his disappointment. Nodding at Crissy, he turned to the class. "We'll keep practicing the waltz, but now we're going to work on swing dancing. Some people call it jive, jitterbug, or East Coast swing." Mike grinned and held out his hand to Crissy. "It's fast and a lot of fun. Here's what it looks like."

They demonstrated a series of the simpler swing steps. Mike's knee was almost back to normal, but he didn't want to strain it, and besides, he'd discovered years ago that showing off a complex choreography in front of a class just made the students more insecure. He kept an eye on the door, though. It remained closed.

By eight thirty Mike had to admit to himself that Al wasn't going to show. During the break, he checked Tina's desk for a message from Al. Maybe for once in her life, Tina had messed up and not delivered a note.

She hadn't.

So what had happened? Al had said he'd be here. He didn't seem like the kind of guy who would blow off a class without calling, and that was worrying. The skin at the nape of Mike's neck prickled.

It was hard to keep up the energy, to stay relaxed and smooth and above all, patient, when all he really wanted to do was jump in his car and see if Al was okay. He managed, but Crissy blinked at him in surprise when he let the class go a good ten minutes early.

"Are you feeling all right?" she asked as he put away the CDs.

"Yeah, why?"

She fixed him with an unyielding glare. "Mike, you never let a class go early. I've seen

you teach with a temperature of 103, and you kept that class over five minutes. What's going on?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. We finished the pivots, and there wasn't time to start anything new."

She made a noise that from anyone else he'd describe as a snort. "Whatever. Are we still working on the rumba tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I want you to get down that slinky little walk Donna did in the tape. It'll suit you."

Pursing her lips, she gave him a sideways glance. "And what'll you be doing while I'm doing Donna's slinky little walk?"

He grinned and held his arms out to the side, slightly curved in a broad embrace. "This." And he did a couple of quick, extremely lewd hip thrusts.

Crissy laughed. "Oh, that'll impress the ladies." She raised an eyebrow and winked. "And quite a few of the men. See you tomorrow."

"Yeah."

Mike waited until she was gone before he searched through the class rosters on Tina's desk. He'd call Al and make sure he was okay.

Damn.

Al's phone number on the contact list was the same as his office number, and no one would be there now. Maybe he'd drive over to Al's apartment.

Get a grip, Pulaski.

Al wouldn't thank him if he dropped by and Charlotte was there—or someone else. Maybe Al had a commitment and he'd forgotten to call, or didn't think it was important to let Mike know he wouldn't be at class. Either way, it hurt. And he sure as hell wasn't going to call Bertini. The guy would probably roll his eyes and ask if Mike was having a problem with his tights or something.

Mike closed up the studio and walked to the car. He shivered as he started it up. It was cold, the wind sneaking into cracks and around corners, chilling him.

Damn it, Al. Where the hell are you?

He peeled out of the parking lot and headed home.

Sunlight streamed through the kitchen window and across the crumb-strewn counter. Mike gave it a cursory swipe with the dishrag and, with a grin, lifted the rag above his head and tossed it in a high arc into the sink. *Score!* He took another gulp of coffee and picked up the phone. If Al got ticked at him for being concerned, that was too damned bad. After all, he'd waited, more or less patiently, until business hours before calling. There was nothing wrong with checking up on a student, was there?

"Tate & Tate Private Investigations. Lyle Tate speaking."

"This is Mike Pulaski. Is Al there?"

"Why, hello, Mr. Pulaski." Tate sounded pleased. "Yes, Alasdair is in his office. If you'll wait one—"

There was a burst of static on the line. Mike winced and held the receiver away from his ear.

"Hello?"

At the sound of Al's voice a wave of heat washed over him. "Oh, hi, Al."

"Hello, Mike." He paused. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"You weren't at class last night," Mike blurted out. "I just wanted to see if you're okay." He covered his burning face with his hand. He sounded as if he was in junior high.

"Thanks." There was a hint of surprise in Al's voice. "I'm fine, and I'm sorry for not telephoning you to let you know I wouldn't be there."

"That's okay." Mike chewed on the inside of his lip for a second. "I guess your fi—I guess Charlotte was around."

"No, she has to work late this week. I was with Vince all evening, investigating another jewelry theft."

"Another one?"

"Yes, I'm sorry to say."

"That's too bad." Oh, God. He didn't just say that, did he? His temperature ratcheted up another zillion degrees.

"Indeed. But Vince hopes this robbery will provide additional clues that will help us solve the cases."

Mike didn't even try to reply. God knew what would come out of his mouth this time.

Al cleared his throat. "What did you cover in class?"

That he could answer. "We started on East Coast swing."

"Swing?"

"You know. Jive, jitterbug... swing."

"I'm sorry I missed it." The thing was, Al really sounded as if he meant it.

"I could always bring you up to speed before the next lesson." Mike's heart thudded in his chest.

"I couldn't ask you to do that."

"Hey. It'd be easier than playing catch-up in the next class." He straightened his shoulders. He could do this. "So, when would you like to get together? I teach all day tomorrow, but I'm free tonight or Sunday."

"I have a previous commitment on Sunday, but I could meet you tonight."

Tonight. Mike's palms were suddenly damp, and he tucked the receiver between his ear and shoulder while he rubbed them on his jeans. "Tonight would be good. My last class finishes at six. No, wait. I have a private session after that. I'll be free at seven."

"Seven would be fine."

"Good." He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the door of the microwave. He was grinning like an idiot. "You like pizza?" His tongue was suddenly too big for his mouth. "'Cause if you do, maybe we could order one and go back to my place afterward."

"I'd like that."

"And you could bring Mac," he hurried on, "if he wants to come, that is."

"I'll ask him." A woman's strident voice sounded in the background. "Yes, of course, Captain." Al's voice sounded muffled, as if he had his hand over the receiver. "Mike," he whispered, "I must go. I'll see you at seven."

"Duty calls, eh?"

"You could say that." The voice in the background spoke again. "Right away, Captain."

"Okay. Bye, Al."

Mike settled the receiver in the cradle and picked up his coffee mug. The coffee was lukewarm, but he didn't care. Al was okay and he'd see him tonight.

Mike went to shower and change, and he found himself whistling as he washed his hair. He stopped and shrugged. Hey, why not whistle? Life was pretty damn good.

*

“One, two, one-two, three-four, hold, and bow.”

Pushing away from the mirrored wall, Mike sighed and shook his head. “That was crap.” He walked over to the lissome young man standing in the middle of the dance floor and smacked him on the side of the head.

“Ow!” The young man smoothed his hair and turned melting brown eyes toward Mike. “What was that for?”

“‘Cause I felt like it.” Mike narrowed his eyes and the young man stepped back. “You’re doing it again, Julian. You gotta let Peggy be the lady, unless you want to work in a drag club.”

The young woman standing a few feet away rolled her eyes, and Mike turned to her. “And you.” He grimaced. “A steelworker’s got more sashay than you.”

“But, Mike!” they chorused, their faces falling.

He rubbed his forehead and took a deep breath. “Damn. I’m sorry. But you,” he pointed to Peggy, “get those hips moving! And you,” his finger moved to Julian, “tighten ‘em up. You’re not going to win any championships looking like you should be cross-dressing. Let’s try it again.”

They took their positions and Mike started the count. “One, two, one-two, three-four.”

A movement by the door attracted his attention. Mackenzie sat on the threshold, watching Peggy and Julian intently. The tension in Mike’s neck suddenly disappeared, replaced by a fluttering behind his navel. He turned his back to the door—how the hell could he concentrate if he could see Al? Keeping his eyes on Peggy and Julian, he called out encouragement as they went through their dance. Someone’s eyes were on him, though, setting his skin to tingling, and they damn well weren’t Mac’s.

He clapped when they bowed. “That was a lot better. Next week, I want to see those hips working the way they’re supposed to.”

Like a compass needle swinging to the north, Mike turned. God, Al looked good. His jeans fit snugly, displaying strong thighs. He stood with his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, his hair windblown. He met Mike’s gaze and smiled broadly. The tightness in Mike’s belly dissolved into liquid warmth that slowly spread up his spine and down his legs.

Peggy and Julian hurried to the door; Al and Mac stepped aside to let them pass. The

dancers' eyes widened and their gazes shifted from Al to Mac and back again. Julian hesitated for a moment, his face turning to Al like a flower to the sun, before Peggy grinned apologetically and pushed him through the doorway.

"Hi, Mike."

Mike held up his hand and hurried over. "Hang on. Mac, my friend, you'll have to stay outside, 'cause the floor doesn't like dog nails. Sorry."

Eyebrows raised, lips pressed together primly, Al looked at Mac. Mac gave a long-suffering moan and curled up by the sofa parents used when waiting for their children.

"Okay, let's give it a go." Mike led the way back to the studio. He tried to tone down his grin as he faced Al, but didn't succeed. "You ever jitterbugged?"

"Never."

"It's fast, but you won't have any trouble." Mike led the way into the center of the dance floor. "The first thing you got to get is the attitude."

"Attitude?" Al raised his eyebrows and looked at him dubiously.

"Yeah. Swing's a cool dance, and you gotta be cool to dance it." He rested his weight on one hip, cocked his shoulders and snapped his fingers. "All the hep cats did it in the late thirties and forties."

"Hep cats, eh?" Al's lips twitched.

"Yeah. And to be cool when you dance swing, you stand like this." Mike spread his feet and bent his knees, leaning forward like a tennis player waiting for a serve. He winked.

Al's lips twitched again. "Like that?"

"Like this." Mike nodded and swayed from side to side. "C'mon, you do it."

"Okay." Al mirrored Mike's stance.

Mike snorted. "Loosen up!" He shook out his arms and swayed again. "Get the rod outta your... spine."

With a solemn nod, Al shook out his arms and swayed.

Mike tilted his head to one side. "That'll do to start. Now, we're going to do the basic step. It's a slow, slow, quick, quick sequence in six," he said, demonstrating.

It didn't take long for Al to master the step, and, even better, the more he did it, the more he loosened up. Julian should see the way Al's hips moved—loose, but not like a woman's. Mike looked into Al's flushed, smiling face and amended that thought. Nope. If he had his way, Julian

would never, ever, get a chance to watch Al's hips.

"Knew you'd get it," Mike said. "Another thing that's different about swing dancing is the hand holds. You can do a bunch of different ones in open position. You lead, and we'll try some."

By the time they'd finished practicing half-a-dozen different handholds, they were laughing. Mike could hardly believe it—Al was beginning to show a little attitude when he danced. He was actually swinging their joined hands in time with the beat and putting some style in his steps.

"Great! Now we're going to try some turns. This is an arch turn." Mike slowly went through the steps. "Okay, when I get to this point," he said as their joined hands reached his eyebrows, "I'm going to push up, to make sure I clear your arm. Otherwise, this'll happen." Al's forearm bumped against his head.

"I see." Al lifted his arm in response to the pressure from Mike's hand, and Mike completed the turn under the arch of their joined arms.

"Yeah. Now you try it." It took Al a couple of tries to move smoothly through the turn, but he soon mastered the steps. "This is good," Mike continued as Al led him in a turn. "God, I wish more of my students were as quick on the uptake as you are."

"That's very flattering, but it isn't the case." He dropped Mike's hand and stepped back, his shoulders and jaw suddenly tight. He looked over Mike's shoulder, avoiding his eyes.

Mike shook his head. "It's true. I've been teaching for almost twenty years, and you're way up there on the getting-it-fast scale."

"Then it must be your abilities as a teacher. I certainly couldn't learn the steps when—" Al stopped abruptly.

The skin between Mike's shoulder blades prickled. That was weird. Al looked not only embarrassed, but guilty too. "You took lessons from someone else?" He tried to keep his tone casual.

"Well." Al's throat moved convulsively. "Not lessons. That is, she—" He shot Mike an agonized glance. "It wasn't formal instruction."

She? A scalding wave passed through Mike, and his shirt was suddenly clammy. *Goddamn it!* "Charlotte tried to teach you?" He was proud his voice remained calm, when he really wanted to yell.

Al squared his shoulders and clasped his hands behind his back. “She felt it was important I be able to dance at our wedding reception and various social events.”

“Sure, I get that.” Oh, yeah, he got it. He’d witnessed this scene dozens of times over the years. Didn’t mean he had to like it, though. But it was no use letting Al see his disgust.

“Sometimes it doesn’t work. It’s kind of like when my dad tried to teach me to drive. We ended up doing a lot of yelling and not much teaching or learning. My dad’s a good guy, but he didn’t have any idea how to teach me something he could practically do in his sleep.” He gave Al a sheepish grin, “I thought I knew everything, and wouldn’t listen to him anyway.”

A little of the tension drained from Al’s shoulders, and he nodded, looking relieved. “You’re right. I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“So you can take my word you’re good.” Mike winked, and Al’s tense face relaxed.

A peremptory moan from the door drew their attention. Mackenzie stood on the threshold and gave a curt woof.

“You’re hungry again? Good Lord, it’s only...” Al began, and glanced at the clock. “Eight?”

Eight? Mike looked at the clock and shrugged apologetically. “Sorry, Mac. Guess the time got away from us.”

“Indeed.” Al rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. “Thank you. I feel prepared for our next class.”

“Like I said, no problem. So, you ready for pizza?”

Mac’s ears pricked and he yipped, then headed for the door.

Al rolled his eyes. “It seems Mac is.”

“Okay. Lemme call in our order. That way we won’t have to wait long. You like taco pizza?”

“I don’t know.” Al looked dubious. “I’ve never had it before.”

Mike picked up the phone and dialed. “Believe me, you’re in for a real treat.” Al nodded and slipped on his jacket as Mike placed the order. “Okay, I need to change my shoes and we’ll be good to go.”

Ten minutes later, Mike unlocked the door to his apartment and followed Mac and Al inside.

“Make yourself at home.” Mike flapped his hand toward the living room before he

hurried down the hallway toward his bedroom. He quickly changed into jeans and a t-shirt and returned to the living room, where he found Al studying the pictures on the shelves. “Jeez.” Mike scratched his upper arm and frowned at the rows of framed photos. “I forgot they were there. I mean,” he amended, “they’ve been there so long, I don’t even notice them any more.”

Al picked up a small, battered silver frame. Inside was a faded and slightly blurred photo of a very young, very skinny, very tow-headed Mike dressed in a fringed silver vest and green bell bottom trousers, standing beside a little dark-haired girl in a similar costume. They were holding a small trophy between them. “How old were you?”

Mike winced. *Oh, God. The photos are going in a drawer. Tonight.* As soon as Al left. “Seven. We won third place in the state junior championships.”

Carefully replacing the photo on the shelf, Al pointed to another one. “First place?”

“Yeah. That was the year Fiona and I partnered up.” He frowned at the photo. Their costumes were covered in gold sequins and layers of fringe. His mother had spent hours at her sewing machine getting his ready for the championship. Fiona’s mom had her seamstress make Fiona’s, and she’d offered to have Mike’s made, too, but no way would his folks accept what they saw as charity. “We were thirteen.”

Al put the photo down and picked up another, larger one in an elaborate frame. Mike reached out to take it, but Al stepped away, studying the photo solemnly. “And this?” Al’s fingertip rested briefly on the glass, and when he moved it, Mike could see a faint smudge on Fiona’s shoulder.

“Nineteen.” Mike turned away, his eyes following Mac as he nosed around the sofa. He didn’t need to look at the photo to see it in his mind. He wore that fucking tux with the ruffled shirt, his long hair brushing his shoulders, his black-framed glasses giving him a pseudo-studious air. Fiona’s hair was piled on the top of her head in lacquered curls, her mom’s little pearl circlet around her forehead, and the white veil trailed behind her. She loved that stupid dress, heavy white satin, with little flower buds and ribbons around the neck. She’d looked like a stranger with it on, and Mike had been scared to touch her, even after she took it off.

“What would you like to drink?” His voice was rough. “Pizza’ll be here in a minute. I’ve got beer, O.J. and milk.”

“Beer would be fine, thank you.” Al put the photo carefully back on the shelf and turned to him.

“Beer it is.” Mike nodded and hurried into the kitchen. He’d just opened two bottles when the doorbell rang. “I’ll get it.”

Al met him at the door. They had a brief argument about who would pay. Mike won only because he threatened never to give Johnny, his regular pizza delivery guy, another dance lesson if he accepted Al’s money. Johnny had looked at the bills in Al’s hand, shrugged, and turned away.

“That wasn’t fair.” Al followed Mike into the kitchen.

“Never said it was.” Mike handed Al a plate and opened the box. “Take it on through to the living room. Thought we could see if there’s anything on ESPN.”

Mac came into the kitchen and Mike put a plate of pizza on the floor for him, along with a bowl of water. Al gave him a long, steady look, but didn’t say anything.

They settled on the couch. Al gazed at his pizza for a second before squaring his shoulders and taking a bite. Mike had to hide his smile when Al’s eyebrows rose.

“Taco pizza is delicious, Mike.”

“Don’t sound so surprised. You think I’d steer you wrong?”

After flipping through the channels once, Mike turned off the set in disgust. “What do you do up there in Alaska when there’s nothing on TV?” He took a swig of his beer.

Al chewed his pizza thoughtfully. “Any one of a number of things.”

“Such as?”

“Read. Play music. Whittle.”

“Whittle?” Mike grinned. “There’s something you don’t see much of any more.”

“It’s a useful skill, especially when you need a gift.”

“Oh, yeah,” Mike laughed. “That’d go over like a lead balloon on Christmas morning.”

“It might not be suitable for some people,” Al agreed mildly.

“You think?” Mike snickered. “Fiona’s family has money, and she’s used to the best. If I’d have given her a carving of a polar bear, she’d have...” The old, familiar pain suddenly lodged in his chest, and his gaze dropped to the floor. She’d always demanded the best. When he was dance’s up-and-coming star, she’d bugged him for six months until he dropped his partner and joined her. Married her. And got dumped by her for someone shinier. He shrugged. “Well, it wouldn’t have been pretty.”

Al looked up and hesitated. “How long were you married?”

“Fifteen years.”

“I’m sorry,” Al said softly.

“Yeah, well, the last couple weren’t too good. She was getting restless, and I... Well, I got kind of crazy and tried to keep hold of her.”

“That doesn’t work.”

“You’re telling me.” Mike sucked in a lungful of air and blew it out with a whoosh. “It just made her madder.” He put his plate down on the coffee table and leaned back, closing his eyes. He wasn’t hungry any more. His throat felt as if it was coated in ground glass. “I thought that if I hadn’t made her mad, maybe she might have stayed.”

The briefest of touches brushed his shoulder, leaving warmth in its wake.

“You can’t keep someone when they’ve made up their mind to go.”

Mike opened his eyes and rubbed his nose, sitting up and giving Al a rueful grin. “Figured that out, finally. So,” he picked up his beer and took another drink, “we got divorced and Fiona got a new partner. End of story.” End of story, end of that part of Mike’s life. Time for a new subject. “So how’s the jewel robbery investigation going?”

Al set his plate down. “Not very well. We have very few leads. Vince is receiving considerable pressure from the Police Commissioner to solve the case, and the Captain is extremely...” He sighed. “Never mind.”

There was that damned phrase again. It meant Al was hiding something. Time to find out what. “The Captain? She’s your boss, isn’t she?”

“Yes. Captain Hetty Tate, along with her older brother, Lyle, founded Tate & Tate Private Investigations seven years ago, when she left the military. The firm does the usual background checks and domestic inquiries, but she’s forged relationships with the local authorities and the firm often is called in to assist in their investigations.”

“Forged relationships, huh?” Mike sat back and raised an eyebrow. “Bet that started when you and Bertini hooked up.”

“It was about that time, yes.” Al tugged at his collar.

“I bet she offered you a job because you and Bertini did good work together, and she figured she might as well ride the gravy train.”

“That’s not entirely—”

“But you got to make sure she doesn’t take you for granted.” From what little Al had

said, Mike was pretty certain he had Captain Hetty Tate pegged. Al would have to stand up for himself or get trampled underfoot and end up doing all the crap jobs. The thing was, Mike didn't know how to help out yet. But he'd definitely be keeping an eye on Al and his boss.

For now, it was time to get back to the case.

"How do they steal the jewelry in the first place? These people are rich. Don't they have safes or bank vaults or something to keep it in?"

"Yes, and they generally maintain a high level of security for the pieces. However, one of the owners had taken the jewelry to be appraised for insurance purposes, another was preparing to wear it to a social function, and the other two had already worn them to a charity benefit and hadn't returned them to the bank yet."

"And the thieves swiped them while they were still out." Mike shook his head. "Talk about bad timing. You think the same thieves did all four robberies?"

"We suspect that's the case." Al's jaw tightened, and he frowned.

"Same M.O., huh?"

"Very similar."

"So what're you guys doing to track them down?"

"Everything in our power." Al's hands clenched. "We've contacted fences, snitches, anyone and everyone we can think of, but so far," he said, thumping his fist against the arm of the sofa in a gesture so unlike his usual calm reserve that it seemed extraordinarily violent, "we have nothing."

Mike scratched his cheek and said slowly, "How do the thieves know that the jewelry's not in the bank?"

Al thumped his fist on the sofa arm again and gave him a look usually reserved for the kind of thing stepped in at the curb. "If we knew the answer to *that* we'd be several steps ahead in the investigation."

Feeling as if he'd been slapped, Mike scrambled to his feet. "Sorry." He grabbed their plates. "I just thought..."

He was already in the kitchen before Al reacted.

"Mike! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude."

He watched the water sluice over the stoneware, rinsing away crumbs and specks of tomato sauce. "And I'm sticking my nose where it's not wanted. Forget about it."

Al moved behind him, close enough that heat blanketed his back from shoulders to ankles. Mike's gut tightened and he squeezed his eyes shut for a second.

"I'm sorry," Al repeated. A warm hand rested on his shoulder and Mike suppressed a shiver. "I'm just frustrated. You asked a perfectly reasonable question. Unfortunately, it's one I have no answer to."

"You keep looking. You'll figure it out." Mike swayed a little. He wanted to lean back against Al, lean into that warmth, but caught himself in time. "Is Mac done?" His voice was harsher than he intended.

Al stepped back and the hand fell from his shoulder. "Yes." He handed Mike the spotless plate. "It's getting late," he said, sounding regretful. "And you're teaching tomorrow."

"Yeah." Mike shut off the water and dried his hands. "Got a full schedule on Saturdays. Grab your jacket and I'll drive you home."

For a second, Al looked as if he was going to argue, but he simply said, "Thank you."

They made small talk as Mike negotiated the busy streets. It looked as if everyone was out on the road that evening, getting in his way, and Mike's temper was frayed by the time they pulled up to Al's building.

"Nice car." Mike nodded at the red Lexus parked in the space in front of them.

"Damn." Al's face was shuttered.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. When we met for lunch, she said she was going to work late, but apparently she changed her mind." Al hurriedly unbuckled his seatbelt and opened the door. "Thanks for the ride. I'll see you on Tuesday." He slid out of the car and pushed the seat back forward. "Are you coming?" he snapped at Mac. The dog looked at him steadily, and slowly, almost insolently, crawled out of the car. Al shut the door and sprinted into the building.

"Night, Al," Mike whispered.

He sat staring at the car in front of him for a long time before he pulled away.

*

Strong hands slipped across the plane of his chest, slid under his shirt and stroked the sensitive skin over his ribs. With a shiver, Mike leaned back against a wall of hard muscle, a hot, stiff dick pushing against his ass. He had missed this, missed the feel of another body touching

his with intent. Fingers found his nipples, plucking at them lightly, and Mike's breath caught. He groaned as his own dick filled, straining against his jeans.

"You want this." The low-voiced words were not a question.

The gentle whisper of air over his ear and neck tickled, but the hands soothed him as he trembled. He swallowed. "Yeah."

But the roaming hands weren't the familiar small ones he'd held for years, the body he leaned against wasn't all smooth, soft curves. He squeezed his eyes closed, felt his dick flag. God, what was he doing?

"Don't think of her." A command.

"I don't want to, but—"

"But she's the one who walked away, the one who decided to end everything."

Harsh, but true. The hollowness carved beneath his ribcage ached as it had for the past six months, ever since Fiona had blurted out that she was having an affair and wanted a divorce.

"We were married a long time. It's hard not to think of her."

"You don't want her. You want *me*."

A long exhalation. The truth of this shook him, marrow-deep. "Yeah."

"Then turn around and take what's yours."

Mike turned then, hands mapping out the hard planes and arcs of solid muscle, sliding down the naked body to grasp, finger by finger, the dick that had pushed against him, watching as bright blue eyes fluttered shut, as that wicked mouth sagged open in pleasure. A nudge forward, a thud as a bare back hit the wall.

"I want you." Almost a groan as his dick chafed against the denim, the line of his zipper branding itself against his rigid flesh. With his free hand, he managed to unfasten his jeans, his head spinning when the pressure suddenly lessened. "I want you," he repeated, words muffled as he kissed Jim's broad shoulders, up the long tendon in his neck, across the sharp angle of jaw to Jim's welcoming mouth, still open, panting. Mike pulled hard on the dick in his hand, setting a relentless pace with hand and lips, never allowing either of them a moment's rest. Groans strengthened, rumbling up from the belly trembling against his wrist. Jim's skin grew damp under his lips, and his own dick ached from neglect. Mike didn't care. Not now, not when they were so close.

A shout, and he squeezed his fingers, hand and arm suddenly warmly sticky.

Now.

Mike guided Jim's still gasping body to the sturdy kitchen table, kicking aside a chair, pressing down on his sweaty back until it bent obediently. Nudging Jim's long legs apart, Mike ran his hands down the valley of Jim's spine, his fingers following the curves of Jim's rounded ass. He shoved his jeans down to his knees and dragged the head of his dick across Jim's fine-textured skin, painting an uneven line of desire on one cheek.

His hand slid down between Jim's cheeks, skimming over his hot hole.

"Christ, Mike!" Hands scrabbled at the table edge, hips canted up, desperate. "I'm ready. Fuck me!"

Taking a shaky breath, Mike rubbed again, just to make certain. Yes. Already prepared, wet and waiting. Just like Jim, to be so sure of Mike, of himself.

Guiding his dick carefully, Mike didn't care that he'd been played by a master. They both wanted this.

With a grimace, he sank slowly into Jim's body, hot and tight and so damned good.

He stopped when his belly pressed against Jim's curved ass, stopped and leaned forward, pressing his forehead between the sharp wings of shoulder blades, breathing in the scent of sex and sweat, scrabbling to hold onto the Mike he'd been for years, for decades. A Mike he no longer recognized. Then he let go.

Watching his dick slide out until just the crown remained clasped within Jim's body made his heart pound so hard it felt as if it were trying to break free of his ribcage. Mike pushed back inside, blinking as his eyes stung with more than just sweat.

He wanted to savor these moments, but the urge to snatch, to grab his climax was too strong, and half a handful of strokes later Mike emptied himself into that willing body with a gasp and bitten-off curse.

As weak-limbed as a baby, he lay heavily along Jim's warm, sticky spine, his dick still embedded inside, an occasional faint twitch sending goosebumps across the ripple of ribs beneath him.

At an impatient grunt from below, he pressed a kiss onto the nape of Jim's neck, then levered himself upright. Mike winced as he freed his sensitive dick, tugging his jeans up before stepping back. A thin trail of spunk started to drip from Jim's still-lax hole. With a cautious fingertip, he collected it, pressing it back inside Jim's trembling body.

Levering himself onto elbows, face half-turned so Mike could see his grin, Jim sighed. “Fuck, that was great.”

Mike closed his eyes, saw a different face, a different body. “Yeah. It was great, Al.”

“Who’s Al?”

Mike rolled over, rubbing his eyes and blinking blearily at the clock beside his bed. Three fourteen. Why had he woken up?

Yawning, he punched the pillow into a more comfortable shape and drifted back to sleep.

Chapter 5

Mike opened his eyes and peered out the window. Blue sky greeted him. With a self-indulgent groan he stretched and glanced at the bedside clock. God, he loved Sunday mornings. He snickered. Yeah, God would know that, wouldn't He? Or was it She? Mike was definitely going to hedge his bets, regardless of what the Church said.

He stretched again, enjoying the dull ache in his joints and tendons, and scratched his balls, faintly remembering a dream he'd had last night—something damned sexy. He grinned as he found a spot on the sheets. Yeah, he'd come hard, all right. Must've been a good dream to get him off like that. Of course, not getting any for ages meant it didn't take much to set him off. Had he woken up afterward?

His grin disappeared. Who had he dreamed about? He couldn't remember a specific name or face, just the feel of a guy's body against his. Jim? No, on second thought, Mike really didn't want to know who'd starred in his dream, even though he had his suspicions. That knowledge could make life uncomfortable.

Mike bent his leg. Good. His knee didn't even twinge. Physically, he felt better than he had for ages. Time for a run. Maybe stop by the bakery afterward and get a strudel or something. Get some good coffee.

The first mile was rough, and the second worse, but then he found his stride. He made a loop through the neighborhood, speeding up past the church, just in case Father Szczypula looked out as he passed, then down to the park and back. By the time he got to Jagiello's, though, he was wiped. *Real bright, Pulaski. Think you're still twenty, right?* He walked up and down the sidewalk for a while to cool down, and joined the line inside.

“So, Casimir.” Standing in front of him, Mrs. Seretny turned to eye his drenched t-shirt and sweatpants. “You go to church dressed like that?”

Mike grinned. “Nah. You know Father would have a heart attack if I showed up before Christmas. Besides, I gotta keep in shape for Fridays at Stosh’s.” He suddenly clasped her ample arms and danced her in a circle as she half-heartedly protested and everyone else laughed. “See? Gotta be fast on my feet.”

When it was his turn, Mike bought a strudel and coffee, and paused by the stacks of Sunday papers by the door. Maybe there was a report on the jewelry robbery that Al was working on. Grabbing a paper, he put the money on the counter and walked back to his apartment.

After a quick shower, he settled down at the kitchen table and spread out the paper. He searched it thoroughly, but there was no mention of any jewelry robbery, at least not of the kind Al had talked about.

He sat back and drained his coffee cup. This was Sunday. The robbery had occurred on Thursday. Maybe there was something in the Friday or Saturday paper. Frowning, he ran his finger through the drift of sugar-crusted pastry flakes on his plate and stuck it in his mouth, almost buzzing from the burst of sweetness. Who would have the daily paper?

Of course. He ran out the door and down the hall. Five minutes later he returned, bearing two neatly folded newspapers. Mr. Slattery down the hall prided himself on being up-to-date on all the news, and he was willing to let Mike borrow the papers for his research.

There wasn’t anything in Friday’s paper. He hit paydirt in Saturday’s, however. It wasn’t much, a little blurb that Mrs. William H. Preston, wife of Randall MacKay Preston III, had attended a charity ball on Wednesday, and had discovered her jewelry missing just before she was about to return it to its ‘place of safekeeping.’ Mike rolled his eyes. Talk about pretentious. Call it a safe or a bank or whatever and get on with it. The police were pursuing leads, interviewing the staff, and that was about it. Not much there, but the police weren’t going to spill everything to a reporter. And he’d bet the Prestons weren’t happy about the publicity, either.

He put down the paper, remembering just in time not to ball it up and toss it into the trash. He returned them to Mr. Slattery with thanks and settled down to pay his bills and do laundry.

Looking out the window later that afternoon, he decided he couldn’t stand being indoors

any more. He slid into the front seat of the Charger and put on his glasses. It was a nice day. Not too much traffic. A drive would do him good. Maybe he'd follow the lake shore for a while.

He hadn't planned to go that way, but he found himself heading along an unexpectedly quiet West Garfield. The red Lexus was still there, parked at the curb. Mike glared at it, burning a little rubber as he passed. Damn fancy car. Way too fucking expensive for what it was. The only people who bought that kind of car were pretentious jerks.

What the hell was he doing? His face was burning as he jerked the wheel around and took the corner faster than he should have. This was Al's fiancée he was dissing. And she couldn't be that bad, not if she loved Al—and not if Al loved her.

That thought hurt more than anything.

*

Mike turned off the lights in his dressing room and walked over to the panel, swinging it away from the wall. The studio appeared in the opening, slightly ghostly from the distortions in the glass coating.

He rubbed his damp palms on his trousers. Crissy was there, talking with Bill. Harold, Ann, Dana and Tom came in, laughing.

A beautiful woman with curly auburn hair cascading down her back walked in, with Al a step behind.

Fuck.

He'd known it. He'd known she would come tonight.

Eyes narrowed, he watched Al introduce Charlotte to Crissy and the others. Al looked nervous, but she smiled and shook hands and seemed to be doing the gracious, and even Crissy's initial frown turned into a smile. Charlotte looked around the room, saying something to Al. He stiffened, but nodded, an unconvincing smile on his lips.

"Damn it." Mike rested his hand on the cool glass and bent his head, staring at the floor. Okay, she was beautiful. Of course she'd be beautiful. A good-looking guy like Al wouldn't have a dog for a fiancée. Not that looks seemed to be important to Al, but it wasn't cosmically right.

He looked up, right into Al's dark eyes.

Hell!

With a gasp, Mike stepped back, jerked his hand from the glass. What was he thinking? He shouldn't touch the glass, because if Al was looking at the right place, he could see Mike's hand shadowed in the mirror. He balled his hands into fists and stepped forward. Al was staring at the mirror, a little wrinkle between his eyebrows.

Suddenly Al turned, and Charlotte was behind him, holding out her hand. He nodded and joined her, taking her hand in his and leading her back to the students clustered at the front of the room.

Mike glanced at the clock. Shit. Seven thirty-one. He closed the panel and ran to the studio.

Stopping outside the door, he took a deep breath and shook out his arms. Loose and cool, that was the ticket. He could do loose and cool.

The class was in a knot around Crissy, listening intently. When he stepped in, there was a pause and their heads swiveled around to look at him. Oh, great. What now?

"Good to see you all." He smiled. Crissy was grinning broadly and gave him a quick wink. He raised an eyebrow but didn't respond. Instead he turned to Al. The guy looked as if he was going to pass out any minute. Or barf.

"Hey, Al. And you must be his fiancée." Mike stuck out his hand and hoped that his smile didn't look as fake as it felt. "Hi. I'm Mike Pulaski."

She took his hand and gave him a polite curve of lips. "Charlotte Thornton. Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise." Mike let go of her hand as soon as he decently could, and she looked as if that was fine with her.

"Um." Al's face had gone from pasty to scarlet in a couple of heartbeats. Hopefully he wasn't going to stroke out. "Thank you for your offer to include Charlotte in a class, Mike."

"It was kind of you." She took Al's arm, her smile going from polite to smug in a blink.

Mike dragged his eyes away from where her fingers wrapped around Al's biceps. She was marking her territory. "Consider it an early wedding gift. Excuse me." He turned and walked over to Crissy. "Okay, everyone. Let's warm up with the waltz. Grab a partner and show us what you can do."

Most of them were really getting the hang of it by now. Mike watched the couples still having trouble, making mental notes on what they needed to work on. He skipped over Al and

Charlotte, trying to make his eyes blur whenever they moved past, but damn it, he was curious. He had to know what they looked like together.

They were awful.

No, really. He forced himself to look at them like he looked at other competitors—analytically, dispassionately.

The facts didn't change.

It wasn't that they didn't know the steps. But both of them looked as if they were dancing in a vacuum, not with another person. Not with someone they loved.

Al was stiff, which wasn't surprising. Charlotte looked as if she could barely stand to touch him. Not her face—her expression was okay, as if she was daydreaming something nice. But her body language screamed 'keep off' and 'get away.' It gave Mike the creeps.

He turned off the music with a jab of his finger. "You're looking good. Leads, don't forget to give your partner directions with your right hand—you won't need to drag them along if you let them know where you're going. Any questions before we get back to swing?"

A hand slowly appeared from the back. Mike craned his neck.

"Ann, you have a question?"

Her eyes slid over his face and the color rose in her cheeks. "I have some friends who are taking dance lessons, too." She spoke quickly. "From Arthur... from one of the big chains. They've learned a lot more steps than we have." Her mouth tightened, but it wasn't a smile. "I wondered why we're spending so much time on other things, like leading and floorcraft. Why aren't we just concentrating on learning the steps?"

Mike nodded and looked around at the attentive faces. He'd been expecting that question—someone always asked it at some point. "Good question." She relaxed a little and raised her eyebrows expectantly.

"Okay," Mike said, "what's dancing?"

Blank stares met his gaze, and he repeated the question. "When I say dancing, what do I mean?"

Ann shrugged. "Moving rhythmically to music."

"Most of the time people dance to music," Mike agreed. "But not all the time. Does that mean they're not dancing?"

"I guess not."

Mike glanced at the sea of frowns and puzzled expressions. Charlotte looked politely bored, but Al's head was tilted to the side, and he was watching Mike. Mike grinned.

"Let me ask this another way. Why do we dance? Rita?"

"For exercise."

"Yeah. And?"

"Because we have to," muttered Ian, and a few of the other men nodded.

Mike laughed. "And?"

"For pleasure," Dana said.

Ah. Now they were getting somewhere.

"For pleasure." Mike turned to Ann and held out his hand. Her cheeks pinked and she pressed her lips together, but she slipped her hand into his. He didn't count or hum, he just began a slow waltz, keeping the steps simple so that she would have no difficulty following. His eyes remained fixed on hers.

For the first few moments she was stiff in his arms, then suddenly she relaxed with a sigh. A tiny smile played on her lips and she moved with him, unhesitatingly following his lead. They were good. It was there, the trust, the connection.

He swept her around in a broad circle, then brought her to a stop in the middle of the room. Bowing low, he held her hand as the class applauded.

"Thank you," he said formally, and she surprised him with an awkward curtsy. He winked at her and faced the rest of the class. "Okay. What were we doing?"

"Dancing." Tom shrugged one shoulder.

Mike raised his chin. "And what else?"

"You were—" The voice cut off abruptly.

Mike turned. Al's face was scarlet, and Charlotte's hand gripped his upper arm, her fingers pale against his dark shirt.

"You were saying, Al?" Mike prompted, shooting Charlotte a hard look when she opened her mouth. She closed it and lowered her gaze. Her lips were pinched together. "We were what?"

Al cleared his throat. "You were communicating, connecting."

"You got it." Mike nodded, turning to the class. "You hear that? Communication. Connection. That's what dancing—good dancing—is about. The steps are just a way to help out, like a language people share."

Ian shook his head. "That's bullshit. How can you have a language without words?"

There was an immediate outcry from several of the students, and Mike let them answer, cutting off the discussion once it strayed into the more esoteric realms of mathematics, body language and autonomous reactions.

"What about dancers who dance alone?" Charlotte's tone was soft, but he could hear the steel beneath the gentle words. A couple of heads bobbed in agreement.

"Good point," Mike said. "If a dancer doesn't have a partner, who are they communicating with?"

"With the audience, of course—or the universe. Or both. It doesn't matter, really." Ann didn't bother to conceal her impatience with Charlotte's question. "I see what you mean, Mike, and I'm sorry for taking up so much class time."

Mike looked around the rest of the class. "Any other questions?" He waited a beat, then nodded. "Right. Let's swing."

He was conscious of an itch between his shoulder blades through the rest of the class, and every time he glanced in Al's direction, Charlotte was watching him. Her expression was neutral, but her eyes were hooded and wary.

At the end of the class, Mike was surprised when she came up to him with a smile.

"Thank you for inviting me to a class," she said. "I can see why Al enjoys his lessons so much."

"Al's a good student." Mike lowered his voice and gave her a conspiratorial grin. "I wish all my students were as fast on the uptake as he is."

Glancing at Al, who was blushing, Mike nodded. "See you on Thursday, Al."

"Yes. Thursday." Al shifted his weight and looked like a man whose shorts were riding up. Charlotte took his arm in a firm grip and led him from the room.

Mike's fingers were numb as he fumbled with the CD case.

"Mike!"

He started. Crissy stared at him, her hands on her hips.

"What?"

"I wanted to know if we're still on for tomorrow." The corners of her mouth drooped.

"Yeah." He punched the eject button on the stereo. "We've got to get that rumba down before—"

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” Crissy interrupted, her voice wistful.

“Who?” he said automatically, even though he knew the answer.

She gave him a disgusted look and continued. “And that hair. All those curls, and so long. I bet he likes to play with it.” Her fingers smoothed over her cropped blonde hair and she sighed.

Mike stared at her for a minute, then reached out and ruffled the baby-fine strands, ignoring her yelp of protest. “You look great.” He remembered the skinny kid with the lank, mouse-brown hair who’d first shown up at the studio and demanded lessons like other girls demanded a pony. “Besides, what would you do with that curly mess for a competition? Pigtails? Braids? You’re not really the bun type.” He leered at her and she laughed a little breathlessly.

“Don’t be a jerk.” She gave him a playful punch on the arm. But she was still smiling when she left a few minutes later.

*

The next morning, Mike sifted through the stacks of paper on his desk, shaking his head over the amount of forms and lists one dance studio could generate, when the phone rang. He looked at the line in use: an external call that Tina forwarded. He raised an eyebrow and picked up the receiver.

“Pulaski.”

“Hi, Mike.”

He sank into his chair.

“Fiona.” His voice was flat.

She laughed her nervous laugh, and he could picture her biting her lower lip and combing back her hair with agitated fingers. He’d seen her do it, God, how many times? Especially in those last few weeks.

“I’m glad you still recognize my voice.”

He didn’t reply.

“How are you?” she finally asked, breaking the brittle silence. “I thought I’d see you in Columbus, but—”

“What do you want?” He wasn’t angry, not any more. He was just tired of the ache that throbbed in his joints and the pain in his chest whenever he thought of her final words—*For Christ’s sake, Mike, can’t you get it through that thick Polish skull of yours that I don’t love you*

anymore?

She took a deep breath. "I wanted to talk to you, to find out how you're doing." Her voice was gentle.

"I'm fine." His fingers tightened. He wanted to slam down the receiver and cut her off the way she had done with him, but he couldn't. He swallowed hard. "You?"

"I'm happy."

"Good." His voice was gruff. "'Cause if you weren't, I'd come over and make Simpson sorry he was ever born."

She laughed. "I know that. And so does Ed. It keeps him on his best behavior."

"Then he's not as dumb as I thought." He wasn't really surprised when Fiona didn't protest his words. "So, I'm fine. You're fine. What did you really call about?"

She sighed again. "Can't I call to see how you are?"

He snorted, but didn't reply.

"Okay." He heard the clink of china. She was having her morning coffee. He closed his eyes. It had been a ritual for the two of them. They'd both have coffee and Mike would have a Danish. Fiona always stole a bite, licking her fingers and sometimes Mike's. When they were first married, that often led to Fiona on her knees between Mike's splayed legs, her manicured fingers wrapped around his dick, her warm pink tongue circling the head. He shook off the memories as she continued. "I wanted to talk to you about a couple of things, but not over the phone."

"Why not?"

"Mike." Her voice held a note of warning. "Let's have lunch, and we can talk in peace."

"Simpson gonna be there?"

"No. Just you and me."

He hesitated. "All right," he said slowly. "As long as I don't have to look at his ugly face."

"Mike!"

"Where and when?"

"I know you're busy on Saturday, and I can't make Sunday. How about Monday?"

"Fine." He didn't want to continue this conversation. Why couldn't she hurry up and end the call?

She seemed to sense his impatience. “At the deli at one?”

“Okay.”

She paused, as if she were going to say more. “See you then.”

The line went dead and he dropped the receiver into the cradle, then wiped his hands on his thighs. Shit. He was all wound up like a spring, just from a quick phone call. He’d probably be bouncing off the walls after their lunch.

What he needed now was to move, do some warm-ups, work on a little choreography. He was at the door when the phone rang again. Biting back a curse, he lunged for the receiver.

“Pulaski,” he barked.

Silence. Then a voice tentatively said, “Mike?”

“Al?”

“Did I interrupt—”

“No, no.” Mike parked his hip on the corner of the desk. “I was just—Never mind. What’s up? Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine.”

“Oh. Okay. Good.”

“I just called to thank you again for last night. Charlotte said she thoroughly enjoyed herself, and she had nothing but praise for your teaching abilities and dancing prowess.”

Mike rubbed the back of his neck. “You’re welcome.” He glanced at the window. He could see his reflection grinning like a maniac. He turned away.

“We were both struck by your discussion of dance,” Al continued. “Neither of us had ever thought of it that way before.”

Mike nodded. “Most people don’t.”

“I suppose that’s one of the reasons it’s difficult for professionals to find the right partner.”

“Yeah. One of many.”

Al paused, and a strident voice spoke in the background. “Ah. Yes. Do you have any other questions about the services offered by Tate & Tate Private Investigations, sir?”

Mike blinked and the penny dropped. “Your boss came in, huh?”

“Certainly. We can assure you that our staff is most discreet.”

With a laugh, Mike stood. “Gotcha. See you tomorrow?”

“Yes, indeed. And thank you for calling Tate & Tate.”

Mike hung up with a snicker, which quickly died. Al’s boss—the Captain, and how pompous was that?—sounded like a real bear, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that Al’s abilities weren’t properly appreciated. He’d have to check out Tate & Tate Private Investigations soon. He walked down the hall to the studio. Tina raised both eyebrows as he passed her desk.

“You’re looking remarkably chipper after talking with Fiona,” she said. “I almost didn’t put her through, but she asked *very* nicely. What did she—What did she want?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” Mike shrugged. “I’m going to meet her for lunch on Monday.”

Tina tilted her head to one side and eyed him appraisingly. “You’re too smart to take her back, and she knows it. Watch your wallet, and let her pay for her own lunch.”

Mike grinned. “She asked me out, so she can pay for both of us.”

“Yeah, right.” The phone rang.

Tina added, “Crissy’s waiting for you,” and answered it.

Mike flapped his hand at her and hurried to the studio.

Chapter 6

“Okay, everybody swing!” Mike hit the play button and held out his hand to Abby, leading her onto the dance floor. He kept the steps and hand-holds simple, and looked around the room. Yeah. They were getting it.

Abby followed his gaze and grinned at him. “Your talk made a difference.” She panted a little. “Everyone seems more into the dance.”

“I don’t know if it was that.” He single-timed his steps so she could catch her breath. “But you guys are looking good.”

“Yeah. Even Al looks like he’s got a bend in his spine.” She winked at Mike, and he couldn’t hide his surprise.

“He’s loosening up,” Mike said, keeping his voice noncommittal.

Abby laughed. “I’m sure he is.”

Mike looked away, his cheeks burning.

“Don’t worry,” she murmured. “He’ll be looking for another partner soon.”

Mike blinked at her. Was his interest that obvious? “I don’t... Uh, it’s not...”

“Sorry.” Abby’s mouth twisted in a rueful grin. “I’m sticking my nose where it’s not wanted. It’s none of my business.”

“S’okay.” Mike forced a smile. “I think it’s time to change partners,” he continued, guiding her into a turn and bowing low.

“Mike, listen, I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.” Abby touched his arm.

“You didn’t.” Mike shifted his shoulders. That wasn’t exactly true. He was

uncomfortable with the whole situation: his attraction, Al's engagement, the times it felt as if he and Al wanted the same thing. But if anyone could understand how he felt about this mess, it was Abby. "It's just complicated."

She sighed and glanced at Rita. "Yeah. I understand."

"Right," he called. "Everyone change partners."

The rest of the class passed quickly, and when Al came up to him afterwards, Mike carefully didn't look in Abby's direction.

"I'd like to thank you again," Al began.

"Enough with the thanking," Mike interrupted. "No big deal."

"But it was much appreciated."

"Okay." Mike put away the last of the CDs and turned to face him. "Lemme change my shoes and I'll give you a ride."

They were silent as Mike pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward West Garfield.

"I was wondering..." Al said as they waited at a traffic light.

"Wondering what?"

"I never did have the opportunity to dance the polka. If you were planning on dancing at Stosh's some time in the near future, I'd be interested..." His voice trailed off.

The car behind them honked, and Mike blinked at the green light for a moment before stepping on the gas. "Really?" Mike cleared his throat. "I was thinking of going tomorrow. It'd be good if you wanted to be there."

"I look forward to it."

Mike hesitated. "Will Charlotte come with you?"

"No." Al's jaw tightened. "She has to work late tomorrow."

"Okay. You need a ride?"

"I work until six."

"That's fine. My last class finishes at five, so I can pick you up at work when you're done and we can swing by your place so you can change before we go. Sound good?"

Al turned to him with a broad smile. "Sounds very good."

Mike's world narrowed to two dark eyes. He wanted more than anything to be able to give in to the impulse to reach out, to draw Al near. He wanted to run his fingers across Al's lips and jaw and down the strong tendons of his throat. He wanted to tilt Al's head to the side and

lean forward. He wanted so much he couldn't have.

Taking a deep breath, he beat a quick tattoo on the steering wheel. "So, where's your office?"

Al stared at him blankly for a moment and gave his head a quick shake. "My office? Ah. It's not difficult to find."

*

Mike pulled up to the curb and examined the shabbily elegant brick house behind the wrought iron gate. Not what he was expecting at all. He checked the number on the brick wall that surrounded the place. Yep. This was it.

He got out of the car and walked up the path, his hands shoved in his pockets. Man, what a weird place. Creepy. He wouldn't want to work here, especially after dark.

The big oak doors were closed, and he checked his watch. Almost six. With a shrug he pushed them open and walked inside, squinting in the dim light. The foyer was enormous, panelled and gloomy, with a heavy, carved staircase along the right. A small reception desk stood against the left wall. An old guy peered out a doorway just beyond the desk. Mike craned his neck to meet his eyes.

"Good afternoon. Welcome to Tate & Tate," began the guy.

"Thank you for coming by, Mike." A familiar voice came from down the shadowed hall. Mike could just about make out a dark form.

"Al?"

Without waiting for an answer, he started down the hall.

Smiling, Al stood beside an open door. Mike grinned back, so damned glad to see Al that he couldn't help it.

"This is your office?" Mike peered around the small room. A desk and chair were squeezed into a corner, across from three large filing cabinets. Mackenzie was curled up as small as possible under the window. "Wow. There isn't enough room in here to swing a cat."

"Fortunately," said a crisp voice from behind them, "swinging a cat is not one of Alasdair's current duties."

They both whirled around and Mike stared into the eyes of a tall, big-boned woman in a severe black suit and no-nonsense shoes. Her expression suggested that both Al and Mike had

been rolling in shit.

“Ah. Captain, I’d like to introduce Mike Pulaski, my dance instructor.” Al sounded strangled, but he kept going. “Mike, this is Captain Hetty Tate, my superior.”

Mike stuck out his hand, surprised when she patted her short hair and gave a nervous laugh before taking his hand.

“Mike Pulaski?” Her eyes brightened. “Really?” She darted an unreadable look at Al. “You’re Alasdair’s dance instructor?”

“I sure am,” Mike replied, trying not to flinch as she clasped his hand in both of hers. “Al’s my star pupil.”

“Is that so?” Her voice dropped an octave and her nostrils quivered. “I saw you dance the rumba two years ago in Miami. It was breathtakingly sensual.”

Mike stared at her. When Al cleared his throat she jumped slightly, suddenly released his hand and stepped back.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Pulaski.” Before Mike could reply, she nodded briskly and disappeared down the hall.

Mike’s eyes slowly moved from the doorway to Al. He opened his mouth. “That’s your boss?”

Al nodded.

Taking a deep breath, Mike shook his head. Talk about strange. “Okay. You ready?”

“Mac?”

With a whuff and a groan, Mackenzie slowly rose and ambled past them.

They stopped by another small office and Al introduced the other Tate of Tate & Tate Private Investigations, who reminded Mike of a large, friendly puppy. A sixty-year-old puppy dressed like a mortician. He looked down at Mike, eyes pleading. “Oh, Mr. Pulaski, I—”

“Mike,” Mike interrupted. “Call me Mike.”

“Oh!” Tate’s face practically glowed. “Oh, thank you, Mike.” He rolled the name around on his tongue for a moment before nodding. “I saw you three years ago at the North American Championships, and I’ve always wanted to say how much I admire your dancing.”

Mike grinned, feeling more than a little sheepish. “Thanks. Well, Al, you ready?”

“Yes. Of course,” Al said.

Tate plunged on. “I did wonder how you managed that little glide and shuffle on the—”

“Mr. Tate,” Al said, gently but firmly.

Tate stepped back a pace. “Yes, of course, Alasdair.”

Mike put his hand on Al’s shoulder. “It’s okay.”

“Very well.” Al nodded. “Go ahead.”

It was as if someone had flipped a switch and turned him back on again. “During last year’s championship, you performed a waltz. It looked as if you added a quick glide and shuffle to the twinkle, but I couldn’t be sure.”

“I know the steps you mean, but they’re not quite as simple as they look.”

“Oh, of course not.” Tate looked shocked. “I would never suggest that.”

“Listen, Mr. Tate.” Mike paused. “You got a first name?”

Tate’s throat worked as he swallowed. “Lyle.”

“Okay. I don’t have time to show you the steps right now, but how about I come by some time soon and give you a lesson?”

Tate beamed at him. “That would be...” He took an enormous breath and smiled broadly. “Splendid.”

“Great.” Mike caught Al’s eye and jerked his head toward the door. “I’ll call and we can set up a time. It was good to meet you.” He turned to follow Al.

Tate’s heartfelt “Thank you!” floated after them as they left, Mac hard on their heels.

Mike waited until they were in the car before speaking. “So, that’s where you work.”

“Yes.”

He drove another block.

“Lyle’s kind of...” He paused and made a stirring motion with one hand, adding, “but he seems harmless.”

Al sighed. “Only to those who have never met him.” Mac moaned plaintively from the back seat.

They were stopped at a light before Mike continued. “The Captain’s pretty formal.”

“Indeed.”

Mike turned onto West Garfield. “You happy there?”

“Happy?” Al turned toward the passenger side window. “My work is interesting, on the whole, and I’m engaged to an intelligent woman. How could I be anything but?”

“Yeah. How could you?” Mike slowed in front of Al’s building, spotted a space up the

street and gunned the engine, just beating out an ancient green Gremlin sporting duct tape patches and a compound-grey right fender.

Al opened the door. "Do you want to come up? I'll only be a minute."

Mike leaned back and smiled smugly at the guy in the Gremlin. What a wuss! He even had a comb-over. "Nah. Mac'n I'll wait here. Right, Mac?" Mac rested his head on the back of Mike's seat, and Mike waited for the guy in the Gremlin to notice him.

Al gave Mike a level look, but the corners of his mouth twitched. "I'll be as fast as I can."

"No hurry," Mike called after him.

Mac turned toward the Gremlin and yawned hugely, displaying an impressive set of teeth.

"Good move!" Mike nodded, as the Gremlin took off down the street. "Al teach you that?"

Mac snorted.

Mike grinned. "Didn't think so." He sobered and met Mac's gaze, narrowing his eyes. "None of that around the girls tonight, right? It's 'nice doggie' the whole time. Got it?"

Mac's eyes locked with his for a moment, then suddenly a large, warm tongue slid across his cheek and lips.

"Guh!" Mike jerked back and rubbed his jacket sleeve over his face, sticky with saliva. "Ack! You damned dog!" He opened the door and spat on the pavement. "Why the hell'd you do that?"

He could've sworn he heard breathy laughter. Turning to glare at Mac, he saw Al coming down the steps of his building. Al moved quickly, his eagerness obvious, and for the first time Mike understood how someone could be said to grin from ear to ear. His complaint died in his throat.

Al slid into the front seat and turned an inquiring eye on Mike. "Is something the matter?"

"Nah." Mike stopped himself from rubbing his mouth again. "Stosh's is going to be a madhouse before the dancing starts. How do you feel about having leftover tuna casserole at my place first? It's my Mom's recipe, so it's edible." He glanced at Al. "You eat tuna, right? You and Mac?"

"Yes, thank you." A faint whuff came from the backseat.

“Stosh and Danuta’ll feed us again when we get there, and pretty much all evening, so it’s not like any of us will starve.”

“I didn’t have the slightest worry that either Mackenzie or I would starve. Although Mac would benefit from being placed on a rigorous schedule of diet and exercise—”

The rest of Al’s remarks were drowned out by Mac’s howls.

*

“Faster, Al! Faster!”

Mike glanced across the room and laughed. Even though her head didn’t even reach his shoulder, Mrs. Darlak had Al careening around the dance floor. She was screaming with laughter, and Al was smiling down at her.

God. A hot, sweaty, grinning Al. Mike licked his lips and tried not to get too distracted. Dancing with Lorraine Holomshuk wasn’t exactly a penance, but she kept twisting around so her hip brushed his, or her boobs pressed against his arm. Then she’d smile at him with her big, white teeth and give him a meaningful nudge, which he’d ignore. Nice girl, but not his type.

They finished up the polka with a shout, and Mike deposited Lorraine back with her brother, crossing the room to where Al was standing with Mrs. Darlak. She still had a deathgrip on his arm, so no wonder the poor guy hadn’t managed to slip away.

“Hey, Mrs. D.” Mike bent down to kiss her cheek. “I need to take Al out back so he can catch his second wind. Poor guy wore himself out keeping up with you.”

She returned Mike’s kiss with a pat on the cheek and released Al’s arm. “I just saw Shtepa Holomshuk open his accordion case, so if you’re going...”

Damn. Mike darted a glance back at the crowd. “Thanks for the warning. C’mon.” He grabbed Al’s shoulder and pushed him toward the back of the room.

“Mike?”

“Just go.” His eyes were glued to the back door. Ten feet to safety.

The accordion began to play and a large, heavy hand landed on Mike’s shoulder. He stopped and sighed.

“So, Casimir,” came the basso rumble. “You were trying to sneak out on us?”

“C’mon, Josef.” He drawled out the syllables, almost a whine. “Have a heart. I haven’t had a break since we got here, and I’m not as young—”

“Young?” Josef laughed heartily and shook his head. “What matters young? I am sixty-three years, Casimir, and I will dance like a man. Come.”

Al looked at him, clearly confused, and Mike ran his fingers through his damp hair. “Okay, okay.” He quirked a grin at Al. “You might want to get comfortable. This is going to take a while.”

“This?”

Mike turned and said over his shoulder. “Dancing. Like a man.” A sea of smiling faces parted before him.

He just hoped he had the strength not to embarrass himself.

Shtepa was standing at the corner of the dance floor, his fingers running nimbly over the keys of the accordion. Mike walked to the center of the floor as Josef plucked four other men from the audience.

When they joined him, grumbling and grinning shyly, Mike turned to Shtepa. “Start out slow, for God’s sake,” he said, then called out “*Hej, chłopcy, zrójeckiego!*”

Applause broke out as Shtepa laughed and swung into the rhythm of the *zrójnicki*, and Mike and the men began to circle the floor, following the beat. They called out encouragement to each other as they walked and turned, shaking out their arms and catching the grins of onlookers.

Mike looked around. Al leaned against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, watching with sparkling eyes. Heat raced through Mike, pooling in his gut and trickling down his arms and legs.

With another shout, he began the *galop*, the running step, and the men followed, Josef’s face split by a huge grin.

Then the dance took over. Mike jumped and slid and stamped his heels and the men followed his lead. He shook the sweat out of his eyes, kicked and turned, slapping his thighs and feet, clapping as the music dipped and swirled and sped up, note tripping after note in an unbroken river of sound.

They looped around the floor, opened into a line, then broke up into pairs, hands gripping each other’s upper arms as they circled, stamping and sliding. His muscles ached, sweat streamed down his back and sides, and his joints shook.

God, he was having fun.

Josef shouted and they broke apart, forming into pairs again, but this time each partner

faced in the opposite direction, hand on the other's shoulder. They squatted and kicked and turned before breaking apart again.

The floor filled up as more men joined them, some pushed reluctantly from the audience by laughing wives or girlfriends, some swaggering onto the floor, hands in pockets.

Grinning faces flew by as they stamped and turned, moving from partner to partner. Warm, familiar hands unexpectedly took his and he met Al's terrified gaze. Oh, God. Someone must've pushed Al out onto the floor, thinking that he knew what he was doing.

"Follow me." Mike grasped Al's hands and guided him in a tight circle, simplifying his steps. Al quickly caught the pattern and rhythm. He grinned at Mike, eyes bright with pleasure.

Time to finish up with a bang.

Mike released Al's hands and crossed his arms, then caught them again. He slid sideways, forcing their circle smaller and smaller, until their hands were the center point.

"Brace yourself." Mike tightened his grip and kicked his feet out. Al grunted but held him firmly as he whirled around before landing lightly and continuing the step. "Your turn." Bracing himself, he leaned backward and tensed his arms as Al kicked out. He didn't get the height Mike had, but it wasn't bad for a first attempt.

"Again." Mike kicked out and leapt higher, almost parallel to the floor. Momentum allowed him to hang there for what seemed like several seconds, while Al held him firmly.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mike could see the other dancers fall back into a large circle, clapping and stamping. Every time one of them kicked out, the audience shouted.

"Last one," he finally grunted, and when he landed, he released Al's hands and threw in a showy turn, kicked and came, at last, to a stop.

The noise was deafening as the audience shouted and clapped and stomped. Mike bowed, caught Al's hand and raised it, then bowed again. Grinning, he turned to Al and winked, then threw an arm over his shoulders.

"God, I need a drink."

His legs shook as they pushed their way through the mass of people toward the front room, the buffet and the bar. After a couple of heartbeats, Al wrapped an arm around Mike's waist and pressed him close.

Mike shivered, but only partly from exhaustion.

"Water," he gasped as they collapsed at a table. Danuta bustled up to them with two

brimming glasses.

“You boys.” She smiled.

Mike downed most of his in one gulp, only then realizing how sweaty he was. God, his shirt was soaked. Al must be soaked, too, after Mike had draped himself all over him.

“Hey. Sorry about the...” He plucked at his shirtfront, the damp fabric sticking to his chest.

Al shook his head. “There’s no need to apologize.” He took several gulps of water and carefully set down the glass. His face was damp and pink. “That was amazing. I’ve never seen anyone dance like that.”

“That’s because not many people are crazy enough to try.” Mike wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “You should see ‘em when they’re liquored up.” Al’s eyes widened and Mike grinned. “Don’t worry. Stosh won’t let anyone get too tanked tonight.”

Mike finished off the rest of his water and sighed, slumping back in his chair. His muscles were as limp as cooked noodles, and he didn’t even want to think about how his knees would feel in the morning. “That’s it for me. Sorry, but I’m going to have to sit out the rest of the evening.”

Al stared at the table for a minute, then raised his eyes. The corners of his mouth twitched. “That’s fine with me. Mrs. Darlak intimated she would ask me to dance again, and I’m not sure I’m strong enough for that.”

Mike laughed. “I know. She’s seventy if she’s a day and she can dance me under the table.”

“So,” said Danuta, returning. “You boys want something to eat?” Mackenzie followed her, yawning and licking his muzzle.

“Danuta, if I eat now, I’ll be sick,” Mike said. “Al?”

“No, thanks. I had too much earlier.”

“Not as much as Mac.” Mike sniggered and Mac gave a throaty moan, settling down on the floor beside him.

Al glared down at Mac. “I can smell the sausage on your breath from here.”

Mac snorted and closed his eyes.

“So.” Mike frowned and rubbed the Formica tabletop with his thumb. “We’re done dancing. You want to go home now?”

“No.” Al’s answer was immediate and definitive.

“Oh?”

“No. Unless...” He hesitated. “Unless you’d like to leave.”

“Nah. I’m good here.”

“Then so am I.”

Mike looked up and the skin down his arms prickled. Al was staring at him. Intent. Focused. As if he wanted to pin down Mike with the strength of his gaze.

And Mike would let him, in a heartbeat.

Then Al blinked and smiled, and Mike could let out the breath he was holding.

“So, what kinds of things do you do as a private investigator?”

Al hesitated long enough for Mike to wonder if Al was going to put him off like he usually did. Instead, Al nodded. “Although a private investigator doesn’t have the same scope in conducting investigations as a police detective, we’re still able to...”

Mike let the words wash over him, enjoying the chance to look at Al without being interrupted.

Until the front door flew open and a tall figure stood on the threshold.

They turned toward the door. Al jumped to his feet, Mac beside him.

“Vince?”

Mike looked at Al and the figure in the doorway. His contentment turned to ash.

“At fucking last.” The man in the door stepped inside and gave the room a quick once-over. His nose wrinkled. “Do you know how many places I’ve been, looking for you?”

“I’m sorry,” Al said. “Is there a problem?”

“You bet there is.” Bertini strode over to them, his long coat flaring as he moved, showing a glimpse of well-cut suit and pristine shirt. “There’s been another burglary, and Scott wants us there pronto.”

Al nodded. “Right.”

Mike got to his feet. Compared to Bertini, all cool and well-dressed, he must look a mess. Bertini stared at him for a second, his mouth compressed into a tight line. “Pulaski.” He nodded once. “Sorry to interrupt your evening, but Alasdair and I have a job to do.”

“I can see that.” He turned toward Al, wanting to stop him leaving, to keep him there, at his side. “Thanks for coming by.”

“Oh, no. Thank *you*,” Al managed, then Bertini had him by the arm and they were at the door. Al stopped and turned as Mac slipped outside. “I’ll call you tomorrow.” They were gone.

Mike sank back into his chair, his limbs as heavy as lead. Another burglary. Of course it would happen on the one night he and Al were really connecting.

Christ. What was he, some stupid teenager, mooning about love in the middle of a crisis? There was a burglary. Al had to go. It wasn’t like he had a choice.

Smacking his hands on the tabletop, Mike stood. Home. A shower. Bed.

He slipped out without anyone noticing.

*

“Mike.” The long, luxuriant moan made him chuckle around the hard dick filling his mouth. Close, so close. He pressed his arm across Jim’s quivering belly and pulled back slowly, letting the rigid flesh slide between his lips until it slipped out completely.

“Damn you, don’t leave me like this!”

He grinned and licked a stripe down the side of Jim’s dick, then nuzzled his balls, hot and tight. A fingertip pressed against Jim’s hole prompted another groan and an impatient wriggle. Oh, yeah, it wouldn’t take much.

Mike scrambled to his knees, one hand searching in the sheets—ah! He grabbed the tube, slicking up his dick as Jim rolled over and raised himself onto hands and knees. Jim wiggled his ass—such a perfect ass—and looked over his shoulder.

“Fuck me.”

Breathless, needy. Just what Mike wanted to hear, exactly the way he wanted to hear it.

He touched the tip of his dick against Jim’s hole. “Take it,” he ordered, not moving.

Jim groaned and dropped his head. Mike knew he loved doing it this way, pushing himself back onto Mike’s dick. And Mike loved watching Jim tremble and moan and open around him, loved the feeling of Jim’s body welcoming him inside.

Shit, not yet. Grabbing the base of his dick, Mike squeezed until the urge passed. He wanted to come inside Jim, not shoot his wad just thinking about it.

Slowly Jim pressed back, gripping Mike’s dick hard with that ever-widening ring of muscle, taking Mike’s dick inside inch by agonizing inch. Mike gritted his teeth, forcing himself to stay still, not to take control and shove the rest of the way into Jim’s hot, tight body. God, he

wanted to.

Jim paused, Mike's dick buried halfway inside, took a deep breath, and slammed back, taking it all in an instant.

Christ!

Any hope of going slow disappeared in a flash as Mike shuddered and grabbed Jim's hips, setting a grueling pace. Mike couldn't stop, couldn't even pause as he pushed deep, then withdrew almost completely, only to slide back again, accompanied by Jim's groans and curses and half-strangled words of encouragement.

Mike reached for Jim's stiff dick, stroking it once, twice, rewarded on the third time with a grunt as Jim climaxed, hips jerking, ass clenching around Mike's dick.

Oh, fuck.

Another handful of strokes and Mike joined him, holding tightly onto Jim's hips as he came hard. Panting, Mike collapsed onto Jim's back, wrapping his arms around Jim's waist as they both sank onto the mattress. They lay together for a few minutes, bodies thrumming, damp and sticky and still connected, until with a reluctant groan, Mike pulled free and rolled onto his back.

"You're going to kill me," he said, closing his eyes.

"Not if you kill me first." Jim patted his arm, then crawled out of bed.

Mike turned, propping his head on his arm, watching Jim collect his trousers and shirt from the floor. A familiar routine, although how the hell Jim could find the energy to move after all that, Mike would never know. They'd been lovers for over two months now, and Jim had never stayed all night. Maybe he was waiting for an invitation. Hell, Mike missed sleeping with someone. "You know, you can stay."

Jim paused, his trousers halfway up his thighs. "Thanks." He winked. "But I promised Charlotte I'd be back before midnight." Then Jim's face turned into Al's, smiling sweetly. "She can't get to sleep until I'm safe at home."

With a start, Mike sat upright in bed, panting, staring wildly around the dim, empty room. His sheets were wet, his crotch sticky.

He buried his face in his hands. Jim was two years gone. Mike hadn't seen him again after he'd dropped the bombshell that he was married.

But he didn't want Jim anymore. And he couldn't have Al. Even if Al had wanted him,

Mike couldn't ask one partner to betray another, wouldn't be the one who came between them.

Mike shifted to a dry spot and closed his eyes. Al's friendship was important to him, and if that was all he could have, he'd accept it and be grateful.

Maybe one day he'd actually believe it.

Chapter 7

“Yeah, Crystal’s doing well, Mrs. Sobieski.”

Mike smiled and started down the hall. If he didn’t make a dash for his office after the Young Champions class, he’d be cornered by gushing parents and wouldn’t get a chance to plow through some of the mounds of paperwork that kept appearing on his desk. Did Tina make some of it up just to keep him busy?

The phone rang, and Jennifer picked up the receiver.

“Mike?” she called. He glanced over his shoulder. “Line two.” She held up her fingers like a peace sign.

He waved an acknowledgement and made it around the corner before anyone else stopped him.

He grabbed a bottle of water from the small fridge in the corner and kicked off his shoes before sitting down and reaching for the phone.

“Pulaski.”

“Hello, Mike. This is Alasdair Lovat. I—”

“Alasdair?” Mike’s face heated, remembering his dream. He pressed the chilled bottle against his forehead. “That’s right. Bertini calls you Alasdair.”

“Yes, he does.”

“It suits you.” They were friends. Keep it that way.

Al was silent for a moment. “Thank you.”

Mike tapped his fingers on the desktop. “Sorry, Al. Alasdair. Hey, which do you like

best?” He grimaced. What an idiot. “Stupid question. You introduced yourself as Al. Duh.”

“Which do I like? It doesn’t matter, Mike,” Al blurted. “Whichever name you prefer is fine with me.”

Mike’s eyebrows lifted. “Nah, that’s not how it works. Remember who you’re talking to—I know what it’s like to be saddled with a name you hate.”

“My family calls me Alasdair, and I would rather...” His voice trailed off. “However, Charlotte prefers Al.”

“I didn’t ask what *she* prefers.” Mike shook his head. “Sorry.” The thing was, now that Mike thought about it, he seemed like more of an Alasdair than an Al. Of course, Mike could just be determined to like whatever Charlotte didn’t, including what to call Al. *Alasdair*.

“Don’t apologise. If pressed,” he replied slowly, “I suppose my preference would tend toward Alasdair.”

“Alasdair it is, then.” Mike leaned back in his chair and propped his feet up on the desk. “So, how’s the investigation going?”

Alasdair sighed. “It appears to be another in the series of jewelry robberies. The modus operandi is the same as the others, but unfortunately, we don’t have any new leads as of now.”

“Sorry to hear that. Must be pretty frustrating for you.”

“That could be considered an understatement. Vince is feeling a certain amount of pressure from the lieutenant to solve these cases quickly.”

“Yeah. I’d think so.” Mike chuckled silently. The idea of Bertini getting his ass roasted was satisfying. Still, Alasdair was working hard to solve the cases, and that thought sobered him. “Is the Captain still riding your butt? I mean—”

“I know what you mean.” Alasdair made a weird noise, then coughed. “Yes, she’s anxious for me to successfully represent the firm.”

Mike wasn’t sure if Alasdair was laughing or choking, but he wasn’t going to ask. “Hope you can get them solved soon.” Yeah, so Bertini wouldn’t keep horning in when they were together.

“Thanks.” Alasdair’s voice warmed. “And I also wanted to thank you for a delightful evening.”

“Oh, yeah. Deee-lightful. Feed you leftovers and then make you dance until you’re a grease spot on the floor.”

Alasdair laughed. Mike closed his eyes and let his head fall back. God. He was getting the shivers from a laugh—Alasdair’s laugh. The laugh of an engaged guy who was a friend. *Pulaski, you jerk.*

“I had a good time.” Alasdair paused, and Mike could hear him breathing. “The best time I’ve had in a long while.” The words came out in a rush.

Burning. His face was burning. His face? Hell, his body was burning. Mike swallowed. “Yeah?”

“Oh, yeah.” It was almost a growl, and the sound rumbled through Mike’s joints.

“Maybe we can...” Mike gulped, plunged ahead. “I dunno, get together later? Or tomorrow? Shoot some hoops? Go down to the lake?”

Silence.

“I’m sorry.” Alasdair sounded sincere. “I had to work this morning, and Charlotte is picking me up at the office in a few minutes. We have plans for tonight and tomorrow.”

Mike’s feet slipped off the desk and thudded on the floor. Might as well be his heart lying on the carpet. Charlotte. “Course you do. Charlotte’s off work, you’re off work. I wasn’t thinking.”

“I am sorry. Very sorry. If I could—” His voice cut off abruptly.

“Yeah, me, too.” Mike took a deep breath and rubbed his eyes. “See you on Tuesday?”

“Absolutely.”

“Thanks for calling, Alasdair.”

“Goodbye, Mike.”

He slowly placed the receiver in the cradle. His chest hurt, his eyes burned. Shit. *Back off, Mike. Back the fuck off.*

*

Mike was a few minutes early, but that was okay. He’d grab a table, look at the menu, play it cool. When Fiona walked in, he’d be like ice.

The place hadn’t changed at all. It called itself a deli, but you could get more than just sandwiches. They used to come here a lot when he couldn’t afford to take her to a nice restaurant, but he hadn’t been by in close to a year now.

He took a seat at one of the booths and looked at the menu. Though he could see the door

out of the corner of his eye, he pretended not to notice when Fiona walked in.

“Hello, Mike.” She gave him a tiny smile and slid onto the opposite bench.

“Hey.” He wondered if the ache that lodged beneath his breastbone whenever he saw her would ever go away. “You look good.”

Her hair was streaked, lighter than it used to be, and he could see the hint of a spiderweb of tiny wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, but she looked happy. Content.

They ordered and made small talk as they ate. Fiona chose chicken salad. She always chose chicken salad, and, like always, Mike stole the pickle from the corner of her plate. With a tentative smile, she put down her fork.

“I’m glad you came. I want to talk to you.”

The pastrami on rye turned leaden in his mouth. He chewed and swallowed, leaving the other half of the sandwich untouched.

“Yeah, you said. So, what do you want?”

“I was hoping...” She lowered her eyes and stared at her clasped hands on the table. “Ed and I didn’t do as well in Columbus as we’d hoped, and I think it’s our choreography. Don’t get me wrong, Ed’s a good dancer, but he doesn’t have a flare for choreography. And you know how bad I am at it.” Her mouth twisted into a rueful grin.

“You weren’t that bad.” Oh, God, please don’t let her go where it looked like she was going.

She shook her head. “I’m serious. I couldn’t choreograph a wedding march and you know it.”

“And what’s this got to do with me?”

She leaned forward. “I know you’re thinking of retiring soon. Would you consider choreographing our dances? You already know what I can do, and I’m sure you’re familiar enough with Ed’s abilities that it wouldn’t take you long to work up something good.”

Damn.

He pushed his plate away, his lunch churning in his stomach. “Don’t ask me that. You of all people should know how I’d feel about it.”

She rested her hand over his. Her fingers were warm. Weird. In all the time he’d known her, all the time they’d been together as partners, lovers and man-and-wife, Fiona’s fingers had never been warm.

“I know you’re the right man to do it.” She squeezed his limp hand. “You’re a great choreographer; that’s a fact. If you did our routines, Ed and I could...” Her face lit up. “We could have a real shot at Blackpool this year.”

He slid his hand out from under hers. “I don’t have time. Between the studio and my own stuff...” He shrugged. “It wouldn’t work.”

“It would. I know it would.”

“Does Simpson know about this?”

“Of course he does!” He stared at her steadily, and she dropped her gaze to the table. “Well, I haven’t actually said anything to him about it yet. I thought it would be better to approach you first, and when you said yes, then he’d be easier—That is, he’d see what a good idea it was.”

“It’s not a good idea.” He sighed and rubbed his forehead, which felt tender, as if he’d been banging it against a wall. Christ, he was exhausted. “It’s a lousy idea. Even if, and I mean *if*, I said yes, there’s no way in hell that Simpson would agree to it.”

Her lips curved into a smug smile. “If you said yes, I’d convince Ed.”

“Well, no sense in arguing. I can’t do it, and that’s that.”

Her smile vanished. “Won’t you even think about it and get back to me?”

“There’s nothing to think about. I can’t do it. End of story. Close the book, stick it back on the shelf.”

“But Mike!”

“That’s it.” She was as tenacious as a dog with a favorite bone. That was Fiona. Once she’d set her sights on something, she’d climb over any obstacle to get it. She’d done that to him, then Simpson. “I’m finished talking about it.” He slid out of the booth. “Bye.”

And he left.

On the street, he turned to the right and walked quickly down the block, then turned right again. It was entirely possible Fiona would follow him and continue to wheedle. He didn’t think he could take that right now.

After another three blocks he slowed, confident she wasn’t coming after him. He looked around, jostled by the lunchtime crowd, trying to figure out exactly where he was.

There was a coffee shop on the corner, the kind with little tables that lined the large plate-glass windows fronting the shop. Mike walked by, trying not to think about what Fiona had just

asked him, when a tumble of auburn hair caught his eye. He slowed, peering through the reflections.

She was sitting with her back to Mike, and the guy across from her was staring intently at her, buzz cut and goatee giving him a hard-bitten look.

Mike turned into the coffee shop and stood over by the display of oversized mugs and overpriced coffee. He glanced over the shelves and ducked his head.

Charlotte.

He glanced up again and stared. They were holding hands across the table. As he watched, mesmerized, the guy leaned forward and kissed her.

Not some dry, brotherly peck, but an open-mouthed, sloppy, lots of tongue, fuck-me-now kiss. And she was kissing him right back, her eyes closed, her body straining against the table edge.

He almost ran from the shop.

By the time he reached his car, his breathing was back to normal, and he was thinking hard.

Al. No, Alasdair. Shit. This would kill him. Mike knew exactly how he would feel: Stunned, betrayed, cut to the quick, devastated. Been there, done that. He pulled away from the curb and headed toward Tate & Tate's office. Three blocks away, he sat idling at a traffic light.

What the hell was he doing? How could he—he, of all people—tell Alasdair that his fiancée was playing tonsil hockey with some other guy? Why would Alasdair believe him?

He needed to get someone else involved. A disinterested party. Someone whom Alasdair would believe.

He knew exactly who to call—only the number was back in his desk at the studio.

With a sigh, Mike turned right and headed toward the studio. He hated to do this, but he didn't have another choice.

He just hoped Bertini wouldn't blow him off before he could finish his story.

*

“Let me get this straight. You're telling me that you saw Charlotte in a coffee shop making out with some guy who isn't Alasdair?” Bertini crossed his arms and leaned back against the trunk of his Torino. Mike wanted to smack the smug grin off his face, but since they were

standing in the parking lot of the Seventh District Police Station, he decided it wasn't a good idea.

"That's what I'm saying. I was going to tell Alasdair, but then I thought..." Mike looked down at the greasy pavement and shrugged.

"There's your problem. You thought."

"Damn it!" Mike took a step toward Bertini, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. "If Charlotte's screwing around on Alasdair, then he should know about it."

Bertini pushed away from the car and faced Mike. "And what do you want me to do? Tell him?" Bertini's upper lip lifted slightly. "'Cause you're too scared to?"

"You stu—" Mike bit off the rest of the word and took a deep breath. "You're his friend. You know him better than me."

"We've been partners for over two years now. You've known Alasdair, what, three, four weeks? You better believe I know him better than you."

"I know him well enough to know this'll really hurt him," Mike shot back, pleased when Bertini looked away. "I thought you might be interested in helping out and being a real friend. Guess I was wrong." He turned toward the Charger.

"Simmer down."

Mike glanced over his shoulder. Bertini's shoulders slumped, and he looked exhausted.

"Okay." Bertini raised his chin. "If what you saw is true, then, yeah, Alasdair needs to know about it."

"It's true. I saw them both clear as day."

Bertini shook his head. "Can't say I'm too surprised. Charlotte's a... different kind of girl. Never understood what Alasdair saw in her in the first place. She's pretty, but cold as a Chicago winter." He sighed.

"How long've they been engaged?"

"I dunno. Maybe five, six months?" Bertini's eyes narrowed as he stared off into the distance. "She showed up here last winter. February, I think. Hooked up with Alasdair, and they got engaged in... March? Something like that."

"That was fast." One month and they'd gotten engaged? He would've accused Bertini of lying, but it would be too easy to check. All Mike could say was that didn't sound like the Alasdair he knew.

“Not really. They’d known each other before. Up in Fairbanks.” The corners of Bertini’s mouth turned up, but there was no humor in his expression. “She’d worked in Alasdair’s Dad’s office. He was a judge—”

“Yeah, I knew that.”

Bertini’s look of surprise pissed him off. Why wouldn’t he know that? Did Bertini think he and Alasdair never talked? Or did Bertini think Mike didn’t care enough to ask about Alasdair’s life before he came to Chicago?

“Anyhow.” Bertini recovered quickly. “They’d dated, and things were getting serious, at least on Alasdair’s part. Then Alasdair picked up a guy for identity theft to the tune of a quarter of a million dollars, and it turned out he was Charlotte’s lover. They checked her out pretty closely, but couldn’t pin anything on her. Alasdair didn’t say much, but I think he took it hard.”

Well, *duh*! Could Bertini even see the nose on his face? But maybe he was playing down everything, just to protect Alasdair. Mike could understand that.

“Yeah, he would.” This was getting more complicated than one of his Mom’s soap operas.

Bertini looked as if his boxers were crawling up his ass, but he kept going. “After his Dad was shot, Alasdair came down here to try and clear his name. When we went back to Fairbanks, we heard that Farley—*Loverboy* to you and me—had escaped and Charlotte had gone with him.”

Mike stared. Bertini had to be kidding. “What the hell happened?”

“She *said* he had a gun and forced her to get in the car. They were driving out in the middle of nowhere and hit a moose. Farley got away, but she was pinned in the car for two days. Alasdair insisted on tracking them down, and he’s the one who rescued her.”

Pinned for two days after her lover left her stuck in a wrecked car? Charlotte must’ve thanked God when Alasdair found her. And no wonder Alasdair felt protective. “Was she hurt?”

“Yeah, her leg was smashed up pretty bad, and she was in the hospital and rehab for a long time.”

“They did a good job. She doesn’t even limp.”

“Alasdair made sure she had the best doctors available. Paid extra for them himself.” Bertini glanced at Mike. His eyes were troubled. “Before she went into surgery, she told Alasdair to get the hell out of her life. She must’ve changed her mind in the rehab center, because when she got out, she came looking for him.”

"I guess so. Sounds kind of strange, if you ask me."

"Me, too. But she said she didn't want him hanging around the hospital because he felt sorry for her. Once she was all healed up and walking again, that changed. She *said* she fell for Alasdair while they were dating, and only the thought of him kept her going while she was recovering." It was clear that Bertini put as much stock in Charlotte's word as Mike did, and wasn't that a fucking terrible thing to say about Alasdair's fiancée?

"Shit. That sounds like a bad romance novel."

Bertini snorted. "You read a lot of romance novels?"

"Fuck off," Mike said absently. He hesitated. "You think Alasdair feels the same way about her?"

Bertini wrinkled his nose and shrugged. "Never asked him. I guess he must, if he proposed." He turned to Mike, eyes solemn. "If you ask me, I don't think he likes her much, and she likes him even less."

"Then why don't they break off the engagement?" A tiny flicker of hope flared, warmed him.

"Good question. Guilt? Sex? Denial? Take your pick."

The reason didn't really matter, and that brought them back to his current problem. "So, are you going to tell him?"

Bertini shifted and ran his hand over the top of his head. "Yeah," he said slowly, "but give me a few days. Let me follow her at lunch and see if she meets up with the guy again. I'll bring a camera. That way we can confirm what you saw, and Alasdair will have to believe me." His eyes moved over Mike. "Believe *us*."

"I don't go in until two on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Can I help?"

"The whole point of me doing this is to get another witness." Bertini flicked a bit of fluff off his jacket sleeve. "You seeing her again isn't going to help."

"True." Mike shoved his hands into his pockets and hunched his shoulders. Maybe coming to Bertini was a mistake. Maybe he should have done this himself. No, Bertini was right. Alasdair could ignore Mike's story if it wasn't corroborated, but he'd have to believe two witnesses. "Okay. But you let me know what you find, right? And when you're going to tell him."

"What, you think Alasdair's going to fall apart when I tell him and you'll need to go in

and pick up the pieces?”

Mike met his eyes. “Maybe.”

“Listen. Thanks for the info. You did good on that.” Bertini sighed. “But you’re right. I’ve got to take it from here.”

Mike continued to hold his eyes until Bertini rubbed his forehead and turned away. “I’ll let you know when I tell him.”

“Thanks.” With a tight nod, Mike spun on his heel and left.

*

Mike looked out over the class, searching in vain for the one face he wanted to see. He glanced at his watch and struggled to hide his disappointment.

“Okay, people. It’s time to get started.” The buzz of conversation died. “We’re going to finish up swing tonight, and if we have time, we’ll start on the rumba.” He raised one eyebrow and leered at Crissy. “Also known as the dance of *loooooove*.”

The class laughed, and Mike started the review. The door banged, and Alasdair skidded into the studio.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” he panted, bending over, his hands gripping above his knees. “I missed the bus.”

Mike opened his mouth to ask if he’d run the whole way, then closed it. He’d find out later.

“That’s okay,” Mike said instead. “We’re just reviewing. When you catch your breath, you can partner with Ann.”

Crissy looked disappointed.

Mike kept an eye on Alasdair during the class. He looked even paler than usual, and dark smudges stained the skin under his eyes. There was none of the spring in his step or sparkle in his eyes Mike had come to expect.

What the hell had happened? Had Bertini told him without letting Mike know first? With a shake of his head, Mike banished those thoughts for the moment. He had a class to teach.

They finished up swing with twenty minutes to spare. Alasdair looked exhausted and leaned against the wall, his shoulders drooping. A prickle of concern moved through Mike’s chest.

“Good job, everyone,” he said. “Now let’s try something completely different: the rumba.” He turned to the CD player. “Crissy and I will show you what a rumba looks like. It’s different from any of the dances we’ve done so far. Watch the lady’s hips and legs, and you’ll see what I mean.”

He put on *Solamente Una Vez*, then turned to Crissy, holding out his hand. She took it and they moved onto the floor.

“Okay, this is a rumba box.” He led Crissy through the steps. “Not the same as the box step for the waltz.” He kept the steps simple, so the class could see what they were doing, and explained them as they went along.

Crissy made a final turn and bow, smiling as the class applauded. Mike stepped back and clapped along with the class. She was a good dancer—maybe someday she’d be a great one. Too bad she wasn’t the one he really wanted to dance with.

His eyes flickered over to Alasdair. He was watching them intently, arms crossed tightly over his chest, head lowered. Mike had seen that look before on his own face, when Fiona had started dancing with Simpson. Was it possible that Alasdair was even a little bit jealous? At that thought, a trickle of warmth ran down Mike’s spine and blossomed into heat. He turned away.

“The most important thing you need to learn to dance the rumba, or any Latin dance, is how to walk.”

Ian grunted.

Mike grinned. “Hey, I saw you watching Crissy. How did she walk?”

“I dunno.” Ian shrugged, trying to look bored.

“Yeah, you do. Let’s see it again, and that’ll help you break it down. Crissy?”

She walked across the studio in her normal stride, then turned and walked back using the walk from the rumba.

Ian frowned, but spoke up. “Her hips move more, and her legs... They look longer. It’s like they’re flowing instead of stepping.”

“Good.” Mike was pleased and more than a little surprised at Ian’s description. “What about her feet?”

“They were turned out more at the toes.”

“Yeah. Good job, man. Thanks.” He winked at Ian, who ducked his head but looked pleased. “Ian gave us a start, but let’s break it down even more. We call this a Cuban walk, or a

rumba walk. Some old timers call it a Kiki walk.”

They spent the last fifteen minutes practicing the walk. A few picked it up quickly, while the rest struggled to coordinate hips and feet. Alasdair was among the latter.

“Homework is to practice your walk,” Mike said at the end of the class. “Remember, keep your toes turned out, move those hips, and step forward without bringing your back foot off the ground until the very last second, then snap it forward.”

Mike was putting away the CDs when Alasdair came up to him, shrugging on his jacket.

“I apologize for being late and disrupting the class.”

“Don’t worry about it. What happened?”

Alasdair stifled a sigh. “Captain Tate asked me to finish some additional paperwork before I left, and I missed the bus.”

Damned woman. He really was going to have to help Alasdair grow a spine. “Couldn’t Charlotte drive you?”

“She’s working tonight.”

“She does that a lot.” The words came out harsher than Mike intended. Was she really working? Or was she sucking face with goatee guy?

“She enjoys her job, and it means a lot to her.” Alasdair’s voice was soft.

“Hang on a minute and I’ll take you home.”

“Thank you.”

They started toward the door. After two steps, Alasdair swayed and stumbled, his face pale as old milk. Mike grabbed his arm and steadied him.

“I’m sorry.” Alasdair closed his eyes and swayed again.

“What’s the matter?” Mike laid his fingers against Alasdair’s cheek. His skin was cold and clammy. Shit. “Sit down. Put your head between your knees.” Mike lowered Alasdair to the floor and pressed his shoulders forward. “Stay there. I’ll be right back.”

He ran to Tina’s desk, jerked open a drawer and pulled out a first aid kit. Scrabbling in the kit, he located a small paper packet and hurried back to the studio. Alasdair hadn’t moved.

“Okay, I’ve got you. Hang on.”

Tearing open the paper packet, he shook out two small capsules. He snapped one between his fingers and waved it under Alasdair’s nose.

With a yelp, Alasdair’s head flew up and his eyes bulged. “Good Lord!”

“Just smelling salts.” Mike dumped the empty capsule on the floor and squatted next to Alasdair. “You want to lie down for a bit?”

Alasdair shook his head. “No, I’ll be fine. I just—”

“You just almost went face first into the floor. *Not* fine.”

“It’s really nothing.”

“Are you getting sick? Want me to call Charlotte?”

“No.” Alasdair’s pale cheeks turned faintly pink. “I’m not ill. It’s just low blood sugar. I didn’t have time for lunch today, then I missed dinner. Coupled with the exertions of this evening, I overtaxed my strength.” He stared at his hands hanging between his knees.

Mike took a deep breath. He wanted, more than anything, to yell at Alasdair for being so stupid. How could he miss lunch and dinner, and expect to swing dance all evening?

“If it happens again,” he managed to say more or less calmly, “pick up something on your way in and eat it before you come to class. You can use my office if you want. It’s better for you to be late than to go forehead skiing.”

“You’re right, of course.” Alasdair sounded annoyed.

“Yeah. That happens occasionally.” Mike stood and held out his hand. “C’mon. I’ve got roast chicken and mashed potatoes at home. I can nuke ‘em in a minute.”

“That’s really not necessary.” Alasdair grabbed his hand and clambered to his feet.

Mike watched him sharply, but Alasdair’s color remained good and he seemed to be steadier on his feet. “My place is closer than yours. And what do you have in your fridge?”

Alasdair opened his mouth, hesitated, and closed it. “Thank you.”

Ten minutes later, Alasdair was sitting at his kitchen table with Mike loading up a plate with leftovers. He shoved it into the microwave, turned it on, and grabbed the carton of orange juice from the fridge. He poured a glass and set it in front of Alasdair.

“Drink. The sugar will help.”

Without a word, Alasdair drank.

When the microwave beeped, Mike put the plate in front of Alasdair and sat down across from him.

“So, this happen much?” he asked after Alasdair had demolished half the food and was slowing down.

“No. Today was more hectic than usual.”

Mike nodded. "Still working on the investigation with Bertini, right? As well as keeping the office running?"

Alasdair shoveled a forkful of mashed potatoes into his mouth and nodded.

"Peanut butter crackers." Mike grinned at Alasdair's confused look. "That's what I take to competitions, so I have something to snack on if I miss a meal."

"That's very foresightful."

"Maybe. But you try doing the Standard and Latin competitions in two days and see if you have time to grab more than a snack."

Alasdair finished up and stood. "Thank you." He took his plate to the sink and rinsed it. "I appreciate your forbearance and kindness."

With a chuckle, Mike rose and grabbed his coat. "Forbearance and kindness, my ass. I just didn't want to eat chicken again."

Alasdair smiled and followed him out to the car.

*

Mike pulled into a parking space half a block from Tate & Tate's office and checked his watch. Almost noon. He grabbed two paper bags from the front seat and hurried up the walkway.

"Mike!" Tate popped out of his office as Mike entered. "You're right on time."

Mike grinned and opened one of the bags. "Here you go. Bologna on white with mayo." He handed Tate the wrapped sandwich and suppressed a shudder. There was no accounting for taste, or what passed as such. "You want to take the Captain's sandwich to her?"

Tate glanced at the Captain's closed door. "She's in a meeting at the moment."

"Right. I'll leave it here, and you can give it to her when she's done. Okay?" Mike pulled out another sandwich and headed down the hall.

"Thanks, Mike."

Alasdair's door was open, and Mike paused, watching him neatly filling in a form. Alasdair raised his head and blinked in surprise.

"Mike?"

"Heya." Mike walked in and put the bags on Alasdair's desk.

Alasdair frowned. "I don't mean to sound rude, but what are you doing here?"

"I'm giving Lyle a dance lesson during his lunch break. He asked me to pick him up a

sandwich on the way, so I—”

“Mr. Tate asked you to bring him a sandwich?”

“Well.” Mike lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug. “I offered, so we could have the whole half-hour for his lesson. And since I was bringing him a sandwich, I picked up a few more. Save you and the Captain from having to go out.”

Alasdair gazed at him solemnly as Mike folded his arms over his chest and shifted his weight. It was close enough to the truth that Mike wasn’t going to quibble about a detail here or there. But somehow he thought Alasdair might.

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with my difficulties on Tuesday, would it?”

Mike looked out the window over Alasdair’s shoulder. “Nah.”

Alasdair glanced from Mike to the bags and back at Mike. His face split into a smile that made Mike’s already wobbly knees feel even weaker.

“Thank you. I was wondering if I’d have time for lunch today.” He stood and cleared a space on his desk. “Did you bring something for yourself?”

“Yeah. Thought I might as well.”

Alasdair nodded. “I’ll get you a chair and we can eat in here.”

While Alasdair was gone, Mike unpacked the sandwiches and napkins. Alasdair returned in a minute, holding a straight-backed wooden chair with a brocade seat.

“I didn’t know what you wanted, so I got turkey on whole wheat, pastrami on rye.” Mike frowned at the sandwich in his hand. “And roast beef and cheese on white.”

They split up the sandwiches and ate in comfortable silence for a few minutes. Mike was folding up his napkin, trying not to spill the crumbs, when voices came from the hall.

“Mr. Pulaski.” The Captain stood in the doorway. Mike and Alasdair scrambled to their feet. “I understand we have you to thank for our lunches.” She glanced at the sandwich in her hand. “That was very kind of you.”

“I hope you like yours. Tuna salad on whole wheat, right?”

“Yes.” Her eyes swept over the bags and napkins on Alasdair’s desk.

“I know work’s been busy for everyone,” Mike said. “Alasdair hasn’t been eating right—in fact, he almost took a header in class last week ‘cause he’d missed lunch and dinner. Not a good way to treat an employee, or a friend.”

“Ah.” The Captain closed her mouth, nodded, then turned on her heel and disappeared

down the hall.

Mike glanced at Alasdair and grinned. Mission accomplished.

Alasdair mirrored his amusement. "You didn't need to do that, Mike."

"I know." He shrugged. "Never waste an opportunity, my Mom always says. Seemed like a good time to remind her that people aren't robots and shouldn't be treated like they don't matter."

Alasdair's smile widened. "Did Mr. Tate tell you her preference?"

"Yeah." Mike chuckled. "But I wondered if he'd gotten it right."

"One can never be sure with him."

The sound of voices came from the hall again and Alasdair's smile disappeared. Mike turned back to the door.

Charlotte stood there, wearing a business suit and carrying a leather briefcase. Her eyes darted between them.

"Am I interrupting?" She raised one eyebrow.

"Not at all." Alasdair came around the desk and stood stiffly before her. "Mike is giving Mr. Tate a dance lesson in a few minutes. We were just finishing lunch."

"I see."

Alasdair's shoulders moved as if he had an itch in the center of his back. "I wasn't expecting you."

"Obviously not."

"But I'm glad you stopped by."

Charlotte suddenly smiled and stepped forward, resting her hand on Alasdair's chest. "I'm sorry." She looked up at him from beneath her lashes. "I didn't mean to be so abrupt. It's been a miserable morning and I was looking forward to spending time with you."

Mike blinked. Where the hell did that about face come from? He glanced at Alasdair, staring down at Charlotte. Alasdair lifted his hand and cupped it over hers, pressing it against his chest.

Sucking in a quick breath, Mike stepped back. Time for Lyle's lesson.

The Captain had given them permission to use an empty office for Tate's lesson, and Mike looked around the cavernous room.

"Hey, Lyle."

Tate started. “Yes, Mike?”

“Why are you and Alasdair stuck in those pokey offices when a place like this is collecting dust?”

“I’m not certain. I assume Hetty has something in mind for this room.”

Like lunch time dance lessons. Right. Still, one battle at a time. Mike shrugged. “Okay, let me break down the steps for you.”

Half an hour later, Mike watched Tate competently execute the steps. When he finished, he turned to Mike, beaming.

“Thank you, Mike. I’m looking forward to our next social event now. I believe that Giulietta—that is, my dance partner—will be suitably impressed.”

“Yeah.” So, Tate had a dance partner. The idea made him smile. “Most people can follow it as long as you don’t get too fancy.” He coughed, a dry tickle catching at the back of his throat. “Scuse me. Gotta get some water.”

Tate hovered. “The kitchen is just down the hall. I can bring you a glass if you like.”

Mike waved him away, trying unsuccessfully to suppress his cough. “I got it.”

He hurried down the hall and turned into an open doorway. Dark, wooden cupboards lined the walls, and there was a large stainless steel range, sink, and an even larger refrigerator. Mike turned toward the sink and froze.

Charlotte was perched on a chair, reaching into the top shelf of a cupboard full of stacked mixing bowls. She yelped and spun around, almost toppling off the chair.

“Sorry,” Mike croaked. He grabbed a glass sitting on the counter and filled it from the tap.

Charlotte clambered off the chair, her face pale. She shut the cupboard with a thud and curled her lips in what would never pass as a smile.

“You startled me.” She pushed her hair off her forehead as she crossed to where Mike stood, finishing the water. “What’s the matter? Did you get something caught in your throat?” She took his arm and began to walk toward the door.

“Yeah. Just a tickle.” Her fingernails bit into his biceps. “What were you—”

“How did your lesson with Mr. Tate go?” she asked at the same time, looking up at him.

“Good.” Mike nodded, looking down the hall to where Tate disappeared into his office. “He’s a natural. Picks things up very quickly.”

She laughed. “Unlike Al. Even with your lessons, he still dances like he has two left feet.”

Mike’s hand itched to smack her, but he just shrugged and stepped away, breaking her hold. “Really? Guess he just needs the right partner.” He made a show of looking at the clock. “Well, I’ve gotta run.” He popped his head into Alasdair’s office. “Bye, Alasdair.”

“Goodbye, Mike.” Alasdair smiled at him. “I’ll see you this evening.”

“Yeah. Don’t forget to eat first.” Mike winked and pushed past Charlotte, ignoring her. He stopped at Tate’s door. “Bye, Lyle. Remember, do the brush first, then the turn.”

“Right you are, Mike. Thank you again.”

Chapter 8

“Bertini.” Even through the phone line he sounded harried.

Mike parked his hip on the edge of the desk and jiggled his leg. “Hey. It’s Pulaski.”

Bertini sighed. “What do you want?”

Mike mimed kicking something, preferably Bertini’s head. “Have you discovered anything about Charlotte yet?”

“Not yet. Tuesday and Wednesday she must’ve eaten at work. Today she went to Alasdair’s office.”

“Yeah, I was there.”

“I told you I would handle—”

“Can it. I promised to show Lyle some steps.”

Bertini laughed. “Oh, I bet that was precious. Did he hold your hand and look deep into your eyes?”

“Get stuffed,” Mike said without heat. “He’s interested in someone named Giulietta.”

“He *what!*”

Mike held the phone away from his ear. “I think that was her name.”

“Why that—” Bertini growled.

“Is there a problem with him liking a Giulietta?”

“You better believe it,” Bertini said. “She’s my aunt.”

“Oh.” Mike thought for a moment. “Well, Lyle’s kind of odd at times, but he seems like a good guy.”

“We are not talking about this. Not. One. *Word.*”

Mike grinned. This could be fun, but right now he had other stuff to think about. “Okay. I could be wrong, so before you go beat him up, check it out first.”

“You got something important to say? ‘Cause I’m busy here.”

“Charlotte drives a Lexus, right?”

“Yeah. What’s that got to do with—”

“I just wondered what her job is. It’s got to pay pretty well for her to buy such an expensive car.”

“She works in a lawyer’s office downtown. Ashburn and Peabody.”

Huh. That made sense. After all, a lawyer’s office was probably not that different from a judge’s. “So what does she do?”

“Typing, filing, secretarial stuff.” Bertini sounded thoughtful. “They must pay pretty well, because she’s got a nice apartment as well as the car.”

“Her clothes look expensive, too.”

“Oh, into fashion, are we?”

“Give me a break. I was married long enough to recognize quality clothes.” He hesitated. “Maybe Alasdair helps her out.”

“On his salary? He’s still paying her medical bills.” Bertini snorted. “It’s more likely she got an inheritance from some dead relative. Not that she’d used it to pay back Alasdair—or that he’d let her.”

“Yeah.” Mike stared at the wall. “Yeah, maybe.”

“What are you thinking?”

“Did they ever find the money from her boyfriend’s identity theft scam?”

“Trying for your private investigator’s license?” Bertini laughed. “You can dump that thought. All the money was accounted for. Listen, I’d love to shoot the shit all day, but I’ve got a job to do.”

“Remember to call me before you tell Alasdair, okay?”

“Give me your number again.”

He rattled off his home and work numbers. “Later.”

“Not late enough,” muttered Bertini.

Mike slammed the receiver back into the cradle.

Mike took a deep breath, grabbed hold of his patience by the throat, and nodded. “Let’s try this again. Remember, the rumba uses a slow-quick-quick pattern that starts on four.” He cued up the music, *Adios Amor* this time, and held out his hand to Crissy. “One, two, three, slow, quick, quick, slow, quick, quick.” He led her out onto the dance floor with a simple Cuban walk and moved into a box step. The class followed—more or less—and Mike clamped his jaw shut to avoid yelling at Howard when he got a beat behind.

“Are you all right?” Crissy whispered, her brows drawn together.

“Yeah. Just peachy.”

“Sure, and I’m a linebacker for the Bears. I’ve never seen you so cranky.”

“I’m not cranky. I’m never cranky.” He turned his head and glared. “Howard, you’re supposed to lead your partner, not drag her around like a caveman.”

Crissy shook her head. “Not cranky, my ass.”

Mike took another deep breath. “Okay. So I’m a little on edge.”

“A little? Earth to Mike. Try it without the ‘little.’” She gave his fingers a squeeze.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing I can do anything about.” He brushed a kiss over her knuckles. Alasdair was going to have his heart ripped out when Bertini got the evidence that Charlotte was betraying him, and there wasn’t a fucking thing he could do about it. His eyes strayed to where Alasdair was dancing with Rita.

Her eyes followed his, and her expression softened. “Oh, man. Is that the problem?”

Mike’s mouth twisted. “I seem to have a thing for guys who’re already involved.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. You didn’t know about Jim, and Al...” Her expression was both wistful and yearning. “It’s easy to fall for him.”

“Don’t I know it.”

He managed a smile. Crissy was a good kid, like the little sister he’d never had. She’d helped pull him out of the hole after his divorce and Jim’s revelation, and deserved better than having to put up with his sour, cranky-ass mood. She deserved someone like Alasdair for herself.

“Let me go help Howard,” she said, patting him once on the shoulder.

“Thanks.” He scooped up Dana and she relaxed into his arms. What was wrong with him? All he could think about was Alasdair and Bertini, and how Alasdair would react to the

news. He just hoped Bertini would find something soon, otherwise Mike wouldn't be responsible for his students' safety—or Bertini's.

The class seemed to drag on forever. Mike had to force himself not to look at the clock every two minutes, but eventually the class finished, and Mike couldn't wait until everyone left. Everyone except Alasdair, that is.

"Mike?" Alasdair's brow was furrowed. "Are you okay?"

He coughed to cover his surprise. It was one thing for Crissy to pick up on his anxiety, but Alasdair? Had he been that obvious? "I'm fine."

"You seem... Well, distracted and rather less patient than usual."

He was so busted. And by the one person he didn't want to notice.

"Sorry," Mike mumbled. "Just got some stuff on my mind."

"I see." Alasdair hesitated. "I can easily take the bus if you'd rather—"

"No!" Mike dredged up a smile. "Driving's good. Gets me out of my head."

"If you're certain."

"Absolutely. Let me get my coat."

Alasdair was buckling himself into the car when he cleared his throat. "Would you like to discuss what's bothering you?"

"No! Um. Thanks." Mike put on his glasses and stared out the windshield. "It's not the kind of thing I can discuss."

"If you change your mind—"

"You'll be the first to know." Mike grimaced as he backed the car out of the parking space. "I mean, you—I—Uh."

Shut the fuck up, Pulaski.

Oh, great. Now the voice in his head sounded like Bertini.

"The Captain and Mr. Tate asked me to thank you again for providing lunch today."

"Like I said, my pleasure." He relaxed in the seat, hands resting on the steering wheel. Yeah. Driving was good.

"I wondered..." Alasdair's voice faded, and when Mike glanced over at him, he was staring out the side window.

"What?"

"I wondered if you'd like to join me for dinner tomorrow after work," Alasdair said all in

a rush, still facing the side window. “My treat. To repay you for the sandwiches today and dinner on Tuesday, as well as last Friday.”

Heat blazed through his face, consumed his whole body. “That’d be great.” At least his voice sounded relatively normal. “So, is Charlotte coming, too?”

Alasdair turned and gave him a startled look. “No. She’ll be working. Would you prefer her to join us?”

“No, no, that’s okay.” Having Alasdair all to himself for an evening? You better believe it was okay. “I’m free at six. Want me to stop by your office or meet you at your place?”

“Meeting at the office would create fewer complications, if it’s not too inconvenient.” Alasdair rewarded him with a smile that made his toes curl; he just managed not to reach down and adjust himself. The discomfort was a small price to pay for that look on Alasdair’s face.

“Wouldn’t have offered if it was inconvenient.”

“Very well. I’ll expect you by half-past six?”

“Unless traffic’s a bear.”

Mike pulled up in front of Alasdair’s apartment building and glanced around. No Lexus. Good.

“Goodnight, Mike.” Alasdair slid out of the car.

“Night. See you tomorrow.”

Leaning back in the car, Alasdair smiled again. “I’m looking forward to it.”

He was almost home before he realized he was humming. *Jerk*. He pulled down the corners of his mouth. By the time he parked, they were creeping up again. Aw, hell! If he wanted to smile because Alasdair had invited him out to dinner, then, dammit, he’d smile.

The answering machine light was blinking when he walked into his apartment. Mike punched the play button and shrugged off his jacket.

“Pulaski, this is Bertini.” His voice was raspy.

Mike froze, staring at the machine.

“You were right. Only this time it was dinner and necking in public while Alasdair was at class. I got the photos. I’m gonna download them and get them printed tomorrow. I’ll tell Alasdair tomorrow night. Just so you know.”

The machine beeped and Mike stumbled over to the couch and collapsed. He swallowed the bile that suddenly soured the back of his throat and leaned forward, his head in his hands.

This was going to kill Alasdair.

*

Mike pushed open the heavy door of Tate & Tate's office and walked into the dim lobby.

"Mike!" Tate popped out of his office and smiled broadly. "It's good to see you."

"Thanks, Lyle." Mike glanced down the hall. "Alasdair's expecting me."

"Indeed he is." Tate's smile disappeared. "But he's not here at the moment, and he gave me a message..." He shuffled through the papers covering the small reception desk near his office door.

"Where'd he go?" Mike walked over to him.

"I'm not exactly sure, but Detective Bertini arrived shortly before noon and mentioned a robbery. He and Alasdair left immediately, but not before Alasdair wrote you a—"

"A message." Mike scanned the paper-strewn desk. A small envelope labeled 'Mike' rested under a paperweight in the upper corner. "Is this it?" He pulled it out and held it up.

"Ah, yes. I remember Alasdair mentioning putting it there so it wouldn't get lost." Tate began to straighten the drift of papers.

Mike nodded and tore open the envelope.

Dear Mike,

Vince has brought news of another robbery, and the preliminary report indicates similarities to the others. We are leaving to conduct our investigation now, but I'll try to return to the office by the time you arrive. If I'm late, please make yourself at home.

If this is not convenient, perhaps we can postpone our dinner until next week. I would be very sorry to cancel it completely.

Very truly yours,

Alasdair Lovat

Mike wadded the note and tossed it into the wastebasket beside the desk. His shoulders slumped. Damn. Just what they needed—another robbery. And Alasdair had been with Bertini all afternoon. He rubbed his forehead. Bertini probably blurted the news out as soon as they left the office. Jesus. He could imagine Alasdair's pain.

“Mike?”

Mike blinked and looked at Tate. “What?”

“Is there a problem?” Tate stood beside a small reception desk, his face drawn and his shoulders bowed. He looked exhausted. He caught Mike’s eye, straightened his shoulders and adjusted his tie.

“Nope, no problem. Look, it’s late.” Mike squinted at the clock. A quarter to seven.

“Aren’t you supposed to be off by now?”

“Well, technically, yes. However, when Alasdair asked me to wait for you, I was very pleased to agree.”

“Why don’t you go home?” Mike winked. “I’ll hold the fort until he arrives.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that!”

“Course you could. It’s easy. You say ‘goodbye, Mike,’ and walk out the door.” Mike put a hand on Tate’s back and gave a little push. “I’ll make sure nobody steals anything.”

“But what would—”

The front door opened.

“Alasdair!”

“Mike, Mr. Tate.” Alasdair walked into the room, followed by Mac. “I apologize for—”

“Don’t you dare, Alasdair.” Mike hid his worry behind a glare. Alasdair’s black suit was rumpled, his tie hanging loose, but he looked okay. Not particularly upset or anything. Did that mean Bertini hadn’t told him about Charlotte?

“Is that a double dog dare, Pulaski?” Bertini walked in, grinning.

“Nah, triple.” Mike turned back to Tate. “You delivered the message. Why don’t you get going?”

“Alasdair?” Tate looked at Alasdair, who smiled.

“Thank you for waiting.”

“It was my very great pleasure.” Tate nodded to them. “Detective Bertini. Mike.”

“See you, Lyle.” Mike glanced at Bertini as he closed the door behind Tate. Bertini shook his head once.

He hadn’t told Alasdair yet.

Mike didn’t know whether to laugh or slam his fist into the wall.

“Thanks for the ride back, Vince,” Alasdair said. “You didn’t need to come in, however. I

know you'd like to get home."

"In a minute." Bertini's gaze slid over to Mike. "I've got something to tell you first."

"Oh?" Alasdair glanced from Bertini to Mike and back again. "Is it private? I'm sure Mike would—"

"No, he can stay." Bertini brushed lint from the sleeve of his coat and leaned against the front door. "He's involved in it, too."

A crease appeared between Alasdair's brows and he nodded. "Very well."

"The thing is, we didn't go looking for this." Bertini ran a hand over his hair and kept his gaze on the floor. "We found out by accident. Once we'd found out, we decided... actually, I decided, because we've been friends a lot longer than—"

"Vince?" Alasdair's voice was soft. Bertini continued to stare at the floor.

"Yeah?"

"What is it?"

Bertini took a deep breath and lifted his head, meeting Alasdair's eyes straight on. God, the guy really had some balls. "Charlotte's cheating on you, Alasdair."

Alasdair pressed his lips together, glanced at Bertini, blinked at Mike, then appeared to focus on a spot on the paneling. "I don't believe I heard you correctly."

"I think you did," Bertini said gently.

Alasdair froze slowly, bit by bit. Mike could practically see the icicles growing from his chin and nose, straightening his spine and stiffening his shoulders. Alasdair opened his mouth and twisted his neck with a sharp crack. Mike jumped.

"Why would you say such a thing?" Alasdair's voice was very quiet and his eyes never left Bertini.

"Believe me, I didn't want to."

"I know you've never approved of my relationship with Charlotte. You've never fully accepted our engagement. But I don't understand why you would say something so—"

"He has proof, Alasdair." Mike flinched as Alasdair turned to him, eyes cold, cold, cold.

Damn, it hurt like a gut punch when Alasdair looked at him as if he was a stranger, but it hurt more knowing the shock and pain Alasdair was going through. He'd been through it himself with Fiona and Simpson, and understood Alasdair's knee-jerk reaction. Deny it and it wasn't true.

“Proof?”

Mike nodded, forcing himself to meet Alasdair’s gaze. “Proof. Photos.”

“Indeed?” Alasdair raised an eyebrow and Bertini pulled a packet of photos from his coat pocket. He offered them to Alasdair, who lifted his chin and put his hands behind his back. Bertini’s hand fell and he glanced at Mike.

“Yeah.” Mike leaned against the desk and tilted his head, eyes flickering over Alasdair, looking for cracks in the ice. “Because we didn’t want to tell you without having some proof.”

Alasdair stared at him, silent and grave. Waiting.

Mike crossed his arms over his chest. He felt as if he was trying to hold something inside. Something so big and painful, it would split him in two if it got out. “I saw them first. By accident, when I was out for lunch.”

Alasdair crossed his arms, too, hands tightly clasping his upper arms, fingers pale against the stark black of his suit. “Why didn’t you tell me?” His voice caught. Crack number one.

“I—” Mike looked at his shoes. “I thought maybe I was wrong. I hoped I was wrong.”

“So he asked me to check it out.” Bertini sighed. “I’m sorry, Alasdair.”

“Sorry?” Alasdair squeezed his eyes shut. Mike winced. Crack two. “You tell me that—that my—” Alasdair bowed his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. His shoulders heaved. Mike could practically see the ice shattering.

“You want to go home?” Mike pushed away from the desk. He rested a hand on Alasdair’s shoulder, which trembled beneath Mike’s fingers.

Bertini caught Mike’s eye and lifted his eyebrows, his meaning clear. Go or stay? Mike nodded and jerked his head toward the door.

Go.

“I think—” Alasdair cleared his throat. Mike let his hand fall to his side. Alasdair looked okay, if a little pale. “I think I’d like dinner.”

Okay. If Alasdair wanted dinner, he could do that.

And later, if Alasdair needed him to stick around, he could do that, too. Of course he felt terrible about Alasdair’s pain, but even that knowledge couldn’t outweigh the pleasure of Alasdair’s company.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” Bertini’s brows were drawn together. “You’ll be okay?”

“Yes, Vince. Thanks. I think I need to...” He turned abruptly and walked back to his

office.

Mike watched him until he disappeared through his office door.

“You did good,” he said to Bertini.

Bertini shrugged. “There’s nothing good about this. But thanks.” He handed the photos to Mike. “I’ll be home tonight. Call if you need me.” He pulled a card from his coat pocket and scribbled a number on the back.

“It’s going to be rough for a while.” Mike slipped the card into his back pocket.

“He’s taking it better than I expected.”

Mike shook his head. He knew this, knew how it felt to have that much pain dammed inside, waiting to burst free. God, if he could only *do* something to help, wave a magic wand, take away Alasdair’s hurt.

“It’s shock. Denial. Give him a little time, and everything will come crashing down. I know. I’ve been there.”

“Yeah?” Bertini sounded sympathetic.

“Yeah.” Mike rubbed the back of his neck. “Only we’d been married for a long time, and I was the one who discovered them together.”

“Ouch.” Bertini winced, then checked his watch. “I’m going to head out now, or Ivy will start to worry.” He turned and opened the door. “Oh, and Pulaski?”

“What?”

“Thanks for helping out.”

Mike flapped a hand as he left and started back to Alasdair’s office, but Alasdair was coming down the hall toward him. His eyes were a little red, but he seemed pretty calm. Mike wasn’t fooled. Would Alasdair really let him stick around, offer some comfort, or would he make some excuse to be alone?

“Where would you like to go for dinner, Mike?”

Good. He wasn’t being kicked out. Yet.

“Uh-uh. I picked the last couple of times. Your turn.”

“I know an excellent Chinese restaurant nearby.”

“Great. You can give me directions in the car. Mac, you stay here. We’ll bring you leftovers.”

Chapter 9

Mike poked at the stir-fried chicken on his plate with his fork. Tasty, but he wasn't hungry. And from the way Alasdair was playing with his dinner, he obviously felt the same.

With a sigh, Alasdair set down his chopsticks and pushed away his plate, folding his hands. "I'm sorry not to be better company tonight."

"It's a lot to take in."

"I still—" Alasdair rubbed his forehead. "I can't believe it."

"It's not something easy to take in." Mike shifted and felt the photos in his pocket.

"Bertini gave me the pictures."

"What do they show?"

"I haven't seen them." Mike pulled out the packet.

Alasdair squeezed his eyes shut for a second and held out his hand. Mike put the photos on the table and pushed them over.

Setting his jaw, Alasdair looked at the first photo. He flinched as if he'd been struck.

Shit. Must be bad.

Hands trembling, Alasdair shuffled through the photos. His eyebrows inched up and his jaw slackened as picture after picture flipped by.

Mike pushed his plate to one side and leaned forward. "Alasdair?"

Startled eyes met his. "My God, Mike. It's him."

"Who him?"

"Him!" Alasdair jabbed the photos with his forefinger. "Is this the man you saw with Charlotte?" He shoved the pile of photos across the table.

Mike picked up the top one and squinted at it. "Yeah."

Alasdair dropped back against the seat with a thud. "That's him. Farley. Charlotte's former boyfriend. The one who escaped after—"

"I know about the identity theft, and the crash. Bertini told me." Mike spoke to the plates of cold food.

"He told you?"

"After I saw them together I talked to Bertini. I didn't know what else to do. He told me then." Mike tried to swallow, but there was no moisture in his mouth. He took a quick gulp of water.

"Farley must have discovered where she went," Alasdair murmured, half to himself. "He followed her here, and she, of course, would try to discourage him from continuing their relationship."

How could he make excuses for her? Mike picked up a picture and showed it to Alasdair. "Does this look like she's discouraging him?"

Alasdair's gaze fell and the tips of his ears turned scarlet. "But why?" he said, his voice cracking.

"I don't know." *Way to go, Pulaski. Kick a guy when he's down.* Mike sighed. "But we've got to tell Bertini so he can pick this guy up."

"Of course." Alasdair hesitated. "But I don't understand *why* she would meet him. She told me she was frightened of him."

"If she was that frightened," he snapped, "why didn't she tell you he was in town so Bertini could get him off the street?"

"Perhaps he has some hold over her." Alasdair sounded hopeful.

"Perhaps they're working together."

"No." Alasdair shook his head. "*No.*"

Mike looked at him for a long moment. He hated doing this, hated rubbing Alasdair's nose in the evidence, but someone had to open Alasdair's eyes to the truth. Would Alasdair end up hating *him* for being the messenger?

"Where does she get her money from?"

"Charlotte works very hard. She's often in the office evenings and weekends."

"Bertini says she has a nice apartment. Her clothes aren't cheap, and a Lexus is a pricey

car.” Mike took a deep breath. There was no good way to say this, no way to get it out without hurting Alasdair. “Maybe her old boyfriend has been helping out.”

Alasdair’s face crumpled for an instant. He rubbed his hand over his eyes and squared his shoulders. “This is all speculation, Mike. She’s done nothing suspicious.”

“Except fool around behind your back.”

Alasdair’s head snapped back as if Mike had punched him.

“I’m sorry!” Mike ran his fingers through his hair and propped his elbows on the table. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to say that.”

“Then what did you mean to say?” Alasdair glared.

Mike relaxed. Good. Anger he could deal with.

“Listen, Alasdair. If all this turns out to be nothing except a giant fuck-up on my part, I’ll apologize to you, to Charlotte, to anyone you want me to and I’ll pay for the biggest and best bachelor party Chicago’s ever seen. But you’ve got to look at it from my point of view. I find my best friend’s fiancée making out with another guy, who turns out to be her old boyfriend as well as a thief, but she doesn’t make a move to turn him in. This fiancée works as a secretary—”

“Administrative officer.”

“What?”

“Her title is administrative officer.” Alasdair’s eyebrows were drawn together, as if he was puzzled, but he didn’t continue.

“Okay. She works as an administrative officer for—What was the name of the place?”

“Ashburn and Peabody.” Alasdair looked blankly at Mike. “Oh, good Lord.”

“What?” Alasdair continued to stare at him, slack-jawed. “*What?*”

“Mike, there *is* a connection between all the jewelry robberies: Ashburn and Peabody.” His eyes lit up. “We knew all the victims used their legal services for estate planning and such, but at least two of the victims had visited the offices right before they were robbed.”

“So, you think maybe the thief overheard...” Mike shrugged. “What? That they had taken jewelry out of the safe?”

“Possibly that they were going to a society event and would wear the jewelry, knowing it would not be placed back into a secure environment for the remainder of the night.”

“Yeah, okay,” Mike said. “I can buy that. So tomorrow you and Bertini will ask the others about when they were at the lawyers’ office?”

“Tomorrow? We must—” Alasdair frowned at the clock on the wall. “It will have to be tomorrow. Unfortunately, it’s too late tonight.”

Mike waited. *Damn*. Alasdair still didn’t get it.

“And if they all were there just before the robbery, who’s your main suspect?” Mike said softly.

“No,” Alasdair whispered, raising his hands, pushing the idea, pushing *Mike* away. “She wouldn’t.”

“Maybe not, but she’s hiding something from you, and you need to find out what it is.” Mike slumped back, suddenly exhausted. “She was doing something in the kitchen on Thursday. She jumped like a scalded cat when I walked in—I thought she was going to take a dive right off the chair.”

“The chair?”

“She was standing on a chair, reaching up into a cupboard. I must’ve startled her pretty bad, because she wobbled like crazy—”

“A cupboard? Why would she...” Alasdair closed his eyes and his lips moved. “Mike.” He opened his eyes. “I’m sorry to be such an appalling host, but I really need to return to the office.”

Mike’s stomach clenched. “You’re going to check out the cupboard?”

“I think I must.” Alasdair rose and handed the waiter a couple of bills from his wallet.

Mike grabbed the photos and slid out of his seat. “I’m coming with you.”

They were silent as Mike negotiated the busy streets. Some event was going on down the block, and he had to park around the corner from the office, muttering under his breath about buildings that didn’t have parking lots or even a driveway. Alasdair unlocked the door and they slipped inside.

Mac met them at the door, sniffing at their empty hands. He whuffed and trotted off to Alasdair’s office, tail high.

“He’s upset because we didn’t remember to bring him leftovers.” Alasdair slipped off his coat and threw it across the reception desk, and Mike dumped the photos next to it.

They walked to the kitchen, blinking when Alasdair turned on the lights.

“Which cupboard was she standing at?”

“That one.” Mike dragged a chair over to the cabinet and scrambled up. He opened the

door and reached inside, feeling around carefully. His fingers touched something cool nestled in one of the mixing bowls, and the bottom dropped out of his stomach.

“Alasdair?” He pulled back his hand, filled with glittering diamonds, loops and swirls tangled into one shining mass. Light refracted from the faceted surfaces, a breathtaking multihued rainbow that shimmered and sparkled.

“Mike.” Alasdair’s voice wobbled. “I believe—I believe those are the diamonds reported stolen today.”

“But she put them here yesterday.” Mike stepped off the chair, his gaze still on the jewelry in his hand.

“The last time they were seen was Wednesday morning.”

“So she could’ve stolen them Wednesday night.”

“When she was supposedly at work, then brought them here on—” Alasdair stared at him with horrified eyes. “My God, she came to the office the day after each robbery. She was hiding them here.” He glanced at the cupboard and his jaw hardened.

“Let’s call Bertini.” Mike grabbed a dishtowel from beside the sink and dumped the jewelry into it, tying it into a bundle. “Shit. I shouldn’t have touched it, right? I should’ve left it there for the police to—”

Alasdair suddenly put a finger to his lips. The front door creaked slightly and closed with a thud.

“Be quiet, you idiot!” Despite the harsh whisper, the voice was definitely female.

“The damn door slipped.” A male voice. “Besides, no one’s here. Where’d you put them this time?”

“The kit—What’s that?”

“A coat.” He sounded impatient.

“Alasdair’s coat.”

“It’s a coat, for Christ’s sake. It could be anybody’s.”

“Don’t you think I know my own fiancé’s coat? I helped him choose it. And—My God, they’re photos of us.”

“There’s a light on.”

Alasdair swung around and grabbed Mike’s arm, pushing him toward a door in the far wall that was ajar. “Take the diamonds and get out,” he whispered. “Call Vince and tell him

what's happened. Go!" He pushed Mike into what looked like a utility closet, but in the wedge of light from the kitchen, Mike could see another door, presumably to the outside, secured with a deadbolt.

"C'mon, Alasdair!"

"They know I'm here." Alasdair pulled the door almost closed.

"Hello, Al."

Mike started. Charlotte's voice was loud, as if she were standing beside the door. He pressed himself against the wall, scarcely daring to breathe.

"Hello, Charlotte. Farley."

"What are you doing here?" She sounded cool and composed.

"I could ask the same question of you both."

"You could, but I'm the one with the gun."

Oh, God. No.

"True. Although as my fiancée, I would hope—"

"Don't count on it. Right now, we just want what we came for and then we'll leave."

"Then I'm afraid you're in for a disappointment."

Mike clutched the jewelry to his chest. *Shut up, Alasdair. She has a gun. Don't make her angry.*

"Are we? That's too bad. Where is it?"

"On its way to the police station."

Mike stifled a gasp. *Jesus Christ, Alasdair! What did you tell them that for?*

The guy, Farley, muttered a curse. "Bertini's taken it."

Bertini? They thought he'd been here with Alasdair.

"Maybe." Mike didn't like the assessing tone of her voice. "Wherever it is, we've got to get it back. My buyer won't wait forever."

"How the hell are we going to do that? The police have it." The guy sounded jumpy.

"I believe Al will get it for us."

"If you don't mind me saying so," Alasdair said, voice mild, "that's highly unlikely."

"Not if I provide the proper motivation. Keep your hands up, Al. I don't want to shoot you. Not yet, at least. Farley, there are some handcuffs in the front desk. Top drawer. Go get them." Footsteps sounded loud in the silence, going and coming, then something metal clinked.

“Good. Put your hands behind your back, Al.” A sharp snick, and she let out her breath in a whoosh. “Give me the key.”

“You don’t need to do this—” Alasdair began.

“Where does Mike Pulaski live?”

Mike wiped a sweaty palm on his thigh and strained to listen.

“I can’t help you there. I don’t know the address.”

Alasdair, Alasdair, don’t mess with them. Take them to the apartment. Bertini and the police can catch up with them there.

“Farley, find the phone book.”

“I don’t think he’s listed.”

“Okay. We’ll go to his studio. His address is bound to be in their files.”

“Charlotte, this isn’t necessary.”

“Shut up, Al. I think you’ll be a lot more cooperative if your friend’s life depends on getting the jewelry back.”

“It’s really—” A growl interrupted Alasdair. “Mac! No!”

Mike jumped at the gunshot, and Mac’s growl ended in a yelp and whimper. He took a step toward the door, fist raised.

“Stand still, Al!” Her voice cracked like a whip and Mike froze. “I’ll shoot you, too, if I have to. Farley, get him out to the car.”

A crash and a thud, then another yelp. “No, he’s not dead yet,” she said. “Get up slowly, Al. Slowly, or I’ll kick Mac again. That’s right. Now, that wasn’t very intelligent, was it?”

Mike lowered his fist, his gut twisting.

“Obviously not,” Alasdair rasped.

“Obviously.”

Mike couldn’t believe it. She sounded as if she was laughing.

“I’m not going to let this happen again. There’s some cord in the drawer over there. Tie it around his throat.” Mike’s stomach lurched. “Good. Leave the end at the back, like a leash.”

Fuck.

“All right, Al. Let’s go.”

“At least—” Alasdair broke off into a harsh gurgle.

“Don’t be a fool, Farley! Don’t strangle him before we get the jewelry.”

Alasdair coughed and choked.

Mike's eyes watered in sympathy.

"At least," Alasdair whispered roughly, "let me stanch Mac's wound."

"I don't think so. If you get the stuff quickly, you can come back and play doctor," she said, dismissive. "Or Tate will find him Monday morning. Let's go."

Mike waited until the front door shut before sidling into the kitchen. Charlotte had turned out the light, but he could see Mac's pale shape sprawled on the floor, a dark puddle spreading over the linoleum.

"Jeez, Mac." He dumped the jewelry on the table and grabbed another dish towel. "Okay, buddy, I'm going to see if I can stop the bleeding, then we'll get you some help." He wiped the sweat from his face and peered at Mac. There was a dark, sticky patch on his flank. Mike folded the towel into a pad and pressed it gently over the spot; Mac whimpered and shivered.

"More. More." Mike opened drawers until he found a stack of fresh towels. He grabbed a handful and bound them around Mac's flank. It wasn't a very good bandage, but it was the best he could do at the moment.

"Okay. I've got to call Bertini. I'll be right back."

He ran into Alasdair's office and sat heavily in the hard wooden chair behind the desk. His hand shook as he dialed. The numbers scribbled on the card blurred, and he rubbed his eyes.

"Hello?" A bright female voice greeted him.

"Yeah, hello. Is Bertini there?"

"You want Vince?" She sounded amused.

"Yeah. It's important." He was having trouble sucking in enough air to make his voice work.

"Really?" She didn't believe him. "Hang on a sec."

Mike waited, tapping his fingers on the desk. C'mon, c'mon, Bertini. This is fucking life-or-death.

"Bertini." His voice was smooth, relaxed. Well, that wouldn't last long.

"It's Pulaski."

"What's the matter? Has Alasdair—"

"Shut up and listen." He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "Alasdair saw the pictures. The other guy turns out to be Charlotte's old boyfriend, Farley, the one who got away

after the crash.”

“Christ!” There was a babble of voices in the background, and Bertini muttered “Sorry, Ivy, Aunt Giulietta,” before continuing. “She was meeting up with—”

“Hang on. Let me explain.”

It only took a minute to bring Bertini up to date. “They’ve taken Alasdair to my dance studio. They want to find me, hold me hostage while Alasdair gets the jewelry,” he finished, gasping for breath as if he’d been running.

“Okay. Calm down, Pulaski.”

“I am calm! You’ve got to get people over to my studio, catch them there, and send someone here to the office to help Mac.”

“Is Mac—”

“He’s alive, but bleeding like hell.”

“Where’s your studio?”

Mike gave him the address. “I’ll meet you there.”

“No fucking way! You stay put. I’ll send someone to take you home.”

“Forget it. If they’re at the studio, I can help. Show you the back door, the panel. I’ve got my keys with me.”

“Back door?” Bertini hesitated. “Okay. I’ll meet you in the parking lot. Don’t you dare go in there alone, Pulaski, or I’ll beat the crap out of you myself.”

“Right. I’ll be there in twenty.”

He dashed back to the kitchen and grabbed the bundle of jewelry. Squatting down beside Mac, Mike stroked the big dog’s head. “Hang in there, buddy. Help’s on the way. I’ve got to go help Alasdair, or I’d stick around.”

Mike tore into the studio parking lot in less than twenty minutes, having broken most of the traffic laws during his drive, and muttering prayers to whichever saints came to mind. A small knot of black-clad men were conferring next to the building.

Bertini looked up and waved him over. “We’ve got them boxed up inside, in the big room with mirrors. They shot off the lock and ducked inside when our guys showed up, but our team can’t get any closer. We’ve got three guys stationed in the hall. They won’t let her get away. What’s the layout in there?”

“Got some paper?”

One of the men handed him a clipboard and pencil. "The studio's here," Mike drew a large rectangle, "and here's the hall. It wraps around two sides of the studio like an upside-down L. These are offices and dressing rooms," he scribbled boxes on the outside of the L, "but they're locked at night. My office is at the far end of the hall, with a dressing room and bathroom that run down the far side of the studio."

The men stared solemnly at his rough sketch. "Not much room to maneuver," one muttered. "They can just stay holed up in the studio, and we can't do anything without risking Lovat's life."

Mike looked up. "If they're in the studio, we can see what they're doing."

"How?"

"There's a one-way mirror in my dressing room. You can see the whole studio."

"Yeah, but we can't get to your dressing room without alerting them."

"What about the back door you mentioned?" Bertini asked.

"It's through my dressing room. Had to have it because of fire regulations."

"Okay, gentlemen. You heard him. You cover the main entrance." Bertini looked around, nodding. "I'll take the back door and find out what's going on in there."

"I've got to go, too."

Bertini swung around. "Not a chance, Pulaski."

"Listen. The one-way mirror's behind a panel, and you don't know how to open it."

"So you tell me," Bertini snapped.

"But you can't turn on the light, otherwise they'll see something's different about that mirror. You stumble around, they'll hear you and know you're there."

The sound of a gunshot startled them all, then came muffled yells, another two shots. Bertini pulled out his radio and took off for the building.

"What the hell's happening?" he yelled. The radio erupted in static.

Mike was right behind him. Before Bertini could barrel through the door, Mike caught his arm.

"Around back!" He pulled Bertini toward the corner of the building. "I've got a key." He fumbled with his key ring, flipping through the keys as he ran. Was he too late? No, he wouldn't even think that.

Bertini cut off his radio with a snarl. "Get the damn door open!"

“Keep your pants on—Got it!” Mike unlocked the door and pushed it open.

“Dammit, Pulaski!” Bertini grabbed Mike’s coat. “You’re not the fucking cavalry! You don’t have a gun. Stay behind me.” He pulled out his gun and started up the stairs, Mike hard on his heels. At the top of the stairs, Bertini stopped and cocked his head, listening, before opening the fire door.

“Around to the right.” Mike peered down the hall. Three men with rifles were clustered at the corner. He darted ahead of Bertini, his keys at the ready, and unlocked an unmarked door. “In here.”

He carefully shut the door behind Bertini, glad the dark hid his shaking hands. “Don’t move,” he whispered, crossing the room. “I’ll open the panel, and we can see what’s going on.”

The panel opened with a snick, the room suddenly filled with a dim, watery light.

Fuck.

Mike couldn’t take his eyes off the scene before him, even when Bertini shouldered him to one side.

“Shit,” Bertini breathed.

“Yeah.” He wiped his cold, sweaty hands on his jeans.

Wearing a fatigue jacket, with a rifle in his hands, Farley looked ready for action. Charlotte’s automatic was a bizarre contrast with her white dress coat and elegant pantsuit. When he saw Alasdair, Mike swallowed hard and fisted his hands until his fingers ached. They’d found more rope somewhere, and Alasdair lay on the floor, hogtied. A cloth wrapped around his face and cut into the corners of his mouth. His eyes were closed, and the side of his face red with bruises that would darken soon.

“Alasdair.” The word was a shaky sigh.

Mike’s heart stuttered in his chest. Alasdair looked as if he’d given up, was ready for death. No wonder, after being betrayed and now threatened by Charlotte and Farley.

Bertini nudged Mike’s shoulder. “Can they hear me if I use the radio?” he whispered.

“Probably.” Mike shrugged, eyes focused on Alasdair. “Use the can,” he jerked his head toward the door on the right. “Close the door before you turn on the light.”

“I know how to use the john.” Bertini disappeared.

A muffled voice, yelling something Mike couldn’t quite understand. Charlotte spoke, and Farley inched toward the door, neck craned. He looked over at her and shook his head.

She yelled back. Mike only caught the words “jewelry” and “keep him alive,” but he knew what she’d said. She wanted to trade Alasdair’s life for the jewels.

If it were up to him, he’d give the world to keep Alasdair safe.

The police responded, but before they had finished, Farley fired into the hall, two quick shots.

Charlotte yelled at him and turned toward Alasdair. He did not open his eyes as she tore off his gag. She cupped his chin in her hand and spoke to him. He shook his head. With a shrug, she released his chin and slapped him twice.

Mike squeezed his eyes shut, his gut churning, then opened them quickly.

“That *bitch*.” Bertini spat the word, then took a deep breath. “The negotiator’s here. He’ll try to talk them down.”

Charlotte held Alasdair’s chin again, speaking to him quietly. A bright splash of blood stained the corner of his mouth.

“It’s not going to work. She’ll kill—” He choked on the word, swallowed hard. “She’ll kill Alasdair before she gives up.”

Even if she didn’t kill him, could Alasdair ever recover from this?

Bertini sighed. “I know. But he’s got to try.”

Alasdair shook his head. Charlotte kicked out, the toe of her boot catching him in his stomach. He winced and spat blood onto the floor.

Hands clenched, Mike lunged for the mirror.

“Pulaski,” Bertini rasped, pulling him back. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Farley yelled something to the police as Mike said, “I’m gonna *kill* her!” He struggled in Bertini’s grasp.

“You’re going to be locked in a squad car unless you do what I tell you,” Bertini breathed into his ear. “And I’m telling you to stand back from the mirror and let us handle this. You hear me?”

Mike glared at him. “I hear you.”

“I’m not going to let Alasdair get killed.” He glanced at the mirror, then at Mike. “But we’ve got to do this right, not flying by the seat of our pants. *Capisce?*”

“Yeah.” He shoved his shaking hands into his pockets.

Bertini held his eyes for a moment. “Okay. I’m going to radio in what she did to Alasdair.

Keep a handle on that damn temper of yours.”

Somewhere in the distance, a phone rang.

Mike turned back to the mirror. Charlotte and Farley talked together, watching the door. Farley bounced on his toes, jittery. Alasdair looked half-dead. Mike crept closer. Alasdair’s torso was twisted in what must be a hellishly uncomfortable position. His face was pale, blood staining his mouth and chin.

“Alasdair,” he breathed, pressing his hands to the glass, trying to get as close to Alasdair as possible. This was hell for him, but it didn’t matter. What Alasdair was going through was a hundred times worse.

Alasdair’s eyes fluttered open. He looked at the mirror and his head jerked in surprise.

He could see Mike’s hands against the glass.

Mike pulled his hands away, checked on Charlotte and Farley. They were still staring at the door on the far wall, their backs to Alasdair.

Mike pressed one hand to the mirror.

Alasdair shifted a little and winced. He slowly nodded once; it looked as if he was trying to stretch cramped muscles.

A little of the tension in his chest unknotted. At least Alasdair knew someone was there.

“They won’t answer the phone.” Bertini whispered, stepping silently next to Mike.

“Anything going on?”

“Alasdair knows we’re back here.”

“That’s not funny, Pulaski.”

“It’s not supposed to be. I kinda put my hand on the glass, and he saw it.”

“Shit! What about those two nutcases?”

“They were looking the other way.”

“And Alasdair played it cool, right?” Bertini sounded almost amused.

“As cool as a lake wind.”

Alasdair suddenly twisted his head, trying to look over his shoulder. Charlotte was yelling at Farley, who shrugged and turned back to watch the door. Mike could see the instant when she made her decision.

She stepped behind Farley, raised her gun and pressed it to the back of his head. A flash of astonishment crossed his face before there was no face, only a mess of splintered bone and

shredded flesh. His hands jerked on the gun in his arms, spraying the doorway with bullets, shattering the mirrors along the wall.

His body remained upright for a long breath, then pitched forward. Before he hit the floor, she turned and strode over to Alasdair.

No!

Mike whirled, grabbing a heavy trophy off the shelf beside him. He raised his hand, covered his face with his forearm, and brought the base down on the mirror.

The crash of breaking glass was unexpectedly loud. Dropping the trophy, Mike shook his head, sending shards flying, and launched himself into the studio.

“Down!” Bertini yelled.

Glass crunched underfoot and Mike stumbled, landing on hands and knees. All he could see was Alasdair, trussed up and unable to defend himself. He scrabbled forward, didn’t care if he got cut by the glass.

Two gunshots—BAM! BAM!—and he reached out, hands landing on warm wool, fingers clutching.

“Alasdair?”

A thud, and Mike looked up. Charlotte sprawled against the far wall, arms and legs askew. The spreading red stain on her white coat looked absurd, as if she had spilled her dinner. Her chest heaved and red bubbles foamed from her lips. She coughed, and the bubbles spilled down her chin and onto her chest, joining the blood there.

Mike turned away and hoped God would forgive him for only feeling relief at the sight.

Hands slippery with blood, Mike fumbled with the knot, finally untying Alasdair’s feet. Alasdair hissed with the pain, and Mike gently rubbed the circulation back into Alasdair’s legs as he stretched them out.

“Key,” Alasdair said through swollen lips. “Her pocket.”

Mike didn’t give a shit about police procedure, he was going to get those damned cuffs off Alasdair. He stepped forward, but Bertini held up his hand. Face calm, Bertini searched Charlotte’s pockets, handing Mike the small key he found.

Mike’s hands shook as if he had palsy, but he managed to fit the key into the lock and get the cuffs off. Alasdair rolled onto his back and wiped at the blood on his chin. His hand trembled, and he would not meet Mike’s eyes.

Police swarmed through the room. Mike glimpsed Bertini standing above Charlotte, his expression shuttered and unreadable, before Mike was led into the hall.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur. He answered questions, told a uniformed officer that the stolen jewelry was still in his car, allowed his cut-up hands to be cleaned and bandaged, and cradled the hot coffee someone handed him. The warmth seeped into his aching fingers, and he shivered.

“You okay?” Bertini looked like hell: pasty skin, rumpled clothes, face drawn with exhaustion.

“Yeah. How’s Alasdair?” He pressed his lips together before he could ask more. How bad is he hurt? Can I see him? Can I hold him?

“He’ll be fine.” A ghost of a smile flitted across his face. “He’s arguing with the EMTs about going to the hospital.”

Mike leaned back, holding the coffee cup to his chest, a small bloom of warmth against his cold skin. “Guess who’s going to lose.”

Bertini snorted. “Sucker’s bet. I just wanted to let you know you can go home.”

Mike stood, wincing as muscles in his back and legs protested. “When will you guys be done in here? I’ve got to reschedule classes—”

“Probably not for a couple of days yet.” Bertini looked apologetic. “We’ll let you know as soon as we can.”

He nodded. He didn’t want to think about what was still in the studio.

“You hear anything about Mac?”

“Yeah. The bullet went through his flank, which is why he lost so much blood. But the vet expects him to make a full recovery.”

“Good.” Mike turned toward the door. “Alasdair won’t—You wouldn’t—” He coughed. “He shouldn’t be alone.”

“What do you take me for, Pulaski? He’s coming home with me.”

Of course he was going with Bertini. Where else would he go?

Mike drove home, ignoring the ache in his chest and his burning eyes.

Chapter 10

Mike propped the broom against the wall and tipped the dustpan full of broken glass into a heavy-duty black plastic trash bag. It was already half full, and he had only swept one corner of the studio—the corner farthest from the two dark patches.

What a fucking awful week. He and Tina had scrambled, tracking down a place where he could hold classes, calling students, calming parents, trying to keep a business together while the studio was off-limits. But they had done it.

He'd called Bertini the morning after, asking about Alasdair. Bertini reassured Mike that Alasdair was bruised and cut, but basically okay.

"Can I talk with him?" Mike stirred his coffee.

"Hang on."

He waited, spoon clinking against the sides of the mug.

"Hello, Mike."

"Hey, Alasdair." He took a deep breath. "How're you doing?"

"I—I'm fine, thank you. And you?"

"I'm okay. How's Mac?"

"Remarkably well, considering. He'll be at the vet's for a few more days."

"Good." Rubbing his forehead, he hurried on. "Listen, Alasdair, I'm real sorry—"

"Mike," Alasdair interrupted, "I'm the one who must apologize."

"No need."

"Mike, please."

Mike closed his mouth.

"I appreciate your concern, and I apologize for all the damage that occurred."

"Shit, Alasdair, it's only—"

"Mike!" Alasdair took a shaky breath. "I'm sorry for everything. And in view of the circumstances, I think it would be better if..." He cleared his throat. "I'm afraid I won't be at class this week, Mike."

"Okay." Mike nodded, even though Alasdair couldn't see him. He rubbed the middle of his chest. It ached, as if with the memory of an old injury. "You've got lots of stuff to do. Tie up the case."

"Exactly." Alasdair sounded relieved.

"Maybe I could stop by?"

"No." The word came so fast that Mike flinched. "That is, I have obligations I can't ignore," Alasdair continued.

"Oh. Okay." Mike blinked. His eyes burned, and he wrapped his cold fingers around the mug. "You're busy." He lifted the mug. It shook and coffee slopped over the lip. He set it down with a thump. "With stuff."

"Yes, indeed." Alasdair's voice softened. "Thank you for understanding, Mike."

But he didn't understand at all.

So he concentrated on work and prepared a plan to get the studio back into usable condition once the police left. On Tuesday, Mike called the vet to check on Mac, and was pleased to hear he'd been released. When Bertini had called Saturday night, over a week since the shooting, to let him know that they'd finished with the studio, all Mike had to do was make a phone call or two to set the cleanup plan in motion.

Crissy's cousin's brother-in-law was a glazier, and he had ordered replacement mirrors. They arrived two days ago, and it would only take him a couple of hours to put them up.

Tina, Crissy, Jennifer, and several other instructors had offered to help him clean up the mess, but Mike refused. Then Tina suggested he call a janitorial service. He couldn't explain it, but this was something he had to do himself.

He'd started early that Sunday morning, not bothering with breakfast. Pulling down the yellow crime scene tape, he sipped his coffee and surveyed the wreckage. It looked bad, especially those two stained chalk outlines. Would the blood scrub out? Or would he have to get the floor refinished? Well, he'd deal with that after he'd replaced the lock Charlotte had shot out

and cleaned up the broken glass.

Mike set down his coffee and rolled up his sleeves. Nothing time and elbow grease couldn't fix.

After an hour, he'd made a dent, but there was still so much to do. How the hell was he going to finish it all in one day? Grumbling, he picked up the broom and continued to sweep, the glittering fragments sparkling in the light like the diamonds that had started this whole fucking mess.

Don't.

The creak of the front door opening was accompanied by low voices. Mike's fingers tightened on the broom and his heart raced.

"Pulaski? You here?" Bertini appeared in the doorway, dressed in jeans and a knit shirt.

"You startled me!" Mike took a deep breath. "Yeah. Classes start back here on Tuesday, so I—" He stopped.

Alasdair. Alasdair was there. Standing behind Bertini.

Tate peered over Alasdair's shoulder. "Good morning, Mike." He nodded. "Brooms and dustpans first, I should think." And he disappeared.

Mike gaped.

"And more trash bags," Bertini called over his shoulder.

"Of course." Tate's voice sounded muffled.

"What—" Mike began.

"Alasdair and I thought you could use some help cleaning up this mess." Bertini grabbed the broom Tate handed him. "And when Lyle heard what we were doing, he offered to help, too."

"But—"

Tate presented Mike with a wide push broom. "I think you'll find this easier to use." He plucked the small broom from Mike's hands.

"I don't—"

"We brought coffee and sandwiches," Tate continued, carefully propping up Mike's old broom in the hall. "Alasdair suggested it."

Mike turned to Alasdair. He was sweeping glass into a small pile, his eyes on the floor. The bruises on the side of his face and the thin red line around his neck had faded, faint

reminders of what had happened. He was pale, and tension collected at the corners of his eyes.

“Alasdair?”

“Yes, Mike?” Alasdair didn’t look up, but his broom stilled, his fingers wrapped tightly around the handle.

Mike hesitated. “How’s Mac?”

Alasdair’s hands relaxed. “Better. The vet assured me that he’s healing quickly, although from the fuss he makes about going out, one couldn’t be sure.”

“Glad to hear it. So he’s home now?”

“No. He’s staying at the Bertini’s. Ivy and Aunt Giulietta are spoiling him shamefully.”

“Good.”

Alasdair’s gaze flickered over Mike. “Thank you for attending to Mac’s wound.”

With a shrug, Mike swept more glass into the pile. “Couldn’t just leave him there without doing something.”

“Hey!” Bertini called. “Are you two gonna stand there gossiping all day?”

Alasdair turned, wielding his broom vigorously.

Mike stared at Alasdair’s back for a minute, then continued sweeping.

*

“And that, gentlemen, is a job well done.” Smiling, Tate clasped the damp rag to his chest and turned in a circle, the bottle of glass cleaner dangling from his fingers.

Mike nodded. *This was what a dance studio should look like.*

After they had swept up all the broken glass, Tate had insisted on being the one to scrub the stained floors.

“It would be unseemly for any of you to undertake such a distressing task.” He gave both Mike and Vince a mulish look and even snapped at Alasdair when he offered for the third time to take his place.

“Hey, don’t bust your butt over it,” Mike said as Tate pulled a scrub brush and a jar of what looked like mayonnaise from a galvanized bucket. “I’ll rent a floor sander tomorrow.”

“I doubt that will be necessary.” Tate opened the jar and smeared some of the mayonnaisey stuff over the stains.

“What’s that?” Mike eyed the jar with a frown.

“An old family recipe. It can remove even the most stubborn stains.” Tate sat back on his haunches and smiled at Mike. “There was an unfortunate incident at the office last spring involving ratatouille, my sister’s new drapes, and a duck named—”

“Mr. Tate, I don’t think you need bore everyone with the details,” Alasdair said quickly.

“Of course not.” Tate smeared more stuff on the stains. “However, I believe you won’t need to refinish the floors.”

They had left him to it and helped Crissy’s cousin’s brother-in-law fit the new mirrors into place. Tate was right, though. When he wiped the stuff off the floor, there wasn’t even the faintest shadow to show where the stains had been.

Now they were finished and it was only—Mike glanced at his watch—just after six. “How about some dinner? My treat.”

“Dinner?” Bertini’s eyes narrowed. “What kind of dinner?”

“Cabbage,” Mike said. “*Lots* of cabbage. And sausages. Potato pancakes. Sour cream.” He couldn’t resist grinning at the look on Bertini’s face.

“I should’ve known,” Bertini mumbled, his glare slipping into a smile. “Why you all don’t have heart attacks by forty is beyond me.”

With a snort, Mike turned to Alasdair and Tate. “Yeah, so says the Pasta King. How does steak sound? There’s a good place not far.”

They agreed on steak and walked over to the restaurant. Bertini was surprisingly good company, and Tate’s droll wit lurked just beneath the surface of his scatterbrained exterior.

Alasdair was silent.

Sure, he answered direct questions, but he didn’t volunteer anything. No small talk. No chit-chat. Bertini occasionally glanced at Alasdair, a little crease between his eyebrows, so this must’ve been going on for a while.

Well, *duh*.

The guy was broken up about Charlotte. He’d been betrayed, beaten up, threatened, then watched as his fiancée was blown away by his best friend. Dealing with any one of those circumstances would have been a good reason for a meltdown. Together? You had to give him credit for getting out of bed in the morning.

Mike watched him out of the corner of his eye. Alasdair ate with the air of one doing his duty, shoveling in the food on autopilot. The sparkle was gone from his eyes, his smile looked

like it would crack his face, and, worst of all, he wouldn't look at Mike.

"Alasdair?"

Alasdair lifted his eyebrows but continued to stare at his plate.

"Uh." He had no idea what to say. *Don't you like me anymore?* sounded too pathetic. *Why can't we be friends?* was almost as bad. "If you can't come back to class for the rest of the session, I'll make sure you get a refund."

Bertini rolled his eyes, Tate choked on his drink, but Alasdair just nodded. "Thanks, Mike. I don't think I'll have time."

"But you've learned so much. It would be a shame to stop your lessons now." Tate leaned forward and lowered his voice. "I believe my sister has already entered your name several times on her dance card for the Police Department's Holiday Ball."

Alasdair's head jerked up and his startled eyes met Mike's. For a second it was all there: the connection, the bond.

Alasdair looked away and hurriedly rose. "Thanks for dinner, Mike. I must—I just remembered—" He turned and fled.

Mike stood, staring after him. What had he done?

"Perhaps Alasdair could use someone to talk to," said Tate.

Bertini sighed and waved his hand at Mike. "Never thought I'd say it, but Tate's right. Go on. I'll get the check. This time."

Mike looked from Bertini and Tate back to Alasdair, who disappeared out the front door.

"Thanks." He spun on his heel and headed out into the night.

It took Mike three blocks to catch up.

"What was that about?" He fell into step, zipping up his jacket against the cold night air.

Alasdair looked straight ahead and didn't reply.

"I mean, there I am, trying to do a friend a favor, and all of a sudden—WHAM!—he's on his feet and I'm eating his dust."

Alasdair bowed his head and his shoulders slumped, but his steps didn't slow.

"What is it? What'd I say? What'd I do?" Mike kicked an empty beer can lying on the sidewalk. It clattered as it skidded across the street. "I didn't want things to go down the way they did. I didn't want to see her with him, or find the jewelry, or stand around while my best friend was getting beaten up and almost—"

“Don’t.” Alasdair’s voice was hoarse, and he stumbled on an uneven piece of pavement. Mike reached for him, his hand stilling when Alasdair flinched.

“Don’t what?” Mike crossed his arms over his chest, curling his chilled fingers into fists. This was bad. The worst. Guy wouldn’t look at him, or talk to him, couldn’t even stand it if he touched him. “Don’t say I’m sorry for starting this whole fucking mess? Don’t feel like shit because I almost got you killed?”

Alasdair stopped and turned, his face ashen in the glare of the streetlight. “You *didn’t*.” His breath misted, a small cloud in the darkness.

“If I hadn’t been so fucking nosy, you wouldn’t have to deal with all this.”

“It wasn’t your fault! It was mine.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it, Alasdair.”

“It isn’t. I didn’t see what she was doing. I was so caught up with trying to be the man she said she loved I didn’t even notice she was committing robberies instead of being at work, or that she was hiding the stolen items in the office, or that she was staying with her—” He rubbed his forehead and his hand shook. “She knew everything about me. Things I couldn’t admit to myself. What I really wanted. *Who* I really wanted.” Alasdair pressed his lips together and turned away, breathing hard.

Mike’s mouth went dry. “Who? Who do you really want?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Alasdair sounded defeated.

Mike grabbed Alasdair’s arm and jerked him around. “God damn it, it does matter! You matter. You matter a hell of a lot! More than anyone else.”

Oh, fuck. He hadn’t meant to say that. Not now. Not when Alasdair was still in shock. Maybe not ever.

His fingers were still clenched around Alasdair’s arm. Slowly, carefully, he loosened his grip and let his arm fall. If all this was too much and Alasdair wanted to take off, Mike wasn’t going to stop him.

“Mike?”

“Yeah?” He studied a torn Mounds wrapper on the sidewalk.

“I don’t want a refund.”

“Huh?” Mike’s head jerked up. A spark of hope ignited. “You don’t?”

“No.”

Mike rubbed the corner of his mouth with his thumb. “Then why the hell wouldn’t you talk to me?”

“Uh.” Alasdair’s gaze faltered. A car turned at the corner, headlights sweeping over them.

Could they be any more public? Mike sighed. “Let’s get the car and go back to my place. At least we’ll be warm.”

They were silent on the way over. Alasdair walked into Mike’s apartment with his head high and shoulders back, as if he was going to his own execution. Mike followed him over to the sofa.

“Sit down.” He shrugged off his coat and tossed it on the chair. “Want something to drink?”

With a shake of his head, Alasdair sat on the edge of the sofa and stared at the clutter of magazines and papers spread over the coffee table.

“Take off your coat, at least. Get comfortable.” Mike sat down at the far end of the sofa and propped his feet up. His act wouldn’t fool Alasdair into thinking he was relaxed, but at least he could pretend.

Alasdair hesitated, then pulled off his coat, laying it neatly over the arm of the couch.

Mike tilted back his head and stared at the ceiling.

“I thought you were pissed at me. For starting everything.”

“No, I wasn’t.” Alasdair took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I was disgusted with myself. I *am* disgusted with myself. I failed to see the truth, failed my friends, failed... myself.”

That sounded familiar. “Got news for you, buddy. You’re not the first person to get fooled by someone you love, and you won’t be the last.”

“I’m well aware of that,” Alasdair said. “I’m not a complete idiot.”

Mike raised his head and lifted an eyebrow. “Never said you were. But everyone can make mistakes, especially when love’s involved.” He certainly knew the truth of that.

“I can’t use that excuse.” Alasdair rose and took two stiff steps, then stopped, his back to Mike. “I didn’t love her. Not the way I—” He clasped his hands at the small of his back. “She was beautiful, attentive. I was flattered and asked her to marry me. As soon as she said yes, I knew it was a mistake.”

“Why didn’t you break it off?”

Alasdair's shoulders tightened. "Because she said I was the best thing that had ever happened to her. Because I felt I owed her a chance for a happy life. Because," his voice fell to a whisper, "I was tired of being alone."

Mike swung his legs off the coffee table and stood. The floor under his feet didn't seem completely steady. "There are worse things than being alone."

With a harsh laugh, Alasdair turned. "As I've discovered." His eyes met Mike's for a long, breathless moment, then his mouth twisted and he bowed his head.

Alasdair couldn't do it. No surprises there, his pain was still too raw.

Mike measured the distance between them. Four steps. He could take four steps. Easy. Funny how the air suddenly thickened, tugging at his legs and feet, pulling at him like the retreating surf. He struggled forward until he stood in front of Alasdair.

Mike held out his hand, palm up, an invitation and an appeal. Alasdair stared at it, frozen, while Mike waited, the pounding of his pulse in his temple marking time.

Alasdair didn't move.

So, he had his answer.

Mike swallowed noisily and let his hand fall.

"No." Alasdair's voice was half-whisper, half-gasp. He reached out, fingertips brushing Mike's shoulder, sliding down his arm, fingers tangling with Mike's.

His whole body buzzing with that touch, Mike stepped forward, wrapping his free arm around Alasdair's waist. The knot of tension in his chest unraveled. Alasdair rested his hand on Mike's shoulder and closed his eyes. Mike raised their clasped hands to his lips and brushed a kiss over Alasdair's scraped knuckles.

Alasdair's breath caught, and he shivered. Mike echoed the shiver and drew him close.

Warm, firm muscles shifted beneath soft fabric, touching at chest, hip and thigh. Familiar. Comfortable. Then Alasdair moved against him and the familiarity disappeared, comfort dissolved.

This was Alasdair in his arms, Alasdair who touched him so gently and tentatively. Heat raced through Mike, crackling down his arms and legs, burning brightly in his gut.

His hand slid up Alasdair's back, smoothing over flesh and bone, skimming over spine, ribs, shoulder blades, coming to rest on the back of his neck. Mike stroked the short, soft hair at the base of his skull, traced the strong tendons that joined skull to shoulders, rubbed the small

bumps of his spine.

Alasdair sighed and a little of the tension bled from his muscles. Mike shifted his arms and swayed from side to side as Alasdair settled more firmly against him.

God, he felt good.

Humming under his breath, Mike continued rocking gently. Not exactly dancing, but moving, connecting. Alasdair drew a deep breath and sighed again.

“Relax, Alasdair,” he murmured. “I’ve got you.”

Another deep breath, another sigh. “Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m tired.” It was barely a whisper.

Mike squeezed his eyes shut and held Alasdair tightly. “You get any sleep this week?”

“Not much,” he confessed.

Mike pulled away and studied Alasdair’s face. “Want to sack out for a while? You can have the bed.”

Alasdair closed his eyes and shook his head. “No.” His arms tightened around Mike.

“Okay. How ‘bout we sit down?”

Nodding, Alasdair allowed himself to be steered back to the sofa. After a few minutes they were settled, Alasdair’s head on Mike’s shoulder, arms and hands tangled. It took only another minute more before Alasdair’s regular breathing and lax fingers signalled he was asleep.

Mike shifted until he was comfortable and closed his eyes. It felt good to have Alasdair here beside him. Of course, it’d be better if Alasdair was awake and they were making out, making love, but Mike had waited a long time for this. He could wait a little longer.

He chuckled to himself. Yeah. But sooner would be better.

*

He was cold. A sharp pain travelled up his shoulder to the base of his skull.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Mike yawned and squinted down the hall. Light streamed from the bathroom. As he watched, the light went out and Alasdair emerged.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“‘S’okay.” Mike rose and worked the kinks out of his aching muscles. “What time is it?”

“Nearly midnight.” Alasdair looked at him, and when Mike raised his arms and arched

his back in a languid stretch, Alasdair's tongue flicked out, trailing across his lip.

Oh, God.

Half-a-dozen steps brought them close, and he rested a hand on Alasdair's shoulder.

"You feeling better?"

"Yes." Alasdair suddenly sounded as if he'd been running.

"Good."

Mike coaxed Alasdair forward a little, just enough to feel the warmth of Alasdair's breath on his lips. It wasn't enough. Not nearly enough. He suddenly closed the space between them, pressing their lips together, swallowing Alasdair's gasp.

Oh, yeah.

Then Alasdair tilted his head and opened his mouth and it was Mike's turn to gasp. It was like going from zero to a hundred in a split second. Alasdair was on board. Alasdair was with the program.

Alasdair was a fucking incredible kisser.

Mike shifted against him, groaning as his hardening dick brushed against Alasdair's hip. He was burning, his skin almost painfully sensitive. Echoing the groan, Alasdair's fingers dug into his shoulder, his tongue demanded Mike's attention.

Mike gave it willingly.

They finally pulled their mouths apart, panting. Alasdair's lips were slick, his eyes glazed. He blinked, his eyes focused, and he slowly smiled.

Mike's knees gave out.

Arms tightening around him, Alasdair held Mike for a moment until he regained his balance.

"God, Alasdair." He took a shaky breath, remembering that smile.

Alasdair's hand slipped from Mike's shoulder to cup his jaw, his thumb slowly stroking Mike's cheek. Felt good, kind of ticklish as it dragged through the stubble. Turning his head, Mike gently bit the ball of Alasdair's thumb, then soothed it with his tongue as Alasdair made a sound deep in his throat. The fire inside Mike flared.

Mike pressed his hand against the bulge in the front of Alasdair's jeans. He knew this, knew the shape and size of him, although he had never touched him there before. With a moan, Alasdair eagerly rocked his hips against Mike's palm. Grinning, Mike slid his hand up Alasdair's

stomach and chest, ignoring the faint growl of protest. He cupped his fingers beneath Alasdair's chin and stole another quick kiss.

"Come to bed," he murmured against Alasdair's lips.

Alasdair shivered, his eyes half closed. "Yes."

Mike let out the breath he didn't know he had been holding and grasped Alasdair's hand, tugging him toward the bedroom. One, two steps, and Alasdair seemed to wake from his daze. He squeezed Mike's fingers, his eyes dark with promise, his tongue sweeping over his bottom lip.

God, Mike would never get enough of Alasdair's tongue.

Or lips.

Or hands.

Hands that roamed over his body as his fingers ranged over Alasdair's, untying, unbuttoning, unbuckling, unzipping, pulling off shoes and shirts and jeans and underwear to get to skin—handfuls of warm, soft skin.

It was almost too much.

Mike collapsed on the bed, pulling Alasdair down with him. This was good. This was so damn good. They fit together perfectly. Mike canted his hips and pressed hard against Alasdair, stifling a moan as their dicks rubbed together. Sparks seemed to crackle where they touched, pinpricks of sensation that sheened their skin with sweat. Hungry for more of this, more of *him*, Mike nipped Alasdair's lips and dug his fingers into the muscles in his broad back.

Mike shifted his weight and Alasdair seemed to understand, rolling onto his back, carrying Mike with him. Yeah. That's what he wanted. He spread his legs, straddling Alasdair's hips, grinding against him until Alasdair shuddered and grabbed his damp thighs.

"Wait. Not yet," he gasped, shifting under Mike, his fingers tightening.

"Now." Mike pushed his fingers into Alasdair's hair, tilting back his head, exposing his neck. Lips, tongue and teeth went to work until Alasdair growled—really growled—and flipped them over again.

He settled heavily over Mike, pinning his hips, pressing their dicks together, and stared at Mike with wild hair, hooded eyes and swollen lips.

Mike almost came just from looking at him.

Snaking one hand between them, Mike wrapped his fingers around their dicks and

squeezed. Fireworks exploded behind his eyes, and he bared his teeth and arched his back, a yell ripped from his throat.

Alasdair growled again and spread his thighs, hot, slick skin sliding smoothly, until his knees rested on either side of Mike's waist. Pumping their dicks with one hand, Mike reached down and cupped the other over Alasdair's ass, squeezing it rhythmically.

With a shudder and a gasp, Alasdair pressed his face against Mike's neck. He rocked on elbows and knees, his ass clenching, and Mike stretched that little bit farther, fingertips trailing over the damp crease, brushing his sensitive hole.

Alasdair lifted his head and shouted, his dick jerking in Mike's hand. It was enough to fling Mike over the edge, and he held on tight as they thrashed and shivered and panted, finally collapsing side-by-side on the mattress.

"God, Mike." Alasdair sounded shattered.

Mike grinned. *Good job, Pulaski.*

Gentle fingers turned his face, and he could see the expression in Alasdair's eyes. Laughter, exhaustion, tenderness, smugness, and—yeah, it was there, he wasn't mistaken—love. *Wow.*

"Hey," he croaked, and swallowed hard. He didn't want this to be a repeat of Jim. He had to ask now. "Stay?"

Alasdair's eyes fell. "I have to work tomorrow, and my clothes—"

"I'll drive you to your apartment so you can change, then drop you off at the office."

Alasdair hesitated. Mike's breath caught in his throat. Was it going to end before it even began?

"Okay," Alasdair said.

Feeling as if he'd sailed over another hurdle, Mike took a deep breath and opened his arms. "C'mere."

Alasdair settled himself on his side, Mike spooned behind him. Legs and arms shifted for a minute, until both were comfortable. Mike's soft dick nudged Alasdair's ass, and Alasdair pressed back against him. *God.* Mike squeezed his eyes shut. He wanted to roll Alasdair onto his back and watch his face go slack with pleasure as Mike's dick slid deep inside.

Mike reined in his libido. They were both too exhausted right now. There'd be time for that later. Mike smiled lazily as Alasdair tightened his ass around Mike's dick. He wouldn't have

to wait too long.

He kissed the back of Alasdair's neck and pulled him close. With a child-like sigh, Alasdair relaxed into sleep.

Mike yawned and nuzzled the warm skin before him. Connection. Communication. They had that.

He couldn't wait to see what they could do together on the dance floor.

About [Cita Powers](#)

Cita Powers loves a challenge. That's why she writes mysteries (how *do* you get out of that impossible situation?) and romances between unlikely couples (how on earth do *they* end up together?). For her, a combination of the two equals perfect happiness.

An active member of her local mystery writers' community, Cita fills her spare minutes with dancing, gardening and hanging out with her husband and son.

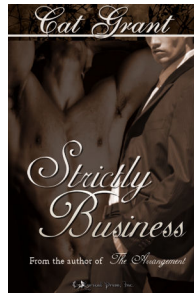
Reader email:

Cita.Powers@gmail.com

Also From Lyrical Press, Inc.

STRICTLY BUSINESS

by Cat Grant



Eric Courtland wants revenge against a father who never loved him, and who drove his mother to an early grave. He's willing to do anything to get it--even if it means selling himself body and soul. A prequel to the All Romance e-books' best-selling novel THE ARRANGEMENT.

The business world is a shark tank, and Eric Courtland quickly learns it's eat or be eaten. Desperate for revenge against a father who never loved him and drove his mother to an early grave, Eric forges a partnership with tall, dark and utterly ruthless titan of industry, Branford Crane.

Bran owns him body and soul, tutoring him in the cut-throat tactics of high finance by day-and by night, giving Eric the punishment and domination he craves.

Will Eric have to become his father in order to beat him? At what cost? Can Nick Thompson's love pull him back from the edge?

Warning: This title contains hot male/male action, bondage, domination and sadomasochism.

LYRICAL PRESS, INCORPORATED



WHERE REALITY AND FANTASY COLLIDE

<http://www.lyricalpress.com/>

Lose yourself in an ebook and discover a new wave of reading.

Just click, buy and read. It's as simple as that!

DISCOVER MORE LYRICAL PRESS TITLES AT:

<http://www.OnceUponABookstore.com/>