



THE MESSENGER

Adrianna Dane

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Chapter One

The fiery seduction scene playing out in the next apartment had him hot and hard in record time. Dillon watched Vance's handsome lover stroke over his neighbor's rigid erection. His fingers flexed and curled around the iron-hard spear of flesh. The long fingers of his other hand delved between Vance's thighs, played at the shadowy crevices, and Vance's lean hips surged up from the plush pillows resting beneath him.

Lights off, the apartment dark, Dillon flattened a palm against the cold glass of his own apartment window. The fingers of his other hand were curled around his own raging erection as he watched the lovers surge and retreat like dancing opponents in a divine duel of earthy lust. It was a scene Dillon couldn't turn his gaze away from.

Snow blanketed the world in huge white flakes, drifting and swirling in a mating dance in front of Dillon's window. Dillon peered closer in order to see beyond the delicate veil of the winter storm, his body burning, his cock throbbing, so in contrast to the frigid cold of the winter's night.

He watched Vance's dark-haired lover flip Vance over on the frothing bed of red and gold pillows. He slipped one of the smaller pillows beneath Vance's lean hips then spread his

legs as he smoothed a hand over the rounded flesh of sleek golden cheeks, taking his time as he pressed a finger between the dark crease and probed around Vance's puckered hole.

Dillon squeezed more oil into the palm of his hand and slid his oil-slick fingers over his engorged dick. The glans had turned a deep shade of purple, skin stretched tight and pulsing hot. It was burning and slick, rising tall and thick, so ready for action. He cupped his heavy balls, coating them with oil, feeling them draw tightly against his blistering body.

Dillon watched closely as the man with the silky blue-black hair spread lube around Vance Keith's asshole. He yearned to be a part of the scene as two fingers disappeared into Vance's rectum. Oh God, he bet the man's ass was so tight. He imagined how it would feel hugging his cock, hearing the groans of pleasure as he sank deeper. Dillon's hand jerked faster up and down his aching erection. He pumped his hips. His breath fogged the window and he wiped his hand across the surface. Flesh sliding across cold, wet glass that cried out into the darkness. Oily fingerprints smudged, but the view was clear enough. The scent of the air was drenched thick and heavy with his arousal.

He felt his climax surge as he watched Vance's lover sheathe his cock with a condom. He did it slowly, stretching out the anticipation. The slope of Vance's body as he waited for his lover, was wet and shiny with oil. Damn, but Dillon wanted it to be his cock closing in on that searing portal. So many nights he'd watched them, hungering for the object of his affection. Dillon's gaze never wavered as the dark-haired lover split Vance's gorgeous ass and targeted his hole with his thick, condom-sheathed dick. Dillon saw Vance stiffen and he held his breath as he consumed the slow penetration with his ravenous gaze. God yes, he wanted it to be him. He needed it so badly he could taste it, he could feel the divine pleasure of penetrating inside that small, hungry channel. His slick hand rode his cock, sliding fast, pumping over his own fiery rod. Almost there, oh God, yes.

"Mr. Lloyd? Mr. Lloyd, are you listening?"

Dillon exhaled like a bloated balloon pierced with a pin, his attention snapped back to the present with painful regret. To the office and to the package resting on his desk. His cock

burned beneath his pants, his balls heavy and aching. Thank God the desk hid the bulge from view. He tore his gaze from the package to meet the curious look of Sid, the messenger who awaited his answer. The ache of his cock would have to wait. Carefully, he straightened in his chair.

“Yes, well...” He cleared his throat. “You’re certain this recipient has moved and left no forwarding address?”

The curly-haired, red-cheeked messenger nodded. “Yes, sir. He’s gone, no forwarding address. And I asked Felice to do a check online when I got back. There’s nothing.”

Dillon had to wonder what had happened. Vance and his lover had used Dillon’s messenger service for their little gifts that traveled back and forth ever since the affair began six months before. Granted, the deliveries had tapered off over the last few weeks, but with the holiday season upon them, Dillon hadn’t really noticed. Until today.

He reached out to pick up the plain brown, wrapped package. Fingering the label, he slid the pad of a finger across the edge of the securely taped triangular flaps. He wondered what was inside. A gift for the holidays, maybe? Jewelry? Possibly a watch with a personal inscription? Or was it a sexual gift? Maybe a new set of anal beads like the ones he’d seen Vance use on his lover two weeks before.

Dillon’s cock surged, aroused far beyond what it should be at five o’clock sitting across from a young man he had no desire to fuck.

Dillon looked at the bundled-up messenger, who had a bright yellow scarf wrapped around his neck. Sid hopped from foot to foot, rubbing his cold hands together, as he waited for Dillon’s permission to clock out. He probably had a girl waiting for him -- maybe a party to attend and a cold bed just waiting to be warmed.

“You can go. I’ll take care of it. Mr. Keith lives in the building right next to mine so it’s no problem. Too bad, though. Looks like someone won’t be getting his gift on time.”

Sid looked relieved and he let out a sigh. "Great. Thanks so much, Mr. Lloyd. I really did try to locate him, but there's just no information on where he's gone."

"No problem. You go on and enjoy your weekend. Next week will probably be a busy one leading into the holiday. It's like everyone thinks the end of the world is coming when we close out the year. Suddenly, every delivery is a life-or-death situation. Rest up."

Sid grinned. "Oh, sure, Mr. Lloyd, I'll be sure to get lots of rest. Have a good weekend." He spun around and raced out the door.

Dillon had to laugh. Yeah, he'd probably be in bed all weekend, but he doubted the man would be resting.

Too bad Dillon didn't have anyone in his life right now. All he had were his voyeuristic fantasies about the man next door. He glanced at the package. And it looked like even that wasn't going to be happening if this undeliverable package was anything to go by.

He lifted the package from his desk. It didn't weigh a lot, less than a pound at any rate. Small and oblong. Maybe a wooden box containing something special for Vance Keith's lover?

Dillon brought the package up to his nose and sniffed. There was the hint of manly aroma. Cologne, maybe. Dillon closed his eyes and inhaled the scent. Vance Keith's scent. He had probably wrapped the gift himself, thinking of his lover as he did so. Visualizing the same things Dillon had just been fantasizing about.

He shifted in his chair. Damn, he had to stop thinking about the man. It was making him crazy wanting something he couldn't have.

In Dillon's mind he could see himself standing in front of Vance. Dillon had never had the guts to introduce himself to his neighbor even though they lived next door and only a narrow alley separated them. A very narrow alley; if Dillon were to stretch out he could probably touch the sill of Vance's apartment. Dillon brought a hand down to cup his aching

erection. He stroked and shuddered. He inhaled again and the subtle scent wafted through him. Was it Diesel? Or something else?

“Are you going to deliver it?” A female voice had Dillon gasping as he dropped the package back on the desk like it was a hot coal.

“Felice, dammit, haven’t you learned to knock? Why aren’t you on the phones?”

Felice snapped her gum. She lifted her arm and pointed to the glitzy Swatch watch on her narrow wrist. “After five, sweetie. Time to go home. Night shift just arrived.”

He waved his hand. “Well then, go.” He was flustered at having been caught in the middle of his favorite sexual fantasy.

Instead of leaving, Felice dropped down into the chair on the opposite side of the desk. She scrunched down and steepled her fingers, studying him intently with her purple contact-lensed gaze.

“You want him, you know you do. Think no one notices that dreamy fixed look you get in your eyes whenever his name is mentioned? I notice.”

Dillon leaned back in his chair. “You’re a busybody, girl. You don’t know what you’re talking about.” He tried to bluff his way out of the conversation. Damn, but the Goth girl who ran the desk on days saw way too much. Obviously, she’d been working for him for far too long.

She shrugged. “Hey, it’s your life.” She leaned forward. “It’s the holidays, Dillon. What could it hurt if you just introduced yourself to him? Will you die if he says no?”

“It will change everything. It’s not right. He’s a client.” But he felt the walls of propriety beginning to crumble. He’d watched the man for so many months, yearning for him, dreaming about him. Fantasizing about what it would be like to be with him.

“Isn’t this the time of year when miracles can happen? You work hard. But you don’t play. How many times have I listened to someone ask you out for a drink and you always turn them down? Even me. You work, you go home, you come back to work again. You’ve

made this place your life. I'm surprised you don't just bunk down in your office. Jeez, Dillon."

"That's not true." Dillon tried to deny her allegations. But he knew it was true. Building this business had taken every cent he had and he wasn't going to see it fail.

"Don't bother to deny it. I've worked here long enough to see what you do. You're one of the good ones, Dillon. You'd be a great catch. You deserve this. Let yourself go. Just this once, take a chance."

He sighed. Felice was right, he spent every waking breath trying to build and maintain a reputation for D.L.F., and so far it was doing well. He'd even shown a bit of profit this year. And he was thinking about branching out. But taking a chance with his business and taking a chance with a man in his personal life were two entirely different things. He wasn't certain he could handle being turned down by the one man he'd fixated on for so long. He wasn't after just a one-night stand. It wasn't only about some hot sex. He wanted someone he could actually think about having a relationship with. Was that even possible?

"It's Christmas, Dillon, give yourself a present." Felice stood up, her gaze rolled over him. "I could help you out with that woody you're hiding behind the desk because you're thinking about him now." She licked her maroon-lipsticked lips. "But I gotta go, my gal is waiting. You deserve this guy, so go get him." She grinned. "I'll expect a report on Monday. And don't think I won't ask."

"You're a tease, you know that," he yelled after her. He heard the cheery ding of the bell on the front door and figured she'd made her swift exit. But he knew she was right. It was time for him to take a chance in his personal life as well as his business.

Did he have the courage to approach Vance Keith and take the chance of being turned down? God, when had he gotten so weak-kneed, and why was he so fixated on this man in particular?

He got up and went to the closet to get his coat. He glanced in the small mirror on the open door and paused. Six feet, blond hair, blue eyes. He worked out every day and kept himself in shape. He wasn't exactly shy and he'd pleased a few men in his life.

But he'd never been in love. Could a fixation on someone you'd never met be called love? He pivoted away from the mirror and grabbed his black wool coat and shrugged into it.

He turned back to the desk and looked down at the package. His messenger service was twenty-four hour. He could have one of the night shift guys make the delivery. He could ignore the rapid beating of his heart at the thought of meeting Vance Keith face-to-face. He could just go on the way he had been doing.

He picked up the package and inhaled the lingering scent. What he couldn't ignore was the raging hard-on he had right now. The yearning that ate at him every single day. The pain around his heart for something more.

With the package fitted snugly beneath his arm, he turned the lights off and closed the door to his office. He heard the muted tones of holiday music coming from the piped-in music on the street. He looked out the front door and saw that the snowfall had increased and it was a blanket of white outside.

He stopped at the main counter. Helen, the night dispatcher, looked up at him. "Good night, Mr. Lloyd. Have a good one."

"I-I'm taking this package back to Vance Keith. Will you mark it down? The recipient has moved so I'm returning it." He handed her the delivery form.

"Sure thing." He waited as she pulled up the docket screen on the computer and typed in the information he gave her.

Well, he guessed he'd take the chance. He'd deliver the package and see what developed. His cock still wouldn't settle. As a matter of fact, it felt like it was even more engorged than it had been before. It wanted attention. It wanted Vance Keith. And Dillon was going to do his damndest to give it what it wanted.

The cold wind hit him as he stepped outside. Snow was piled high on the streets and on the sidewalks. Traffic moved cautiously along the treacherous avenue. Green and red holiday lights twinkled along the sidewalks. Gold and silver glittering signs read HAPPY HOLIDAYS and SEASON'S GREETINGS. People hurried by with arms weighted down with packages, racing for cabs and descending to the subway, and Dillon tried to wend his way through the pedestrian traffic. Buses with signs touting holiday cheer. The steady ringing of the bell at the corner crying out for holiday charity.

It was a time of miracles and wonder. He turned left and headed down the street, snow crunching beneath his feet, inhaling the frigid air, tasting wet snow. He pulled out a five and dropped it into the violin case of an old man playing "White Christmas."

The man lifted his shaggy gray brow, looked at him, and nodded. It caught Dillon's attention beyond the usual nod for some strange reason.

"Thanks, pal," the violinist said. Dillon noted the color of his eyes, ghostly blue shade, seeming almost transparent beneath the glow of the streetlight. Odd and eerie. The old man glanced down at the case and then back at Vance. He smiled and, as the landscape of his face deepened, some sort of strange white light erupted to surround him. "Miracles do happen, Dillon." And then he turned to his violin and started playing once more, eyes closed.

Dillon blinked and looked at the old man again. There was no light and the man completely ignored Dillon. He wasn't certain what had just happened. What had he seen? He shook his head and continued on his way. It had to be an illusion. He must be tired.

Dillon looked up at the sky, blinked rapidly as fat snowflakes struck wetly against his cheeks. He gripped the package tighter. Suddenly it seemed the most important thing in the world that he deliver this package safely. He closed his eyes and stood there, letting the moisture cling to his skin. Vance Keith. He could almost taste the man, the echo of his cologne still nudging at Dillon's senses. He took a deep, icy breath, and then walked on.

He guessed he was about to discover if miracles really could happen.

Chapter Two

“Vance, Jared called to find out if you’ve had a chance to look over the file for that new account with Barnett Morgan? He wants to know what ideas you’ve come up with for the meeting next Thursday. And who you’ll want on your team.”

Vance glanced at the small, brass, G-clef-shaped clock poised on the side of his desk. It had been a gift from Jake for Vance’s birthday just last month. He looked up at his assistant, Laura, and leaned back in his chair with a sigh. Putting this plan together wasn’t exactly the highest priority on his list at the moment. Although it should be.

“You can tell him I’m in the process of reviewing it now. I know we’re on a tight schedule. I should have something put together for him to look at by Monday morning.”

“Great, I’ll let him know. Do you need me to stay any longer tonight?”

“Hot date?”

“How’d you guess?” Laura blushed.

He nodded, indicating with a pointed look, to her black dress. “It’s new. And you have a new shade of tint to your hair. I like the red.”

“How do you always know these things? I wish my boyfriends were as observant. But you know how they are -- one thing on their minds. Which is why they don’t usually last.”

She smoothed a hand down the silky material. "I just bought this yesterday at that new boutique on the corner. I guess that's why I like working for you -- you are so sharp, even on the smallest details."

Not always, he thought. "No, you can go. Have a great time. Maybe this one will be a keeper."

Laura smiled. "Doubt it. But it will be fun anyway. I'll let Jared know you'll have that plan ready for him on Monday." She bounced back out the door. She was a cute kid with a lot of energy. Fresh faced, an import from Wisconsin. Vance wondered how long she'd stick around. Another one on her way to the top just as soon as the right door opened.

Vance glanced back down at the thick file resting on his desk. Barnett Morgan was one of the company's biggest clients. Jared would not be happy if Vance didn't come up with a knock-'em-dead plan that shot off fireworks. He should be further along than he was. Staring at the damn thing wasn't getting him anywhere. Not letting go of his memories of Jake had stunted his creativity big time. Damn him anyway.

Jared Davis, his boss for the last three years, was not a patient man. If Vance said he'd have the draft proposal to him by Monday, then he'd expect it by eight a.m. There would be several prongs to the marketing strategy for this new line of products, which were supposed to be unveiled in the spring. That didn't give him a lot of time to get too elaborate. Working for the Jared Davis Agency was something he'd only dreamed about back in Vermont. Now, here he was in New York, working for one of the most prestigious ad agencies in the city. Vance had managed to land this account by luck and determination. By attending the right parties, talking to the people who mattered, promising the world. Creating imaginative campaigns that caught the public's attention. He'd only kept it with ingenuity and persistence...and making the damned deadlines.

Jared ran a tight ship, hired only the best, and if Vance didn't come up with a plan that Nathan Barnett and Andre Morgan absolutely loved, he was going to be in some really hot water. Jobs like this did not come easily and he darn well didn't want to lose it now.

Suddenly, he snapped up the file and dropped it into his brown leather briefcase. He'd had enough of the office. His brain just wasn't functioning here.

Vance pulled his black leather jacket from the coatrack and turned off the light in his office.

He wasn't particularly looking forward to going back to an empty apartment jammed with memories, but he'd put it off about as long as he could. He could go to any number of parties, there were a slew of invitations on his desk. The problem was he hadn't planned on going stag to any of them this year. Jake and the fucking economy had screwed him big-time. The debacle on Wall Street had practically killed his chances for the future he'd envisioned. And he certainly wasn't in the mood for schmoozing with potential clients tonight.

Maybe he'd stop off at Doneghan's on his way home and grab a beer and some dinner to help soften the edges. He didn't feel much like cooking for himself. He hadn't since Jake gave him the news he'd be leaving.

Damn, but he hated when he got himself into such a black mood. He'd promised himself he wouldn't get all maudlin over the break up of the affair, but sometimes it just wasn't that easy. Especially this close to the holidays. But he missed Jake. He missed talking to him. He missed sharing a meal with him. And he missed the sex.

He smiled to himself as he rode down in the elevator remembering the last time they'd made love -- just before Jake had informed him that he'd found a job in Los Angeles. The sex had been so damn good. And then he was gone. Too many people losing jobs and Jake had done the best he could -- so he said. Too freaking independent and stubborn, Jake had refused to stay with Vance while he looked for another job in New York. The argument they'd had just before he left had been so hurtful.

Vance wondered what Jake thought when he got the package that Vance had sent him. He'd been so fucking angry when he'd put the package together, wrapped it, and dropped it off at the delivery service.

The fact that Jake had taken a job on the West Coast, without even consulting him, told him louder than any words could exactly how important he was in Jake's life. Not very, apparently. Too bad he couldn't be just as blasé about the relationship. He wasn't the first guy to have to survive after a breakup. And he sure wouldn't be the last.

To be honest, Vance couldn't be certain he'd have given up his job in New York to follow Jake to Los Angeles. But he guessed he would have at least liked to have been given the opportunity to think about it. Right up front, Jake had said he didn't want Vance to go with him. He refused to let him give up his dream job at Jared Davis and he wouldn't hear any more about it. It seemed so easy for Jake to cut the ties, why couldn't he do the same?

The holidays sucked, pure and simple. He guessed he could go home to Vermont and spend the holidays with his family, but that idea didn't appeal to him all that much. They hadn't been happy about his move to New York, nor his relationship with Jake. They thought he'd seemed even more wild and reckless than Vance appeared to them at times. His sister, Stella, had made no bones about her opinion. Of course, she always was the most outspoken of his siblings.

He'd been as open with them as he could be, but the family relationship was still tense. His mother and his brother had handled Vance's outing pretty well. His eldest sister was lukewarm. Of course, her husband, Brad, was homophobic, so no surprise there. But his father and grandparents probably bothered him the most. Their coolness and distance to him and Jake on the last visit home made things too uncomfortable to consider going back to Vermont for the holidays -- especially by himself.

He'd left Bennington for a reason. New York was much more to his taste. He loved the nightlife, the fast pace of the city. He never had been much of a skier. And helping out on the farm certainly wasn't his cup of tea. He'd always felt totally out of his skin in Bennington. Although he had to admit, he still loved the taste of fresh, warmed maple syrup. Store-bought stuff still didn't do the trick for him. His mother had been good at shipping him out some of the real thing now and then, and Vance stockpiled the stuff.

“You’re going to lose all your teeth if you keep eating that stuff,” Jake usually commented to him about his sweet tooth. It was just one of the areas they couldn’t seem to agree on. At the time he had thought it was minor. Maybe it wasn’t quite as minor as he’d thought.

But he wasn’t giving up the homegrown stuff. And his dentist bills were not that bad.

He’d really thought there’d been more than a sexual spark between him and Jake. But apparently not for Jake if he could leave that easily. And now he was gone, leaving a giant hole in his life that he had to find a way to fix.

When Vance left the office, it was snowing -- lots of huge, fluffy flakes that reminded him of Vermont. Of the holidays before things got so crazy. He did have some good memories of when he was a kid. Of tobogganing down the hill in back of the farmhouse, and helping to gather the sap from the trees. When he was young, he’d been the one responsible for chopping the wood and keeping the woodstove going at the sap house when it came to boiling down the sap. He’d loved the smell of burning wood and getting a chance to sample the sweet, warm taste of freshly made, strained syrup. God, there was nothing like it. Those were the good memories.

Just not the ones about his personal struggles with his own sexuality. The battles he’d fought alone as he came to terms with who he was. Those had been tough...especially for a homeboy from the farm. But he’d survived and gotten out. Things should have been better for him here in New York. Some days they were, and others they weren’t. It was a real up-and-down struggle.

He descended into the subway tunnel, pulled along by the rest of the late Friday surge of humanity eager for the weekend to begin. The bustle of people didn’t bother him all that much. He was used to it. It was the brightly colored packages reminding him of the holidays that sort of gnawed at him.

He'd had a great present all picked out for Jake. Just right for a man trying to make his bones on Wall Street. It hadn't been the best news when Jake's company was one of those swallowed up by the volatile mortgage crisis. It had blindsided them both when the company went under. Vance had been certain Jake would easily find another position in New York. But it hadn't been that easy, and Jake hadn't been willing to wait it out in the Big Apple.

At his stop, Vance exited the train and made his way to the surface. Doneghan's wasn't too packed for a Friday night and he managed to find a table in the corner. He set his briefcase on one scarred chair and sat down in the other. He didn't need a menu; he knew it by heart.

"Vance, it's been a while since we've seen you in here. When are you going to play for us again?"

Vance looked up into the smiling, freckled face of his waiter. "Hey, Sean, I know it's been a while. Been kind of busy, you know. One of these nights I'll stop by and give you a song or two. How's your pop doing?"

Sean looked over his shoulder at the big, burly man tending bar. "Ornery as ever. But things are going good, I guess. Better than you might expect."

"Glad to hear it. How about a nice tall glass of your finest and a beef pasty. It's been a long week."

"Coming right up. It's a good thing you came in early. Around the holidays we get jammed most nights." Sean sprinted away and Vance leaned back to gaze around the Irish pub. Not too many familiar faces yet, but Doneghan's was a place he'd spent a lot of time at in the past. They had an old upright near the back. On and off Vance would spend a night crooning out a song or two to pass the time. Since Jake left, he hadn't had the urge to do much playing.

He looked at the bar and remembered meeting Jake here that first night. Right off the bat they'd shared more than a beer. Six months ago, Vance had met the man he thought

would be in his life for a very long time. They'd shared a beer or two and then gone back to Vance's apartment for a long night of getting to know each other in the most intimate way possible.

Vance had thought it would end there, like so many of the hook-ups he'd had over the years since coming to New York. But it hadn't, and it had only gotten better.

He should pull out the file from his briefcase and try to break out of his mood. But he just didn't have the energy to focus on that ad campaign right now.

He looked up as someone dropped the briefcase onto the floor and folded into the empty seat at the table.

"Hello, Vance. It's been a while." Vance shifted in his seat. Sometimes relationships with ex-lovers morphed into friendships, and sometimes they didn't. Glenn had been rather a clingy, needy sort of lover. He'd always had a habit of making Vance feel uncomfortable. It was odd how it had been Glenn who had introduced him to Jake.

"Hello, Glenn. I've been...busy."

Glenn's cerulean blue eyes studied Vance. Vance's relationship with the man had never been all that serious in his estimation. Glenn had always liked to flit and never seemed all that serious about commitment. At least Vance hadn't thought it was until he'd started dating Jake. Something subtle had changed with Glenn since then.

"Yeah, I heard Jake's taken off for parts unknown. I'm surprised you didn't go with him."

Vance shrugged. "L.A.'s not really my thing." But he might have made it his thing if he'd gotten the smallest thumbs-up from Jake.

Glenn placed a hand over his and Vance stiffened. He was in no mood to pick up where they'd left off before he'd started seeing Jake.

"I know how tough it can be. I'm here for you, if you need me. No strings, just a friendly face...or whatever."

A friendly face. The problem was, that probably was why Vance came here tonight. He'd felt so alone and isolated since Jake left. He turned to look at Glenn, and remembered the friendly intimacy they'd shared before Jake had come onto the scene. His gaze dropped to Glenn's lips.

"I could use a friend right now, I guess." Anything not to be left alone tonight with his thoughts.

Glenn smiled and squeezed his hand. Glen lowered his hand and cup the bulge clothed by his trousers.

"I haven't forgotten how good it was between us, Vance. It could be like that again."

Vance closed his eyes, feeling the lust surge through his body. The lost intimacy with another man gnawing at him. Jake was gone and he wasn't coming back. Glenn was offering him friendship, a bit of solace, something he sorely needed right now. Should he take him up on his offer?

He opened his eyes and looked into Glenn's face. "Friendship."

Glenn nodded. "No strings." He leaned over to kiss Vance. The touch of his lips aroused feelings that Vance thought had been buried, like touching a lit match to dried brush. But then, the need for sex was never far off. And tonight he could use Glenn's "friendship."

"The men's room," Glenn whispered in his ear and then rose from the table. He looked down at Vance, his expression telling him exactly what would be waiting for him in the men's room.

Glenn trailed a hand along Vance's arm and then turned and sauntered away. He didn't look back. Vance couldn't take his eyes off the temptingly muscled ass clothed in tight blue jeans.

Sean brought his beer and pasty and placed them on the table. "Anything else I can get you?"

Vance blinked and turned to look up at Sean. He knew he shouldn't go into that men's room. Knew it was a mistake.

"Not right now. Thanks, Sean." Sean nodded and then walked away, lost in the throng of bodies. Vance took a long draw of the beer. He looked in the direction of the bathroom. Was this what he really wanted?

Maybe, maybe not. But he knew it was what he needed right now. He stood up, finished off the beer and then headed in the direction of the bathroom. The party could wait.

In the dark hallway, the sounds of conversation and laughter coming from the bar were muted. Vance stared at the old, scarred door for a long time, his gaze fastened on the tarnished, round brass knob. Finally, he reached out. The door was unlocked and Vance stepped into the darkened interior. A reflected flash from the mirror and then the room was again suffocated in darkness.

"Don't turn on the light," Glenn said into the void.

Vance slid the lock on the door home, and then he felt the heat of another body behind him. At first, he tried to draw away, as Glenn's cloying cologne wafted over him. Glenn always had liked drowning himself in aftershave. Tonight it almost made Vance a bit sick at how densely it permeated the small confines of the bathroom. But then hands were at the front of his pants, quickly releasing his stiff cock. A crackle of sound and Vance's erection was neatly sheathed.

"I've been thinking about you, Vance. I've missed you."

Vance couldn't find words. He wished he could get Jake out of his mind. He wished he wanted the man whose mouth was now sucking his cock deep down his throat. He wished it wasn't just sexual release that brought him into this room. But it was, and Glenn's tongue and mouth felt so good. He'd always been expert at sucking and he hadn't lost one bit of talent. Glenn suctioned him in, swirling his tongue over the head and down the thick column.

Vance felt like he was going to fall. He stared off into the darkness, hands braced against the door, hips thrusting toward Glenn, who was kneeling in front of him on the cold tiled floor.

It didn't take long, not long at all, before he was spurting his seed into the condom. He leaned his head back against the door and closed his eyes. The orgasm was good, just what he needed, and he felt the tension ease from his body. He'd been wound so tightly since Jake left, it was a surprise that he hadn't broken apart before this.

Now that his eyes were more accustomed to the darkness of the room, he could just make out Glenn's outline. The man was now back on his feet.

He'd been in the room enough times that he could navigate it blind, and he made his way to the toilet to discard the condom and then he flushed. Automatically, he stepped to the sink to wash his hands. His mind was total mush, filled with too many converging thoughts and memories to make sense of what was going on inside his head.

A heavy hand rested on his shoulder and a mouth pressed to his ear. Glenn's other hand

slid a condom package into his hand.

It was only right. He turned to face Glenn in the darkness. Thank God there wasn't a light on. It was better this way. Anonymity was sometimes a good thing. He dropped down in front of Glenn and released his cock. Quickly he sheathed him and then sucked him inside his mouth.

"Damn, yes. No one is better than you, Vance. No one. I've missed you so much."

Vance attended to Glenn, wished he could feel some emotion, but there was nothing to give the man. It was release, pure and simple, nothing more than that. Glenn's cock was long and slender, sliding easily into Vance's mouth. He bathed the rock-hard pole with his tongue, taking the time to suck Glenn's balls into his mouth, feeling the sac draw up against Glenn's body, hearing his audible sigh of pleasure. He brought Glenn off quickly, there in the

darkness, as he mourned and yearned for Jake. Wishing that it were Jake he was kneeling in front of.

But it wasn't and it never would be again.

Out of courtesy, Vance waited while Glenn cleaned himself up. He needed a drink, badly. He needed to get out of this bathroom. The sickly sweet pine air freshener blasted him. He grabbed for the doorknob.

"We could go to my place," Glenn said from behind him.

Vance felt like such a bastard, but all he could think about was getting out of there as fast as he could.

"I can't tonight, Glenn. I've got a huge project to get done for work. I'll be busy all weekend. Sorry." And then he rushed out of the bathroom and headed back to the table, feeling like such an unfeeling jerk but unable to give the man what he seemed to want. He no longer had an appetite for the dinner. After tossing some bills onto the table, he grabbed up his coat and briefcase and pushed through the crowd and out of the pub.

He sucked in cold, fresh air. That had been such a bad move. Glenn wasn't what he wanted and he shouldn't have raised the man's hopes. But he had so needed that release. The problem was that it didn't matter who it came from. Glenn was just a convenience and that made Vance feel like shit. He couldn't let that happen again.

He could always hop on the Internet if he wanted anonymous sex. There was plenty of that to be had. But he wanted a lover; he wanted it to be the right one. Not just a warm body. He wished he knew the answer. That was easier than this. This was all too hard. Too lonely. And he didn't want to be alone.

He walked the six blocks toward his apartment. He passed a man playing a violin and Vance stopped to listen. He was an avid aficionado of music and the street player had a real grasp of his craft. Vance tossed a couple of bills into his violin case. The old man stopped playing and looked up at Vance with faded blue eyes. He smiled a toothless grin.

“You’ll get your wish, boy. You’ll see.”

His words took Vance aback. “Excuse me?”

But the old man had gone back to playing his violin and Vance had to wonder if it hadn’t been his imagination. Slowly he made his way down the remaining blocks toward his apartment building. He looked back down the street and blinked. The man had vanished as though he’d never been there.

Vance thought for sure he must be losing his mind.

Chapter Three

Dillon had worked hard all his life to get where he was in order to create D.L.F. Deliveries. And now that the business was on firm ground, he wanted a man -- a partner -- to share his life with. It seemed starting a fledgling business was much easier than finding the right lover. That was just plain sad.

He was a pretty private kind of guy, didn't open up readily to every man he'd ever had sex with. He had yet to experience the kind of intimate emotion with a sex partner that he wanted to find in a longtime lover. Something always seemed to happen that burst the bubble of his previous relationships.

He kept seeing the old man with the violin and remembering what he had said. There was just something about the old guy that seemed to stick with Dillon. That was one of the things he'd enjoyed about being a messenger and riding the streets. Meeting people -- all kinds of people. It was something he missed now that his job was behind the desk and not taking him out into the streets. Cycling in the park wasn't quite the same as the adrenaline that pumped through him for each delivery he made. The race through the streets, weaving through traffic, and people of all shapes and sizes. The race against time, to get a delivery where it had to be.

He remembered expressions, learned to interpret body language, anticipate reactions. Yeah, his time on the streets had honed not only his body, but also his understanding of people. He might like keeping his feelings to himself, but he still missed being a regular part of what went on around him.

He wanted to know more about the old man. He couldn't quite figure it out, but the man had hit a nerve. How had the old man ended up on the street? Did he have a home? In some ways the elderly street musician reminded him a bit of his grandfather. Maybe that was it. Too familiar, too close to home.

Dillon glared at the package he had dropped onto his dining room table. He'd stopped by Vance Keith's apartment, but no one was home. Could he have left the package with the doorman? Sure, but it wouldn't have gotten Dillon what he really wanted. Did he have the guts to make another run at the place? God only knew.

He looked out the window at the pitch-black apartment, wondering exactly what Vance did for a living. Something in an office, he decided, because every time Dillon had seen him, he'd been wearing a suit. Dressed to the nines. Usually not a hair out of place.

Except in his apartment when he was butt naked and fucking his current lover. Then that pretty blond-streaked dark brown hair was most definitely not neatly combed back. In fact, he looked rakish, the image of lust on his face, a pale lock of shiny hair falling into his eyes. Lean muscles rippling as he pushed back on his partner's cock. And Vance's cock, oh what a mean length of meat he had lodged between his legs.

Dillon was already getting a hard-on just thinking about him. It just wasn't right that he didn't have someone to worship that body the way it deserved to be worshipped. Like Dillon yearned to do.

It wasn't that Dillon didn't have a life. He didn't spend all his time mooning over the man next door. Well, not exactly. It's just that this man was everything he could wish for in

a man. Did that seem superficial? After all, he didn't really know him. Except for watching him from a distance.

But maybe tonight that could be rectified. He looked up at the sky and the snow falling. Was it special snow this time of year? Could one just make a wish and have it happen? If he could ask for just one thing, what would it be? He leaned back in the chair as he stared up into the black-and-white, star-speckled night.

Did he believe in miracles at Christmastime? He wasn't a kid anymore and he knew he really should have put all that behind him. Everyone was always telling him he should get out more. Even Felice kept trying to hook him up with someone. Again, the image of the old man popped into his head. What the hell was it about him?

Coming to a decision, he jumped up and grabbed his coat, heading toward the door. He had to find out who that old man was. Why, he didn't know. But he needed to find out his name. At least that much. Those pale blue eyes of his had seemed to look right into Dillon's soul. It was an eerie experience. He snatched up the box and stuffed it into his pocket. Maybe on the way back he'd try once more at Vance's apartment before calling it a night.

Hell, he didn't really have anything better to do with his time. He wanted to see if the old man was still on the street corner. And if he still caused the same gooseflesh to trickle down Dillon's spine. Somehow that old man knew something about him. It made him uneasy to realize a complete stranger had that much insight into what went on inside his head.

He headed down the block, vaguely aware of the snow crunching beneath his boots. It was past nine o'clock and there were less people on the streets. Shops were closed. He walked several more blocks before finally coming upon the old man once again. He was just putting his violin in the case. Dillon quickened his steps.

"Hey, mister," he called out, just as the man started to turn away. The musician turned to look at him. He seemed to recognize Dillon.

"Hello, young fellow. What can I do for you?"

There really was something about him. He seemed to look right through Dillon. Well, not actually through him, more inside him. Now that he was here, Dillon was uncertain of why he'd come back.

"Do you have time for a cup of coffee? Maybe get something to eat?" he asked.

The old man hesitated. "You want me to have coffee with you? Why?"

Dillon looked at him for a long time. At the weathered, chapped face, the blue eyes that seemed to have seen so much in his years, the stooped shoulders that looked like they'd carried such a heavy weight during his lifetime.

"I don't know," Dillon finally answered, feeling rather foolish. "But I think it's important. Have you somewhere special you need to be?"

"I'll have a cup of something warm with you. I've enough time for that. Curfew isn't until ten-thirty at the shelter."

"You stay at a shelter? You don't have a home?"

The man looked at Dillon, a small smile curving the corners of his dry lips. "It's home enough, young man. You have a few minutes, too, and then you must go. He won't be expecting you, but it will be a good visit."

The man's words brought Dillon up short. "How do you do that? It's almost like you know what I'm thinking."

"It's a gift, nothing more. Had it all my life."

They stepped inside a coffee shop and sat down at a booth on a couple of torn red plastic cushions. A waitress who looked just as worn and tired walked up to their booth.

"What can I get you?"

Dillon looked over at the old man. His charcoal overcoat had seen better days. Tattered around the edges, holes where the lining peaked through, and several missing buttons. His hands were resting on the table, fingers curled and gnarled with the look of arthritis to them. Dillon had to wonder how he managed to play the violin. He nodded to the old man.

"I'll have a cup of hot chocolate, please, ma'am. Lots of whipped cream, if you don't mind. Do you have the real stuff? Not that imitation crap."

"Sure. Whipped cream. Gotcha. Anything else?"

"No, that will be fine. Thank you."

She turned to Dillon. "And you?"

"Coffee, please." He turned to the old man. "Are you positive you don't want anything to --"

Suddenly, the old man's hand shot out and caught the waitress's wrist. She turned to look down at him in surprise, trying to pull free. "They'll come. You don't need to fret. Christmas will be everything you've hoped for."

Dillon saw the woman pale and then she snatched her arm away, rubbing it as though it had been burned.

"Crazy old man." Dillon just caught the words as she scurried away, rubbing at her wrist.

The old man shook his head. "People don't like to hear good things much. They don't believe. I guess it's a lot easier to believe in the bad things in the world. That's a shame."

The waitress returned and quickly set their mugs down in front of them, spilling some of the hot liquid onto the table in her hurry to get away from them. The old man wrapped his hands around his mug.

Dillon poured a dash of cream and two packets of artificial sweetener into his coffee and stirred it with the spoon. He watched the old man pick up five packets of sugar and one after the other he slowly tore them open and poured the sweet granules into his chocolate before carefully stirring it.

"You like things sweet," Dillon commented.

"Sweet's always better than tart or bitter, don't you think, Dillon?"

The use of his name again drew Dillon up short. He recalled the man had used it once before. “How do you know my name? We’ve never met before, have we?”

The old man just smiled and stirred his chocolate. He carefully drew the spoon from the mug and set it down on a white napkin. Then he lifted the mug and swallowed long and deep. “Ahh, now that warms the toes. You can feel it going all the way down.”

Dillon couldn’t help smiling. “What’s your name?”

“Why’d you come back, Dillon? I’ve nothing more to share. Most people just ignore my ramblings.”

“I don’t know. But I just had to. It’s strange. I have to know your name for some reason.”

“You don’t have enough faith in yourself, Dillon. It will go better than you expect. You really don’t need me. He needs you as much as you need him. The door is open now, don’t let it slam shut in your face.”

“Who are you? I don’t get it. I’ve never seen you before in this neighborhood. I think I would have remembered.”

“Maybe you just didn’t have a reason to see me before. Do you see any of the homeless? I mean, really see them? We’re simply part of the fixtures you pass every day. No different than the street lamps on every corner.”

The reality of that statement made him feel uncomfortable. Yet, Dillon had to admit the old man was probably right. He went on through his life, gave donations when expected, tossed a bit of cash now and then to someone asking -- like this man when he’d thrown a five into his violin case. There was always someplace else he had to be. So why tonight?

“See what’s in front of your face, Dillon. Don’t be afraid to reach out.”

The old man finished off his chocolate, wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, and then carefully set it next to his empty cup. As he watched, Dillon saw him pull two silver coins

from his pocket and lay them on the napkin. Then he rose to his feet. "Time's up. Have to get going. Thank you for the chocolate and the company."

"Do you need a place to stay?" Dillon asked.

"No, I'm fine. You go on about your business." He leaned toward Dillon. "The time is now. Another minute and your chance will be lost. You go do what you must."

"I don't feel right just leaving you like this."

"I can take care of myself. Been doing so for quite a while now. You go take care of your business. I had my chances a long time ago. Some I took and some I didn't. The lost chances... They're the ones you can't get back -- and you regret. Don't let it be so with you. I hope you're one of the ones that gets the message."

Again, Dillon felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end as he looked at the old man. He pulled out his wallet and threw some bills on the table to cover the drinks and tip. Then he held out a twenty to the old man. "Here, take this."

The old man shook his head. "You've already paid for the music. You don't need to pay me for my time. I thank you for the company. I have to be going now." He turned toward the door, but then he paused and turned his head to look at Dillon. "The name's Ren. You have a good night."

Dillon watched as he shuffled on out of the shop. Ren. A strange name for a particularly strange gentleman. A man who seemed to have a message for him. He looked down at his watch. Almost ten o'clock. Was it too late to stop by Vance's apartment?

He wished he weren't so devoted to this damn fantasy of his. To the point where he wanted to believe an old man who was probably just spouting gibberish in an attempt to fill some kind of void in his lonely life.

But in some odd way wasn't he just as lonely? Even to the point of seeking out the old man just to get some validation for his feelings for Vance? God, he was hopeless. And

obviously it showed. Was he really so desperate that he was willing to pay the old man just for smoothing his feathers?

He slipped his hand in his pocket and felt the package. Maybe by making the delivery and actually getting a chance to talk to Vance, he could burst the fantasy bubble and then move on with his life. Maybe this would be a gift one way or the other. Either he got the man he wanted or he closed the book and got to move on to a new page.

He walked the few blocks back toward his street. When he got to his building, out of habit he looked up at the brownstone next to it and was shocked when he saw a yellow light flash on in Vance's apartment. Was he alone? Was this Dillon's opportunity to finally discover if he was going to have a chance with the man next door?

Don't be afraid to reach out. Ren's words echoed through his head.

Another minute and your chance will be lost.

With bated breath, he walked toward the building where Vance lived and mounted the steps. It was time to see if the old man was right.

Chapter Four

Vance stared out the window at the curtain of snow. He wasn't used to arriving at the holidays without at least a casual lover in his life and certainly didn't look forward to being by himself right now. He could have invited Glenn to come home with him, but that would have ended up requiring Vance to extricate himself from a relationship he didn't plan to deepen. He'd tried it before with Glenn and had found the man was just too clingy and demanding a personality to forge a deeper commitment -- almost bordering on psychotic in some ways. Vance's inner instincts told him to get out before it was too late.

When Vance had begun the affair with Jake, the separation from Glenn had not been easy to achieve. Every now and then he thought he still felt Glenn's eerie presence -- his eyes burning into Vance's back. It was an unsettling sensation.

So why had he allowed himself to be drawn into the bathroom for a quick hook-up? Was he really that lonely -- that pathetic -- that he'd take the chance on putting himself back into that sort of situation? God, what an idiot.

Just because Jake had expunged himself from his life was no reason to go off the deep end and land himself back into a whole mess of trouble. He could work this out. He had to work it out. And a relationship with Glenn was not in his future.

Vance could still sense Jake's presence in the apartment; he could still smell his cologne. His imprint indelibly marked every room in this place. He really liked living in this building and dealing with these memories was something he was going to have to work out. Tonight it just seemed to be hitting him harder than it had over the last several weeks. He missed his ex-lover a lot; maybe because, finally, he realized it was over. Jake wasn't coming back. He'd never been as in love with anyone as he had been with Jake.

He looked at the phone on the other side of the room. He'd been unable to help himself and had tried to call Jake at his apartment last week, but he found no one at home and he'd assumed he'd moved. Or wanted to ignore his calls. The problem was that he didn't have a new number for Jake in California. Trying Jake's cell phone only got him voice mail. He'd even tried calling directory assistance and there were several listings for a Jake Hollinger, but none of them were *his* Jake. It was probably too soon.

He lifted the glass of brandy he'd poured earlier and took a long swallow. Then he leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes. He could work on the project he'd brought home with him, but that just didn't call to him. He needed to form a plan by Monday, but he just couldn't shake up the enthusiasm to do what needed doing. He really did need to pull himself out of this fugue he found himself in. Dammit, but he wanted to be whole again.

He visualized Jake standing in front of him, that lopsided smile on his beautiful lips. He held out a hand to Vance. "Come on, lazybones, get up. You'll have plenty of time to sleep when your soul's gone and left town."

A slow, jazzy number playing on the CD -- maybe Kenny G. Jake liked Kenny; he liked the sexy moan that undulated in the music. Slow like two men who enjoyed fucking, was how Jake had put it. A husky, seductive voice. Vance couldn't help it. The relief with Glenn was short-lived at best, like imitation chocolate when he'd gorged on German dark not so long ago.

Vance unzipped his pants and pulled out his cock, needing more relief. He wanted Jake to be here with him. He'd pull Vance into his arms and they'd dance around the room, lights

low, candles lit, the warmth of the gas-lit fire in the fireplace. The ache he felt at Jake's loss throbbed through him.

They'd circle the room, shedding clothes as they went, slow and easy. Jake had wonderful hands that would grip his ass just right, branding him with his hot touch. A finger at his asshole, pushing into him, Jake's other hand pressing Vance to his hard, sculpted body. He remembered the sensation as his cock brushed against Jake's, sliding together and driving them higher and higher.

It was slow and easy there in the living room. Until they moved to the thick rug in front of the fireplace. The fragrant, earthy oil, the butt plug Jake had bought for Vance. And the seductive presence of Jake himself.

"Something new for my best boy," Jake would say in that deep, baritone-rich voice that had a way of sending shivers down Vance's spine. Vance would drape himself across the forest green ottoman, waiting for his lover's attention. He'd wait, in Jake's favorite position to take him.

"You'll wear it while we're at dinner, won't you, sweetheart?" A murmur of words whispered in Vance's ear.

Vance could almost feel Jake's hands on the hard, muscled globes of his ass, separating them, and Vance could feel the heat of the room against his anus. Bared and vulnerable.

It wasn't what they would do; it's what they had done that lived inside Vance. It was the memory of that last night they'd shared together before Jake had left. He tried to force his thoughts away from that night as he stroked up and down his thick shaft, remembering the feel of Jake's hands on his body, the warmth of the oil as Jake spread it around his hole and the quick draw of breath as Jake breached his opening, slipping inside.

Anticipation tightened like a coiled watch spring inside his stomach as Jake's finger slid in and out of his channel. Hot friction that wound the spring -- tighter and tighter.

"Do you want it, Vance? Do you want it bad?"

Vance's cock was so engorged he didn't think he could stand it much longer. "Yes, Jake. I'm ready for you. Do it." His whole body trembled, shudders of pleasure, of anticipation, and then he felt the cool, smoothly rounded end of the plug as it pressed at his opening. He tightened, coiled and waiting, ready to be stretched, to be plugged, to be prepared for and by his lover.

He needed Jake inside him. Needed him now. The warmth emanating from the fireplace was nothing compared to the blaze scorching through Vance's body. Not even close.

Jake had pressed the plug into Vance's rectum, deeper and deeper. Sliding it out and pushing in again and again, until Vance was shoving against the invasion. His hips angled, eager to meet the intrusion, consuming more of it. Until finally Jake pressed it home, lodging it tightly inside Vance's ass.

"There you go, baby. All tight and snug inside. Are you open for me, hon? Will you think about what's going to replace that plug when we get back here?"

"Jesus, Jake. You're killing me."

Vance heard him chuckle. "All mine, honey. All mine for tonight. I love it when you get all flushed and your eyes go so damn dark." He pulled Vance up from the ottoman to face him. Vance could feel the hard presence of the plug in his ass, pressing into him, widening him, making him ready for his lover. The muscles of his ass cheeks kissed tight against the pressure.

Jake cupped his face and possessed his lips. "Nobody will ever be as good for you, baby. I wish it could stay this way. Forever."

Vance's hand rode up and down his throbbing shaft, remembering that night, those feelings. Jake's words. He'd never felt so loved, so linked to another person. God, but he missed him so much. His hand fell away from his cock, the ache of abandonment running deep. He wanted to scream out with his anguish.

And then something strange happened as it felt like someone's wet lips encircled his hard-on. Lips he remembered, a mouth that danced over his prick as though it knew every inch of flesh, just the way he loved to be sucked.

Vance dropped back against the chair, hands gripped tightly on the arms, his hips thrusting against the delicious sensations of the mouth that held him prisoner. The tongue traced up and down the length of his erection, beneath the flared hood, dipping into the slit. The mouth then engulfed him once again.

It was a long ride of thrust and retreat, of driving him toward the edge and bringing him back again, though never releasing him completely. Only one man had ever done this to him. Had owned him so thoroughly. Someone who molded and sculpted his passion until he hardly recognized himself.

God, yes. Suck me! He wanted to scream at the top of his lungs with the pleasure that was bulldozing its way through him. And then he shattered into a million pieces, flying among the snowflakes into the night sky as the ghostly mouth sucked at his cum, pulling every speck of passion from inside him until there was nothing left, not an ounce of energy, and he dropped back into the chair like a lifeless puppet. And the mouth was gone from his softened cock.

What had happened? What had been in this room with him? Inside his apartment? It didn't make sense. But he felt so...at peace all of a sudden. And suddenly the scent of Jake's cologne dissipated.

"No," he protested. "Not yet. Don't go. I don't know what you are, but don't go yet."

Too late, and the last vestiges of the scent disappeared. Finally, he lifted up in the chair and righted his clothing. He rubbed a hand across his eyes, still wondering what had just taken place. It was like he'd been in some sort of trance or something.

Almost like thinking about Jake had willed some essence of the man back into Vance's living room. It was an eerie feeling but instead of being put off by the strange occurrence,

Vance wanted that feeling to come back. It wasn't fair -- none of this was right. None of it. He went into the bathroom to clean himself up. He heard the buzz of the intercom and glanced at his watch.

Ten o'clock. Who could it be at this time of night?

He brushed down his wrinkled pants and walked to the intercom.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Mr. Keith, there's someone here with a package for you."

"At this time of night?" Who could possibly be sending him a package now?

"He said he was by earlier, but you weren't at home. He's from that place that usually delivers your packages. Should I send him up?"

Why not? Maybe it would help to dissipate this weird feeling he'd been having all evening. It certainly had been a strange night all ways around. Why stop now? Any diversion was welcome.

"Go ahead and send him on up. Thanks for buzzing me, John."

It was one of the reasons he liked this building. The security. It was an old brownstone located in an older, renovated section of town. He enjoyed the privacy. This area of town was homey and intimate, and surprisingly, was well policed. Sometimes the people and shops reminded him of his small hometown in Vermont, except there was a bit of a cosmopolitan air to the area as well. Sort of like Georgetown. For him, it was the perfect blending of the best of both worlds. City and small town. He couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

Suddenly, for some odd reason, his spirits lightened. He wasn't sure how he'd managed to submerge himself into the regretful, somber mood of moments ago, or what had now lifted his spirits. He wasn't normally the type of man given to such strong mood swings.

The doorbell rang and he went to answer it. He was shocked to discover, not the usual young, disheveled messenger, but an attractive man about his own age wearing a black wool coat over what looked like a suit peeking from beneath.

“I’m sorry. Can I help you? The doorman said a messenger was coming up.”

The man handed a package to Vance. It was one that Vance thought he recognized.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Keith. My name is Dillon Lloyd.” He pulled off a leather glove and held out his hand. “I own the messenger service that you use. We’ve had this package returned to us and since it really was on the way home for me, I thought I’d drop it off myself.”

Vance accepted Dillon’s handshake. The grip had a certain coolness to it from the winter weather, but it was a clasp that sent tingles of awareness racing along Vance’s arm. He ended the handshake and turned his attention to the package. It was addressed to Jake and Vance felt a fist grip his heart. It was the last package he’d sent to him, hoping he’d still catch him in town. One sent in anger.

He looked at Dillon. “He wasn’t there?”

Dillon shook his head. “I’m afraid not. We’ve tried several times to deliver it, but no luck. Since I live in the building next door to you, I thought I’d drop it by myself.”

Vance’s fingers tightened on the package. He studied Dillon Lloyd closely, an odd hint of awareness now tugging at him. “You live next door? How come I’ve never seen you before?”

Dillon smiled. Damn, it was a really nice smile, with strong, even white teeth. Jake would have appreciated that smile. Tiny crinkles at Dillon’s eyes highlighted the very attractive expression on the man’s face.

Vance made a spur-of-the-moment decision. “Why don’t you come in? A cup of coffee, maybe?”

He saw indecision reflected on the man’s face. “Well, I don’t know. It’s kind of late and I don’t want to keep you.”

Vance stepped back from the door. “I wasn’t sleeping or even on my way to bed. I could use some company. Please.” He waved a hand, indicating his apartment.

“Well, okay. If you’re sure it’s no bother.”

“Not at all.” Vance didn’t know why, but he wanted to get to know Dillon Lloyd a whole lot better. Suddenly, Vance’s spirit rose like an elevator going from the ground level to the top of the Empire State Building. He wasn’t certain what it meant, but right now he was eager for some kind of new beginning.

Chapter Five

Vance Keith wasn't what Dillon expected. Not at all. He was more. So damn much more, up close and personal like this. Taller than he'd first thought, several inches above Dillon's own six feet. The golden texture of his skin more supple, more lickable, than he'd witnessed from his own apartment. From a distance one couldn't see the silky richness of the caramel and gold threaded through the rich dark brown of his hair. Locks that Dillon wanted to stroke. He didn't want to think what he'd find in Vance's eyes if he ever got that close, the colors in their hazel depths appearing to shift with the light. Or maybe it was emotion.

It felt odd as he stepped into the apartment, having watched for so many months. And to now be on the inside. He shrugged off his coat and Vance took it from him and laid it over a chair near the fireplace.

The apartment was neat and in some respects seemed almost Spartan. The first thing he noticed was that the black baby grand piano to the left was the centerpiece of the room. Weird how he'd seen it from his apartment, but here...well, it just seemed different, more alive.

He remembered watching Vance sit at the piano, bare assed, cock shooting up from between his legs. His fingers flew over the keyboard, nothing hesitant about the music. He'd

wished he could hear him play. Wished he could see him from this perspective at the keyboard instead of having the windows of their apartments separating him from the scene.

God, this was not the time to think about that. He caught the glimmer of a splash of color in the red and gold cushions resting on the couch, remembering when last he'd seen them. And he recognized the ottoman near the gold brocade chair in a corner of the room. He was immersed in the sense of intimacy he couldn't feel by just watching from afar. It had an atmosphere of warmth even considering the open-air spaciousness of the place. Much more modern than his own apartment in the building next door. Odd. It felt strange to be here. Like stepping onto a stage at the theater, no longer an observer, not simply a part of the audience.

"Have a seat," Vance said as he walked past the counter that separated the dining area from the kitchen work space. Vance set the package on the counter and then turned away to pull down a can of coffee and scoop some out. Dillon watched him as he worked in the kitchen, preparing the coffee, and saw him pull down a couple of mugs. He admired the strong, shadowed jaw and muscular arms, and how the material of Vance's black turtleneck seemed to enhance his physique.

Dillon turned his thoughts to the package and he couldn't help wondering what was in it. But that was something he figured he'd probably never find out.

"Thanks for bringing the package by. Jake must have moved out sooner than I expected." Vance filled the coffeemaker with water and set it to brew. Then he returned to the living room and sat down on the moss green sofa across from Dillon. "That's really nice of you to take the time to drop it off. You could have called and saved yourself the trip."

"Not a problem. As I said, it was on my way home. I'm sorry we weren't able to deliver it for you." He watched Vance, studied the attractive face that seemed slightly thinner than he would have thought and quite striking. The impression was no longer blurred by the distance between the two buildings or the thickness of windows and weather.

"I should have known he wouldn't stick around, not with California waiting for him."

"So he left the state? He didn't just move to a new part of town?"

Vance shook his head and Dillon saw the hint of sadness flicker across his expression. He wished he could help him, make it better, and take away the pain. "No, he's left town. I'll miss him."

How to broach the subject? Dillon wanted to get to know more about the man. Now that he was here, in his apartment, he didn't want to just ignore the burgeoning feelings he'd tried to smother for so long. This was his chance, possibly the only one he'd ever get.

"Close friends?"

Vance looked at him, the blue in his eyes deepening. "Yes. Very close." The coffeemaker beeped and Vance surged to his feet. "I'll get that coffee. A touch of brandy?"

"That would be great." Dillon knew he'd touched a raw nerve and could have kicked himself for not realizing that talking about his ex-lover would be difficult for Vance. But then, it could have been Vance who ended the relationship and not Jake. So he guessed he could be forgiven to some extent.

He stood up and walked over to the window that faced his own apartment. It was now pitch black outside. He could see his own window very clearly from here. If one was looking for it.

Vance handed him the mug. Dillon took a sip, enjoying the taste of the brandy underlying the bite of the coffee -- a perfect blend. After being outside in the cold it tasted pretty good.

"How long have you lived here?" he asked Vance. Small talk might lead away from pain and into something else -- safer ground...maybe.

"I moved in a couple of years ago. I had a place uptown, but I didn't like it as well. How about you?"

“Oh, I’ve lived here for about five years give or take. I watched them renovate this section of town and both of these buildings back when I was footing the deliveries. I always liked this area.”

“Yeah, me too. I discovered this place when I was visiting a client to make a presentation.”

Dillon looked at him. “Did you get the client?”

Vance grinned. “And a promotion.”

“Ah, big client, I take it.”

“You could say that. He liked my spin, anyway.”

A short silence fell between them that actually seemed kind of pleasant. It was weird how Dillon could almost see himself in the window across the alley. Remember watching the man in this apartment. For a moment he stood outside of himself. Eerie feeling.

“So you own D.L.F. Deliveries?” Vance asked. “So what does D.L.F. stand for? I get the D is probably for Dillon, but what about L.F.?”

The man was so close Dillon could smell his familiar, distinct scent. He quickly lifted the mug and swallowed another gulp of coffee. He was going to lose his head if he didn’t watch out. The man was much too attractive for Dillon’s peace of mind. And all too close. He tried to think of something mundane to help settle his nerves. He wanted this man far too much for his own good. And he knew he was setting himself up for a huge disappointment.

“Dillon’s Lightning Fast Deliveries. I figured the name would be too long to use, so I went with D.L.F. Deliveries.”

Vance chuckled. “Yeah, the initials kind of speed up the delivery -- if you know what I mean. Good thinking.”

That did make Dillon laugh. He liked a man with a sense of humor. Just one more asset to add to the list.

Another hushed moment settled between them. It was intimate and...nice. Dillon watched the snow fall in quiet contemplation of what might be happening here.

"He was my lover." Vance dropped the revelation into the silent moment. "The package was sort of a good-bye."

What could Dillon say? I know who he was? I'm sorry he left you, but not really? He could utter something that would just be a platitude. This was too important for that. An odd sense of walking a narrow ledge told him that this moment could change his life if he stepped carefully.

"It can't be easy losing someone you love like that."

"It's not. He was in investments -- an investment consultant. His company folded and he moved on." Vance shrugged. "It's not the best time for his profession, if you know what I mean."

"Not the best time for any of us right now, I guess. But you didn't go with him."

"He didn't ask." Dillon saw the lines around Vance's mouth deepen. He wished he could take away Vance's pain. He might not know him very well, but he cared. Watching him from a distance all these months seemed to provide some sort of indistinct connection. The ache that passed through Dillon almost seemed a tangible thing.

He nodded toward the window. "I live over there. See that window? That's my apartment."

"You mean, right across from my place?"

Dillon held his breath as he turned to look at Vance. They stood so close, shoulders brushing. He could swear he felt the man's intense heat through the barrier of their clothes. Would he understand what Dillon was trying to tell him? Would he realize the curtains on Dillon's windows were wide open. Just like in his apartment. And that he could see in quite clearly?

And if he did realize, would he throw Dillon out of his apartment without a second thought?

"You knew. You saw us."

Dillon couldn't detect anger in his voice. There was surprise, maybe curiosity.

"Yes. You're both very attractive." He swallowed hard. "Very...passionate." He looked straight into Vance's eyes. "I'll admit I was envious."

"You aren't involved in a relationship?"

Vance didn't move away, didn't step back. In fact, it seemed to Dillon that in some infinitesimal way they came closer together. And yet, he doubted that either of them had moved an inch. The temperature in the room suddenly jacked up to sweltering.

"No. I'm not. There hasn't been time. I've been too busy building my business. Felice keeps telling me I need a man in my life."

"Felice?"

"My day dispatcher. She's been with me since we opened our doors. She gets a little familiar sometimes. And pushy."

"Longtime employees do tend to get that family edge, don't they?"

"Yeah, I guess so. She tells me I need a keeper." Dillon's attention fastened on Vance's mouth. So very tempting. He wanted to feel Vance's lips against his own. To taste him. Would he taste like brandy? Like the hot blaze of the fire in the fireplace?

"You liked watching us." It wasn't a question. Vance's eyes seemed to dilate and turn darker, like the sky just after sundown. His voice deepened.

"Yeah, I did."

Slowly, Vance turned to look out the window and Dillon studied his attractive profile. Shadowed jaw this late in the day, hollowed cheeks, patrician nose, deep-set eyes. Not perfect, not airbrushed, but quite striking.

“Did you jerk off?” The question caught Dillon by surprise. Maybe it shouldn’t have, but it did.

“I...” Did he dare tell him the truth? “Yeah, I did.” He felt the heat flare into his face.

“I wish I’d known you were there...watching us.”

“I’m sorry.”

Vance looked at him. Still, no anger, but Dillon did sense lust. “I’m not heart-whole, Dillon. I find you very...desirable tonight, but I haven’t forgotten Jake. I’m not sure I could give you what you’re looking for.”

“I don’t know what I’m looking for myself. But I had to come here, you know? I had to meet you...to see...” His voice trailed off. Just one kiss. Just one, just to taste him. It didn’t have to be forever. But the yearning had been building for so very long. He had to quench the need.

Without a second thought he leaned forward, cupped Vance’s head, and pressed his lips to the object of his affection. Vance didn’t pull away and Dillon deepened the kiss. Tasted the brandy and coffee, and warmth and intimacy. A tinge of hesitation, a huge helping of lust.

Dillon drew back and stepped away, breathless with that bite of temptation. “I-I think I better go. Maybe this isn’t the right time.”

“No.” Vance placed a hand on his arm. “Not yet. I want you here, I want this, but --”

“I know what you mean.” He looked into Vance’s eyes. “Normally, I wouldn’t think twice about a fast fuck. But not with you, Vance. Not tonight. I don’t want to ruin something that might be important. Really important.”

Vance nodded. “I know. But I don’t want to just let you walk out that door. Not yet. I want to know everything about you. I don’t know why I didn’t see you before. But now that I have, I don’t want to...”

He brushed a hand through his hair and turned away. This time he did stride across the room to stand in front of the fireplace. He stared into the fire. Then he turned to look at Dillon across the length of the room.

“Have you been to the coffee shop down at the end of the block? I think it’s open all night. Maybe we could go there and just talk. I really want to find out more about you. And...I don’t want to be alone right now.”

Dillon nodded. He’d just been there for coffee with the fiddler. Was there some message in that? And he understood exactly what Vance meant. He didn’t want to leave. He was afraid if he left it would break this new, tenuous connection. “The coffee shop sounds great.”

Vance picked up Dillon’s coat and crossing back across the room held it out. Their fingertips brushed when Dillon took the coat from him. A snap of electricity jumped between them. Vance’s fingers gripped Dillon’s hand, clasping tightly, and then drew him up close. Dillon could feel the heat of a hard erection against his own. God, but why didn’t he just take Vance to bed and get this itch taken care of? There was no reason not to. They both wanted it.

But it felt more like a special gift, secreted away. Kind of like waiting to open a present on Christmas. There was an eager urgency to not spoil the surprise, to wait for the right moment in order to relish the treat. But the anticipation tightened the knot in his stomach. Yearning to find out what it would feel like to experience the sensation of having Vance’s naked flesh rubbing against his own.

“Coffee,” he said, a gruff texture to his tone as he squeezed Vance’s hand and then released it.

“Coffee,” Vance echoed as he stepped away.

Too much emotion seemed to thicken the atmosphere of the room. God, he’d waited so long for a moment like this. Wanted Vance Keith for so damn many months. And here they

were, going for coffee? Was he a fool for not following through on the connection of lust that seemed to thread them together? Damn, but he really didn't want to fuck this up.

Something kept saying, *Not yet, it's too soon. It has to be right. With this man, it has to be right.* But damn, his body throbbed with the ache of desire. It had never been harder to exert self-control than right this moment. But how long would it last?

Chapter Six

Vance had experienced a week of conflicting emotions. Dillon Lloyd was something he'd never expected in his life. The gift of his friendship, without strings, seemed to be his saving grace. How and why it had occurred he stopped questioning. It hadn't been about sex, although that was something he knew he wanted with Dillon. He just wasn't certain exactly what it would mean. Was he really ready for that kind of deeper intimacy with the neighbor in the next building?

Work had been a bear with back-to-back meetings as he fused together the Barnett Morgan deal, even slipping in a quick trip to a potential site for a photo shoot he had in mind. Jared had been extremely pleased with Vance's ideas. Vance had a feeling meeting Dillon had quite a bit to do with his fresh burst of creative inspiration.

He'd been feeling pretty good by the time he got home, but was still wound tight, adrenaline shooting through him. Vance had just stepped into the shower when his phone rang. He was waiting to hear back with the results of a bit of market analysis from one of his assistants on the project and he couldn't ignore the call just in case it was her. Vance grabbed a towel as he dived for the phone. When he glanced at the display he was surprised when he saw who was calling.

“What’s up?” he asked as he hitched up the white towel around his hips. “I thought we were meeting at Doneghan’s in an hour?”

“We are. Go into the living room.”

“Now?”

“Now. I want to talk to you.”

“You are talking to me, Dillon. I was just in the shower. I’m not exactly dressed.”

He heard Dillon chuckle on the other end of the line. “Timing couldn’t be more excellent. Go. I’m waiting.”

Vance was totally confused. What the hell was Dillon planning to do? Vance padded into the living room and looked around.

“Now what?”

“Go to the window.”

Vance pivoted to the right and he caught his reflection in the glass. Then he looked beyond and saw Dillon standing at his own window and his gaze widened, just as his cock surged.

“I take it you just got out of the shower yourself.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

Dillon was positioned in front of the window. The subdued light from a well-placed table lamp seemed to cast his very succulent body into sharp contrast within the darkened interior of his living room.

“You shouldn’t be doing this,” Vance murmured as he walked to his own window.

“Why not?” As Vance reached the window, Dillon dropped his towel. Desire erupted through Vance’s body like a tidal wave. His gaze followed Dillon’s hand as he fisted it around the root of his cock. “Do you know how many nights I fantasized about you, Vance? I never thought I’d actually get to meet you.”

Vance couldn't help it -- he allowed his own towel to hit the floor. He was still damp and felt the cool air shift across his naked body. Gooseflesh rippled along his skin -- but he wasn't certain if it was because of the cool air in the room or the sight of Dillon across the narrow alley.

"I don't think this is a good idea," he said as he fisted his own burgeoning erection.

"I imagined what you would taste like, what your cock would feel like." There was a long silence as Vance's gaze lasered through the glass to watch Dillon's hand slide up and down his thick shaft. He mirrored the action with his own hand and could almost feel it was Dillon who stroked him.

"I wish I'd known you were watching." He'd been so wrapped up in Jake, how could he have been aware of anything or anyone else?

"No, you don't. You and Jake looked so hot together. Watching you was like witnessing perfection in action. Male perfection. I know it was an invasion of your privacy, but I couldn't help myself."

Vance's hand slid up and down his stiff penis. Skin stretched tight, he saw Dillon across the way, but he also remembered Jake. Dillon was right, Jake was so gorgeous. And it had always felt so right -- no matter where or how they had done it. He had a feeling Jake would have liked Dillon. They might even have invited him over to make up a third -- if Jake had still been there.

"Tell me about him, Vance."

It felt odd, so strange to be standing here, jerking off, watching Dillon do the same, and talking about Vance's ex-lover.

"This is insane."

"I know. But I can't help it. I feel connected to you and to him. I know it's crazy, but I feel like if I know more about him, it tells me about you, too. Please."

"Now? While we're doing...this?"

“Yeah, right now,” the almost disembodied voice said into his ear. “Where did you meet?”

Vance felt the heat of his flesh, remembered the first time he saw Jake, the smile that drew him across the floor of the bar. Jake had come into Doneghan’s with Glenn. Suddenly, he could again smell Jake’s cologne, as strong as though the man stood right in the room with him. And then, just like the night earlier in the week, it felt like someone was there, a pair of warm hands settled over his. Vance reached down to cup his balls as the ghostly fingers wrapped around his cock, stroking over his flesh. Vance inhaled sharply.

“What’s the matter?” Dillon asked.

“N-nothing.” He couldn’t explain to Dillon about the strange thing happening to him. He would think he was crazy. But it felt like Jake was right here with him, his body pressed against his back, arms wrapped around him.

“Talk to me, Vance.”

Vance tried to concentrate. “I met him at Doneghan’s. He walked in with a friend of mine. Jake has a charisma that lights up any room he enters. People are drawn to him immediately. The moment he walked in the door, I was bowled over by him.”

“Was the man who introduced you a friend? Or a lover?”

“You see too much for someone who hasn’t known me for very long.”

“So, a lover.”

“Nothing permanent. A buddy I fucked, nothing more than that.”

That night, Vance had almost forgotten that Glenn was in the same room. Glenn certainly hadn’t been happy about Vance’s strong attraction to Jake. Nor Jake’s to Vance. Glenn liked to screw around, but he didn’t like his lovers screwing around on him. But that night, neither Jake nor Vance had cared in the least.

“What did you like about Jake? What drew you to him?”

Vance watched Dillon through the window. He was just as good-looking as Jake was, in his own way. And Vance was just as drawn to the personality differences that made up Dillon as he had been to his ex-lover. It felt so strange. Jake had been so outgoing and Dillon was so quiet, yet both of them were forces to be reckoned with, confident in their own skin.

"I think he would have liked you, Dillon. Just as much as I do."

"Do you, Vance? How much?"

The hand moved faster up and down Vance's cock. "If you were here right now, I'd show you. Just the way Jake showed me. One of these days, Dillon."

"When you're ready, Vance. We don't need to rush it. But I've had a hard-on for days and I need to do something to fix it."

"Me too."

"I love your mouth, Vance. Hard and soft...all at the same time. I'd love to see you in action when you're pitching a project that you feel passionate about."

Vance could feel his balls drawing up, the flared head of his cock, precum oozing from the slit.

"If I won the contract, you could help me celebrate with champagne." God, he could picture Dillon in his office, shirt opened, his flesh a hard-muscled buffet for Vance's delectation. "You could always stop by to make a delivery. I'd love to show you my office."

"Is that something like showing me your artwork?"

Vance chuckled. "Sort of, I guess."

He saw Dillon's expression sober, his gaze turning intense. Vance could almost feel the heat of that look right through the windows that separated them.

"I saw Jake use the anal beads on you," said the sexy voice on the phone. "Do you still have them?"

That's all it took and Vance was dropped over the edge with his climax. Oh, yes, he remembered those anal beads. He dropped the phone as he braced himself against the

window, hand flat against the cold, wet window. He shuddered with his climax, his gaze rose to meet Dillon's across the expanse separating them. Dillon was also braced against the glass, cum spilling from his cock to smear the pane.

Vance closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the window. He'd never done anything like that before. It was erotic and voyeuristic and so hot. The scent of Jake's cologne started to fade away. The extra set of hands and sense of another warm body were gone. He had to wonder if he'd imagined the whole thing again. Was he crazy?

Finally, he leaned down and picked up the phone with a shaking hand. He saw Dillon hold his own phone up to his ear.

"Would you consider that an appetizer? Because I've got to tell you I'm ravenous right now."

He heard Dillon chuckle into the phone. "Yeah, I know what you mean. Doneghan's right? Sorry I have to stop in at the office first, but I promise it won't take me more than half an hour to handle things. I won't stand you up."

"I didn't think you would. I don't know what you've got planned, but I'll be there." Vance flipped the phone shut. Dillon had refused to tell him where they were going tonight. He had a feeling that whatever it entailed, Vance was going to enjoy it. Picking up the discarded towel, he cleaned himself up. Unbelievably, with the appearance of Dillon into his world, Vance felt like he was beginning to heal. Jake had gone on with his life without a backward glance, so why couldn't Vance? He shouldn't feel guilty about enjoying Dillon's company, dammit.

It wasn't long before he was dressed and heading for the pub, eager to meet up with Dillon, feeling lighter than he had in a long time. How had he not known that this man lived so close? How could he have missed that? How many times must he have looked out his window and not really seen what was right in front of his eyes? Well, not anymore.

He entered Doneghan's Pub at five forty-five and sat at a table. He ordered a Guinness while he waited for Dillon. He couldn't seem to get the smile off his face. Damn, that Dillon was something else.

He picked up the glass and swallowed several gulps of beer. He had a raging thirst but he wasn't exactly sure it was for the beer, although he always had enjoyed the brews at Doneghan's. They had a special sparkle to them.

"Hey, Vance. Where've you been?"

Vance slowly set the glass back down on the table. Glancing up, he saw Glenn staring down at him, a smile pasted across his lips.

"I've been busy, Glenn."

Without waiting for an invitation, Glenn pulled out a chair and sat down across from him. He leaned forward and Vance pulled away instinctively. He was afraid this would happen. *Idiot.*

"I've called and left messages, but you never return my calls. I thought...the other night..."

"Look, Glenn, I'm sorry if you assumed there was more to...that...than there was. We said no strings."

Glenn reared back. "Yeah, no strings, but I didn't think you'd just cut me out of your life. Is that what you think I am? Just a bitch for you to use when you need to scratch an itch and then throw me away like a used-up rubber once you got your rocks off and just forget about me? Fuck you, Vance Keith. Fuck you."

Vance hadn't wanted it to be this way. He hadn't meant to hurt Glenn. Shit, he didn't know what he'd been thinking that night. All he knew is that he'd been hurting and he'd wanted to stop it somehow.

"I'm sorry, Glenn. I guess I didn't expect you to think it was anything more than it was. I wasn't looking for a long-term gig. I thought you knew that. I'd just ended one. I wasn't ready for another."

He didn't like the weird, fixed glare in Glenn's eyes. He'd never seen him like that before. "Jake's gone, Vance. He's not coming back. Not ever. I thought you'd figured out he wasn't the kind of guy to stick around. He always was out for the main chance."

"Glenn, that's enough. I think you better leave. I'm expecting someone."

Glenn's gaze narrowed. "You're hooking up with somebody else? Fuck you, Keith." He jumped up from the chair, knocking it over. "This one won't last either. You just wait and see. One of these days you're going to know. God, you are so dense sometimes that I don't know why I --" He glared down at Vance, his expression took Vance aback and he really wondered what he'd been thinking about ever getting involved with Glenn again. "Forget it, just forget it. But don't think we're through."

Vance watched him stomp away, shoving his way through the Friday night crowd toward the exit until Vance lost sight of him. He leaned over and righted the chair, totally confused by the man's intense reactions. What was the matter with him? In the past year he'd gotten stranger and stranger. Was something odd going on in his life right now? Vance shook his head in utter amazement.

One incident of sex in the bathroom at the pub did not make a relationship. Glenn should have known that. They'd agreed there would be no strings. What had Vance missed? Glenn and he had been casual sex partners for several years and nothing serious had ever come of it. So what was his problem now? Lord save him from temper tantrums of ex-lovers.

He looked down at his watch and then toward the door. The tension eased as he saw Dillon making his way through the bodies and heading in his direction. Glenn and his temper tantrum totally shifted to the back of his thoughts.

Dillon, dressed in blue denim, a black-and-white checkered, button-down shirt, and black boots looked just as good as he had an hour ago with nothing on but seductive flesh. Maybe better, because now he was here and Vance would be able to touch him. Yes, that was much better.

Maybe tonight would be the night. Unlike with Glenn, his relationship with Dillon was one he expected to enjoy for some time to come.

He stood up as Dillon approached. Now here was a man with a solid head on his shoulders. Not volatile like Glenn. Not the same obvious dynamism of Jake. But he was solid and sexy as hell, and Vance didn't think he'd ever appreciated it more. He stared at him for a long moment before he sat back down.

A waiter must have seen Dillon sit down and hurried over to take his drink order. Dillon ordered a Heineken.

"So, you've got a surprise in store tonight."

Dillon grinned. "Yeah, something different. You said you used to play hockey, right?"

"Well, yes, but that was a long time ago. A real long time ago."

"Maybe. But I happen to know where there's this outdoor rink. It's a great place to go skating -- not as crowded as some of the bigger rinks. One of these days I want to see your ass in action, buddy."

"You don't actually expect me to get on skates tonight, do you? It's been a long time."

"Well, you're not too far off the mark. We may not have time to actually skate tonight, but we are going to a game. They aren't the Rangers, but they're a damn good team."

"Hmm, now you've got me intrigued. At least I won't have a sore butt from landing on it so many times tonight. Where's the game?"

Dillon's expression darkened as he stared at Vance. And Vance had a feeling he knew exactly what was going through his mind.

"What?" he asked innocently.

Heat spread through him as he watched Dillon's smoldering gaze track over his body. "I'm thinking about the condition of your ass, but not in quite the way you imagine."

Vance felt the fire catch life and blaze through him as his cock hardened once again in anticipation of what tonight might bring.

Chapter Seven

Larsen Park was small, buried in an out-of-the-way corner of the city, a place hardly anyone knew about. It was a community recreation area where Dillon donated monthly time, and sometimes money, when he had the opportunity. He'd been a particular advocate of creating the outdoor ice rink for use during the winter months. It helped to keep the kids off the street. He'd certainly made his share of calls to try to gain financial backing for the project. This year represented another year of successful fundraising. Next week they'd be lighting the holiday tree. Renovation of the park was a pet project that he wanted to share with Vance. A special place, to be shared with a special friend.

He didn't jog when he wanted to burn off energy. He either rode his bike in summer or came here to skate in winter. He never had been much of a runner. If he'd had a particularly tough day, Larsen Park was where he was most likely to be found.

The dinner at the pub was simple and filling -- a loaded burger and a cold beer.

"The park is where the game is? Are you sure?" Vance asked for about the tenth time.

Dillon smiled. "Yes, I'm sure. Coming from Vermont you should remember how those go with an outside game."

"Outside?"

“Yeah, a mite team -- you know, the little guys. They’re kind of fun to watch.”

“I take it you know this park pretty well. And the team?”

“You might say that.” Dillon’s business had provided the team jerseys. One of the things he could do. That and provide pizza and drinks for everyone after the game.

Coming out of the pub, they then headed toward the subway. The park was several stops away. Dillon’s attention was arrested by the old man sitting on a wooden box beneath the street lamp at the end of the block.

“Hold on for a minute.” He hurried ahead and stopped in front of Ren. He pulled two fives from his billfold and tossed them into the violin case.

Ren stopped playing and peered up at Dillon. Then his attention moved past Dillon to focus on Vance. He nodded. “I see you took my advice.” Dillon wasn’t certain what he was talking about and must have looked confused. Ren nodded. “You didn’t miss your chance -- you took it.”

And then Dillon recalled their conversation in the coffee shop. “So Vance is what you were talking about?” Ren had been so cryptic and Dillon hadn’t been certain of what Ren was talking about at the time. It was good to know he’d made the right decision. Such a strange old fellow.

“Yep, it was him. All I do is pass on the message. It’s up to the receiver to figure out the meaning.”

“That makes it kind of hard to follow through, doesn’t it?”

Ren shrugged. “I have no say in it.”

“What if a person misses their chance because they don’t understand?”

Ren lifted his violin to his shoulder. “Sometimes they get a second chance, sometimes not. Always best to keep your eyes open and follow your instincts.”

Vance joined Dillon and he saw him peer at the old man. “Do I know you?”

Ren smiled at him, giving Vance one of his toothless grins. “Got your wish, didn’t you, Vance?”

Dillon saw Vance’s eyes widen. “My wish? I don’t get it.”

“Last time I saw you, you were wishing not to be alone.”

“I never said that.”

“No, but you were wishing it. Got to get back to my music, boys. You have a good evening. Enjoy that skating.” Then his expression turned somber as he looked straight at Vance. “You watch that storm brewing behind you. Pay attention or it will swallow you both. Don’t let it rattle you, or you’ll lose your way.”

Then, as though he’d never uttered the last part, his expression lightened and he began playing “Winter Wonderland,” totally ignoring the two men as he closed his eyes and seemed to embrace the song.

Dillon and Vance moved away, heading toward the subway entrance. “Strange man,” Vance muttered. “You’ve seen him before? He seemed to know you.”

“I’ve only noticed him the last couple of weeks. Actually, I treated him to a hot drink the other night. He’s interesting, don’t you think?”

“Very odd. Is that how he knew my name? You told him?”

“Actually, no. I never mentioned your name. But he knew mine, too. I haven’t figured that out yet.”

Vance shook his head as they stepped onto the escalator. “Odd as they come, that’s for sure.”

* * * * *

The game was already in play when they arrived at the rink. Hands wrapped around Styrofoam cups of hot coffee, they sat in the bleachers cheering on Dillon’s team, The Mighty Messengers. The end of the last period was almost on them.

“Sink that puck!” Vance yelled. Dillon smiled and the crowd of proud parents roared when the little black dot on the white ice sailed past the goalie and scored another point for the Messengers, winning them the game.

Vance turned to look at Dillon. For the first time since knowing Vance, Dillon saw tangible excitement in his expression. His cheeks were ruddy with cold, eyes sparkling, a puffy cloud of excitement clinging to the air. God, he wanted to kiss him right then and there. He wanted to shove him back onto the cold aluminum bleacher and share the searing body heat that blazed through him like a furnace, fueled by the beauty of the man sitting next to him.

He tried to tamp down his emotion. This wasn’t exactly the best place to be exposing his lusty passions with the man of his dreams. Not here, in front of everyone to see.

“Come on,” he said, breathless desire filling his words. Lucky for him it sounded more like excitement from the win of the game. “Let’s go down and congratulate the kids.”

The expression on Vance’s face seemed strange. “You’re really into all this community stuff, aren’t you?” They stepped off the bleachers and headed to the red brick building on the other side of the rink.

Dillon stopped and turned to look at Vance. “Yeah, I guess I am. My family has all been involved in community action. My dad’s on the board of education. My mom’s an adult education teacher in the neighboring county. There were always people in and out of our house. What about you?”

Vance shrugged. “I’ve got six brothers and sisters and I’m the youngest. Farm family and everybody helps out on the farm. I played some hockey, but I’m not sure I ever really fit in.”

“Do they know you’re gay?”

“Yeah. It didn’t happen in the easiest way for them. I realized what I wanted when I was a junior in high school. Or at least that’s when I first acted upon it. Unfortunately, my

mom stumbled upon me and a friend in the barn one afternoon. But I didn't actually come out to them until I was in my twenties. It was tough on them."

"Do you go back to visit much?"

"Not a lot. I've always felt a bit out of place. I was never meant to stay on the farm."

"Will you be going home for the holidays?"

"No, I haven't been back to celebrate the holidays with them, in, oh probably five years or so. Jake and I went for a visit a few months back."

"How did that go?" Dillon asked.

Vance shrugged. "Not the best. So, what about you?"

"I didn't really come out to my family until I turned twenty-five. They were surprised at first, but they've handled it. For the most part." What he had was tolerance from them. "I think I don't go home much because the town seems to have expectations more than my family does. You know what I mean?"

"So you're not going home for the holidays?"

Dillon stopped walking and turned to Vance. "I was kind of hoping..."

"What, Dillon? What were you going to say?" Vance's words were spoken softly. Dillon was afraid to read more into them than Vance meant.

Dillon's gaze fastened on Vance's mouth. He couldn't wait another minute. "Come with me." He made a sharp veer to the left, down a path that led past the community center.

"I thought we were going to congratulate your team?"

"In a bit." He hurried his footsteps until he and Vance were surrounded by darkness. It had started to snow again and the crunch of their footsteps was the only sound in the silent night. Suddenly Dillon grabbed Vance's arm and yanked him forward, pushing him up against a solid oak tree. He cupped his face and fastened his lips to Vance's.

Vance's lips parted and Dillon sank his tongue deep inside. He tasted of winter, of hot coffee and deep wanting. He tasted good and clean and absolutely wonderful. He pressed closer. His cock surged to attention, wanted to have this man in bed, beneath him. Or splayed out over the ottoman in Vance's living room, fucking him deep again and again.

He didn't just want to watch from a distance any longer, he wanted to be a part of this man's life. Wanted this man...more than he'd ever wanted another man before.

Dillon tasted him, savored him, yearned to be inside him, linked to him, as only the intimacy of passion could do. He broke the kiss, licked at the wet snowflakes clinging to his cheeks, and then possessed his lips again.

He felt Vance's arms lift to encircle him, his gloved hands cupped Dillon's jaw, locking Dillon to him.

And then they were pivoting around and it was Vance who had Dillon anchored to the tree. Pressing him backward, bodies melded as close as they could considering the layers of clothing separating them. Layers he wished weren't there.

Vance lifted away. Dillon couldn't see the look in his eyes. There was no moon tonight, but the fallen snow still sparkled beneath the street lamps. He felt his warm breath, hot and damp against his cold cheek.

"Tonight, I want you to come home with me," Vance said. "No more waiting."

Dillon didn't think he had the strength to turn his back on the invitation. Not tonight. So many nights he'd walked away. Unable to sleep, he'd toss and turn in his lonely bed, fantasizing about making love to Vance. He'd become an ogre at work, antsy and biting people's heads off. Felice was ready to kill him. He wanted this man so much.

"Are you sure?" He forced himself to ask the question. But did he really want to know the answer?

"Yeah, I'm sure." Vance's mouth covered Dillon's once again. Dillon wasn't certain they'd make it home if they didn't stop now. This wasn't the place he wanted their first

intimate encounter to take place. He'd fucked in many strange places in his lifetime, but that wasn't how he wanted it to be tonight. Not with Vance.

He wanted to take his time and savor the man's body. To learn every inch of him. To delve into his strengths, and his weaknesses. To make him yield, and to yield himself to Vance. To make him shudder and cry out, begging for more.

Fuck. He couldn't take much more. He tore his mouth from Vance's.

"Let's go then. I don't think I can hold out much longer. My cock is as hard as this tree."

He heard Vance chuckle. "Yeah, mine too."

They moved away from the tree, and the small pocket of intimacy, and back out into the open and down the path toward the community center.

"I'm going to have to stop in just for a minute."

"No problem. I want to meet the kids. They played a great game."

Dillon felt Vance's warm, gloved fingers wrap around his hand. He looked at him. Vance squeezed and then let him go. It was a simple gesture, but a gesture that almost dropped Dillon to his knees. It was intimate, and in a way, marked of possession, and his stomach knotted at its possible implications. God, he wanted to get this man home and in bed. His hunger was growing stronger with each second. He no longer felt the cold of the frigid night. He was burning up with desire.

Suddenly, an odd presentiment slipped through the heat of passion. The crack of a twig caught his attention and he turned around, peering into the darkness.

"Did you hear that?"

Vance followed his gaze. "Hear what?"

He took a few steps back the way they came. The hairs on his neck stood on end.

"It sounded like someone was out there. Someone besides us."

“Are you sure it wasn’t just an animal? Maybe a rabbit or a dog or something?”

Dillon stood there and listened intently. All that met him was eerie silence. Snow fell wet and cold onto his face. He shrugged.

“Maybe that’s all it was. I don’t know. Let’s go. I want to get you home.” He swung around and once again started walking through the darkness toward the well-lit part of the park grounds. This time all he heard was the crunch of fresh snow beneath their feet. But there was something, some instinct that said someone had been watching them. Whether it was man or animal, he couldn’t be certain. But something had been out there.

Chapter Eight

Was he ready for this? To turn this relationship into something more? Something deeper? Tonight it seemed right to take it to the next step. Every fiber of his being told Vance this was right. They'd stopped at the pharmacy around the corner to pick up a few essentials and now Vance couldn't get the door open fast enough.

It wasn't just the sex that he needed so badly. It was the intimacy with Dillon Lloyd. The man he was with, not a memory, like Jake now was. A man he'd learned so much about in just the last couple of days. It was his strength of character and the way he knew people by name in their small part of the world. Unlike Jake, he took the world with quiet strength.

Tonight Vance had seen how the kids at the community center had looked up to Dillon like he was a young god, someone to emulate. How he took time to talk to Ren, the fiddler on the street corner.

And Dillon's patience with him. Waiting for the right time and nurturing their friendship. With Jake, they'd had sex the first night, no questions asked. It had been filled with steam and passion that had not burned out in the months they'd been together. Dillon and Jake, two men so different, and yet both of them men who Vance was drawn to.

He shoved the door of his apartment open and strode inside. He dropped the bag containing the essentials and his brown leather jacket onto the chair closest to the door and then whirled around to face Dillon.

Dillon's jacket hit the floor. Vance saw Dillon's glance slide to the window facing his apartment and then back to Vance.

The time for words was long past. Vance stepped forward and Dillon mirrored the action, bringing them chest to chest. Dillon's blue eyes were now shadowed with the fire of passion, determined and heavy with desire. His hands lifted to Vance's chest, slid up the cloth of his soft dark green shirt.

"Fuck it," Dillon said as he ripped the shirt open, buttons flying as he shoved it over Vance's broad shoulders. "I'll buy you a new one." He dragged the white T-shirt over Vance's head and tossed it away. Dillon's hands went for the brown belt at Vance's waist.

Vance shoved his hands aside and went for Dillon's shirt. He yanked the shirt out of his waistband and pulled it over Dillon's head along with his T-shirt. He sent them sailing across the room. Dillon threw back his head and grinned. Vance grabbed Dillon's face and welded their lips in a searing kiss that burned with the passion of a hot summer sun.

Boots came off, the rattle of belts unbuckled, and the rasp of jeans shoved to the floor, followed by bodies shifting to the carpeted floor. There was an urgency to their actions, the need to meld flesh against flesh. Nothing separating them.

Strong hands roved, fingers tested intimate flesh, moans erupted. Vance was on his back as Dillon's wicked mouth worked its way down across the expanse of Vance's chest. He detoured to explore a nipple, teasing it with his teeth. Then dipping lower to his tight abdomen, his tongue tracing an agonizingly slow horizontal path along the skin, just above the elastic waistband of Vance's black briefs.

"Oh my God," Vance groaned, jerking his hips up, eager to feel Dillon's mouth surround his raging erection. But Dillon was not a man to be rushed. That much Vance had

learned over the last few days. He took his time, learning his way, testing and tasting every inch of Vance's skin. He snagged the waistband of Vance's briefs and started to drag them down over his hips, using his hands to ease them over his ass.

Vance lifted up, wanting him to finish it quickly, the need to come riding him hard, harder than it had in a very long time. Dillon's mouth felt so damn good. Vance pressed down on Dillon's shoulders, forcing him lower. Dillon's hands gripped his ass, flexing his fingers against the rounded globes of Vance's cheeks. The rhythmic kneading as Dillon pushed his briefs off drove Vance crazy.

But Dillon wasn't finished. His mouth traveled down Vance's body, bypassing his needy cock. Instead he spread Vance's legs and licked a fiery trail down his inner thigh, passing his knee and sliding over a muscled calf. He sucked the big toe in his mouth, swirled his tongue, tugged, and then allowed the toe to pop out of his mouth.

He looked up at Vance and grinned. "Do you think you're ready yet?"

"Damn you." Vance gasped. "Fuck, yes!"

Dillon reached for the white plastic bag on the chair and pulled out the box of condoms. He dug for a packet and was about to rip it open when Vance grabbed it from him.

"I'll do it. God, your mouth feels so damn good."

As Vance tore open the package, Dillon turned his attention to his lover's other leg. He licked his way up. Vance's cock was sheathed by the time Dillon made it to the crease at his upper inner thigh, inches away from his heavy ball sac. Vance's cock throbbed with his need. Thick and oh-so-ready to feel Dillon's mouth embracing it.

Dillon sucked Vance's balls into his mouth. His tongue circled over and between, bathing them thoroughly before letting them pop out of his mouth.

Again, he looked up at Vance, his lips wet and engorged.

"You're certain you want this?"

“Goddamn you, Dillon.” Vance thrust his hips. His sheathed cock towered and bobbed from the dark, curly triangle of hair, hungry for attention. Aching for it. He reached down to grab his lover by the head and force him to take his cock in his mouth. He was beyond rational, totally consumed by the heat of desire that Dillon had driven him to.

But Dillon was quicker and he shifted to the side, out of Vance’s reach.

“So you think you’re ready for me? I’ve watched you, babe, don’t forget that. I know what you like, and how you like it. And I know how bad you need it.”

“Then do it.” Vance screamed again, thrusting his hips, totally out of control and needing the release that Dillon kept tantalizingly just out of his reach.

“Do you think I’m going to make it that easy?” Dillon again leaned forward to suck Vance’s balls into his mouth and Vance thought he was going to go through the roof. His toes curled and he couldn’t hold back the growl that emanated from deep in his chest. The plea to come gurgled up through his throat, ready to burst free from his mouth, when suddenly Dillon’s mouth released Vance’s testicles and practically swallowed his steel-hard prick.

Vance felt like he’d been shot from a cannon as the climax swallowed him whole, burst free, pulse after pulse of cream shattering him completely.

It was long moments later before Vance had recovered enough to get off the floor and head to the bathroom.

“I’ll be right back,” he said as he jogged down the hallway. It wasn’t ten minutes later as he was turning to leave the bathroom that he saw Dillon standing in the doorway.

“How ’bout a shower?” Dillon said.

“Why didn’t I think of that?” Vance grinned and leaned in to turn on the shower. The water pulsed from the twin heads. He’d had them installed when he first moved in. Now to really put them to work. He adjusted the temperature and then stepped inside.

* * * * *

Dillon didn't think it could get much better. His greatest fantasy fulfilled. And again, it was so much more than he ever could have imagined. He stepped into the shower after Vance and slid the door closed. He couldn't get enough of this man, not nearly enough. The pulsing beat of the water felt great on his skin. Steam rose up to encompass them. Vance's wet hand surrounded his cock, slick friction from root to broad-tipped glans. Again and again his soapy hand glided along Dillon's length sending him straight into paradise.

He was disappointed when Vance turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, but Dillon followed him. Vance pulled down two huge white towels and they slowly toweled each other dry. Dillon again thought he was going to die when Vance drew the fluffy towel between Dillon's legs and carefully kneaded his balls, then pressed the towel between his crack, teasing at his anus.

Dillon's cock was still hard, the head stretched wide, deeply blushed and throbbing for release. But he'd tortured Vance and he guessed it was now his turn.

"Come with me," Vance said, as they headed back into the living room. "I've got something special planned for you. Don't think you're getting off that easy." They were halfway to the living room when Vance turned to Dillon and yanked him into his arms. He pressed his mouth to Dillon's, diving deep with his tongue, cock to cock, chest to chest. Vance rubbed his body against Dillon's, nipples frictioning, hard beaded buds driving Dillon's lust even higher.

Vance threaded his fingers through Dillon's, pulled away and drew him back into the living room. He gripped Dillon's full erection, gliding his hand along and up and over the rigid log, before he grabbed a condom and sheathed him. He then shoved Dillon over the ottoman. The same one Dillon had seen Vance spread over several months before.

"What are you going to do?" Dillon asked.

“What do you think, babe?” Vance leaned forward, and before Dillon knew it his wrists were bound to the ottoman as Vance pulled out lengths of cord that were apparently hidden beneath the underside of the ottoman.

“Bet you didn’t know about this, did you?”

He shoved Dillon’s legs apart and bound his thighs, just above his knees in the same fashion. Dillon felt him smooth his hands over the tight globes of his ass.

“I bet your ass is so damn tight, sweetheart. I can’t wait to be inside you.”

Dillon’s prick, caught between his stomach and the ottoman, pulsed with need.

“You stay there, I’ll be right back.”

“Like I’m going somewhere?” Dillon couldn’t help stating the obvious. But what exactly was Vance up to?

It wasn’t long before Dillon heard Vance pad back into the room. Again his hand swept over Dillon’s buttocks, spread his cheeks, and traced a finger down his crack. Dillon shivered with anticipation.

Then he felt a cool liquid dribble around his hole and then Vance’s fingertip circled his anus. Dillon tried to thrust his hips back and that earned him a sharp slap across the ass.

“Oh, no. Not until I’m ready, honey.”

And then Dillon felt something that almost sent him through the roof. Something soft and feathery tickled at his testicles, almost driving him crazy.

“What the fuck is that?” He groaned as his cock grew even harder.

“Ostrich feather. Ever used one before?”

“God no. Christ, I think I’m going to come.”

The feather was immediately removed. “Oh, not yet, honey. Not until I’m ready for you to come.”

“Then you damn well better get ready real soon.”

He heard Vance chuckle. And then more of the liquid was trickled down his crack. He felt a finger penetrate his anal ring and he moaned as the heated friction began to spread through him.

“Oh yeah,” Vance said. “Such a sweet, tight ass. I’m gonna make you ready for me, babe.”

“God, yes. I want to feel you inside me. I can’t wait much longer.”

Vance’s finger buried deeper into Dillon’s hole. It slid back out and then Dillon felt the bite of penetration with the breadth of more than one finger pressing into his anus. He jumped as, at the same time as two fingers thrust deep inside. He felt Vance’s mouth on the cheek of his ass. Vance’s tongue danced over the flesh and then Dillon bucked when he bit down.

“Christ,” he yelled as searing sensation raced through him.

Then Vance smoothed a hand over the sting.

“You’ve got such a gorgeous ass. Your hole is going to hug my cock so damn tight.” The fingers retreated. Dillon heard Vance pull out another condom and the crackle announced that Dillon was soon going to feel that cock widening his hole deliciously.

He held his breath as he felt the plumed tip stroke across his opening.

“Are you ready for me, babe?”

“Yes, dammit. I’ve been ready.”

And then the pressure disappeared and Dillon again shuddered at the light stroke of the feather at the base of his balls and then teasing at his anus. He shuddered with the light, tormenting sensation, tension coiled tightly in his belly. God, he needed to feel Vance inside him, right this minute. He didn’t think he could stand it much longer.

And then he again felt the tip of Vance’s cock press against his opening. A slow, shallow penetration, sending Dillon right to the edge of sanity. He balled his fists, tried to push back, to force Vance deeper. A swat on his butt stilled him.

“My pace, sweetheart. I want you to feel every inch of me going in. God, you should see your sweet ass right now wrapped around my cock.” Dillon felt another inch of Vance’s meat sink deeper. And then another, and another.

“God damn you, Vance. I can’t stand much more.” Sweat broke out on Dillon’s forehead, his body burned with lust, with the need to come. And then suddenly Vance rammed forward. He seated himself smoothly inside Dillon’s channel.

“Oh God.”

Dillon adjusted to the thickness and length of the cock inside him, cementing him to the man he’d wanted more than anything else to have. And then Vance began to move. Deep, powerful strokes, frictioning inside him, marking and branding him with every inch of that prick. Dillon pushed back, countered Vance’s movements, and this time Vance didn’t stop him.

Sweat trickled down his body, as Dillon’s rise toward a powerful climax surged.

One last thrust and Vance shouted out his orgasm. Dillon’s own groan of release wasn’t far behind. Deep and pulsing, stretched to the limit. It was long moments before he collapsed over the ottoman, totally boneless. So filled with some deep emotion for this man that he didn’t dare try to define it. It was too new, too real.

Too devastating.

Chapter Nine

Vance saw Jake walking toward him. He didn't have the usual cocky smile on his face; the one that said Jake owned the world. There were furrows of worry instead. And he strode toward Vance with purpose. It didn't make sense. And then Vance saw that his clothes were torn and there was blood seeping from his neck. His face was pale, with dark bruises beneath his eyes. Vance pulled the pillow over his head, trying to stifle the vision. He didn't want to think about Jake. He didn't want to worry about him. Why now, when he was starting to get his life back together? He should be able to let Jake go. Why did he keep seeing him, smelling him, feeling his presence? He'd heard nothing from him since his departure, so why couldn't he just forget him? Jake had no problems cutting ties. So why couldn't Vance do the same? Especially now.

Wake up, Vance. You need to wake up.

Vance rolled away from Jake's voice and reached out to the other side of the bed, expecting to find a warm body there. But it was vacant and the sheets were cold.

Wake up, Vance! Do it now!

Suddenly, Vance shot up in the bed, the voice inside his head loud and clear. The air in the room was sickeningly scented with Jake's cologne as though someone had spilled a full bottle of it somewhere close by.

What the hell was going on? He threw back the covers and slid from the bed. Dillon had been next to him last night, not Jake. His head felt fuzzy as though he was somehow displaced out of time with the past and present merging in the darkness of the moment. For some odd reason, he knew he was supposed to do something, but he just wasn't certain what it was. He stumbled as he tried to cross the room.

After the marathon fucking in the living room, he and Dillon had retreated to the bedroom, both of them exhausted. He remembered now. Dillon had gotten up at four in the morning because he had to be to work early to finish up some paperwork, and he needed to stop back at his apartment for fresh clothes. Vance remembered a quick kiss, but he'd been so exhausted he hadn't awakened completely when Dillon left.

But now, Vance sensed something was wrong. Very wrong. He just couldn't put his finger on exactly what it was. He threw on a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt and padded into the kitchen for a glass of water. He really wanted to go back to bed. Carrying the half-finished glass, he walked over to the window -- the shared portal between the two apartments. He couldn't help thinking about Dillon and the passion they'd shared the night before.

He was just about to raise the glass to his mouth when he saw movement in Dillon's apartment. He peered closer, trying to get a better look, but all he saw was a vague shadow. Of something. Then he reared back as the figure was outlined against the window as he leaned forward and yanked the curtains closed. Dillon would never have done that. So who the hell was it?

Sonofabitch! Someone was in Dillon's apartment!

Vance sprinted back to the bedroom and grabbed up his phone off the nightstand. Thank God he had Dillon's number on speed dial. His heart hammered in his chest as he waited, praying that he wasn't too late. That Dillon would pick up the phone.

"Vance, what the hell are you doing up? I thought you went back to sleep."

"There's someone in your apartment. Be careful. I'll call nine-one-one from here."

"What the --"

Suddenly, it sounded like Dillon dropped the phone and Vance could hear scuffling and grunts of pain in the background.

"Dillon! Dillon!" There was no answer to his frantic demands for a response except for the chilling echoes of breaking glass and shouts of rage. He couldn't make out what they were saying and he didn't plan to wait around for the outcome.

He didn't have a choice, he broke the connection and dialed 9-1-1, but he knew they'd never get there in time. He could only hope that Dillon could hold his own until someone arrived.

As he gave the emergency operator the information, he threw on his sneakers, grabbed his keys, and raced out of the apartment, praying to God that he'd be in time. He didn't dare wait for the elevator and instead hurtled down the three flights of stairs, vaulting down whole sections at a time, until he came to a crouched halt at the main floor.

He shoved open the heavy metal door and exited into the main entryway. John's head shot up from behind the desk, his eyes widened in surprise as he spotted Vance racing toward him. Vance didn't even want to consider what kind of picture he made to the alert security guard.

"John, when the police arrive, if they stop here by mistake, send them next door to apartment three twenty-five. There's a break-in."

"Mr. Keith," John yelled after him as he ran out of the building. "You shouldn't go over there."

Too late. There was no way he couldn't go, not if there was the least chance of helping Dillon. How the hell had the man gotten past the security in Dillon's building?

"Come with me," he yelled at the security guard in Dillon's building. "There's a problem in one of your third-floor apartments." Time was running out. "Where are the stairs?"

The two buildings shared security, and thank God, the man on duty recognized Vance. With hardly a hesitation, the security guard strode ahead of him and Vance tracked him up the stairs. Even with working out regularly, Vance was already winded by the mad dash from his own apartment and then another mad sprint up three more flights of stairs.

Once they reached the third floor, Vance led the way down the hallway to Dillon's apartment. Thank God he'd been there several times during the past week and knew the way. His heart hammered in his chest as he noted the door to Dillon's apartment was ajar. He was afraid of what he was going to find inside.

* * * * *

Dillon had just turned the water off in his shower when he heard his phone ring. Who would be calling him at this ungodly hour of the morning? It had been a real commitment to dedication to leave the warmth of Vance's bed and head back to his own apartment. But he couldn't turn his back on his responsibilities at work because of one night of fantastic sex with his dream man. Luckily it was Saturday and it was strictly a morning of winding up the week's paperwork and then he was finished. Then he could really let what had happened last night sink in. He held the passionate memory close inside him, a secret he didn't want to examine too closely just yet.

God, but he just wanted to bask in the glow of this fledgling relationship. He wanted to shout it out the window. He wanted to savor the hours of last night in Vance's company. Unfortunately, that would have to wait.

Wrapping a towel around his waist, he then stepped into the bedroom, picked up the phone, and looked at the number displayed. What the...?

"Vance, what the hell are you doing up? I thought you went back to sleep."

"There's someone in your apartment. Be careful. I'll call nine-one-one from here."

He didn't really have time to let Vance's panicked words sink in before something thin and deadly was wrapped around his throat, yanking him backward with brutal force. He dropped the phone as he struggled to break free.

"Die, you bastard, die. How dare you try to take him away from me? You can't have him," an angry male voice yelled from behind him.

Dillon tried to draw in a breath, but the wire around his neck was already cutting deep into his skin, choking off his air. He felt slick blood trickle down his throat. As searing pain racked through him, he knew he was going to die if he didn't do something fast. There was no time to think, no time to reason, and his street instincts kicked into full throttle. It wasn't anger that drove him -- it was pure, primal self-preservation. Survival of the fittest. Adrenaline pumped through him and primal power surged, giving him the strength he needed.

He popped his head back with as much force as he could muster, slamming into the intruder's face. Dillon saw stars and heard the yelp erupt from behind him. But the wire around his neck loosened just enough. It allowed him to insert a hand and rip the damn thing from around his neck. Wasting no time, as he yanked the wire away, he shoved back with the full weight of his body, careening his assailant into the wall. Spinning around and stepping back, he launched a right blast at the man's jaw, a left to his stomach. And kept it coming, the primal instinct for survival, fueling the counterblasts.

Surprisingly, the man didn't drop. He grunted, shook his head, and then launched himself at Dillon. The bedroom wasn't that large and there wasn't much room to maneuver. They both went down. Dillon's bare back scraped against the edge of the bed. He shifted and

the assailant landed on the floor with Dillon on top of him. They struggled for supremacy; the air surged and thickened with the fight for survival.

Tables overturned, lamps broke. The two combatants rolled across the floor, finally banging up against the door. Dillon rose up, finally gaining the upper hand. With instincts honed by repeated bouts with a man who knew street fighting, and from his years on the street as a messenger, Dillon struck out, knowing the least hesitation, the least sign of weakness, and this man would kill him. It didn't matter why he wanted him dead or who he was. What mattered was stopping him from achieving his goal.

A snarl on his lips, Dillon pulled back his fist and delivered the punch straight on to the bastard's face. Again and again, without pity, he kept punching until finally he realized the assailant was no longer struggling. Only then did he let up, realizing the man was unconscious.

He didn't waste any time and jumped up from the floor. Vaulting to the window, he yanked down the curtain and ripped the cords free. He went back to the unconscious would-be killer, rolled him over, and trussed him up, uncaring that he might be cutting off his circulation. For a moment he stood there, heart pounding, looking down at the unconscious, bound man.

Bastard. Never fuck with a messenger, fool.

Dillon reached down and yanked off the black ski mask. The man's face was covered in blood and already beginning to swell and discolor. He had no idea who the attacker was, why he'd chosen Dillon's apartment, or why the man seemed to want to kill him, but at least he wasn't going anywhere any too fast. Dillon hoped Vance had gotten through to the police.

Staggering back, he dropped to the bed and ran a hand through his hair. He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. Suddenly, he felt weak as a baby.

"Dillon! Dillon!"

"I'm in here," Dillon called out. He couldn't have risen from the bed if he'd wanted to. Within seconds, Vance burst into the room, almost stumbling over the prone body on the floor.

Dillon looked up to see Vance staring down at the man lying on the floor, a shocked expression on his face.

"What is it?" Dillon asked.

"Jesus, I know him." Slowly, as though in shock himself, Vance turned to look at Dillon and his face went a shade paler.

"Hey, man, are you okay?" Dillon rose to his feet and limped toward Vance. He put an arm around his shoulder and guided him to sit on the bed.

Vance looked at him. He reached out to touch the wound on Dillon's neck. "He tried to kill you. I don't understand."

Dillon looked toward the door and saw the building guard standing there looking down at the man trussed up on Dillon's floor. He was talking into a two-way radio, his back to Dillon and Vance.

Dillon turned as Vance held something out to him. Dillon realized it was the towel that had been wrapped around his waist. He must have lost it in the struggle.

"Here, you better put this on. I think the police will probably be here any second."

On shaky legs, Dillon stood up, wrapped the towel around his hips, and secured it. Already he was starting to feel the aches and pains from the confrontation. And his throat felt like someone had dragged him through the desert or just shoved a gallon of sand down it. He looked over at the man on the floor. He still couldn't quite believe what had taken place. But actually, as he was beginning to think more clearly, the assailant's words began to make some sense.

He felt Vance's hand on his arm and he looked at him. "Are you all right? Jeez, you took him down pretty good. Do you do this a lot?"

“Not really. But when you work these streets, you kind of have to be ready for anything. You know what I mean?” The words came out hoarse, his throat getting more raw by the second.

And then suddenly the room swarmed with men in uniform and again all hell broke loose. Dillon didn't have another moment to think about the man's words.

Chapter Ten

Later that day Vance handed Dillon a mug of warm, honeyed tea. Dillon held a wet compress to his neck, hiding the angry red welt left by the deadly garrote that had almost sliced his throat completely open. The doctor in the emergency room had given him some antiseptic to use on the wound. Vance shuddered to think about what almost had happened. And to realize it was an ex-lover of his left him about as shell-shocked as it was possible to be.

He sat down on the sofa next to Dillon. What a freaking mess. An ambulance had come to take Glenn away and that was the last that Vance had seen of him. The rest of the day had gone by in a blur. The police had taken Dillon's statement at the hospital. Once the doctor had said it was okay, the two men had gone back to Vance's apartment. Vance was not letting Dillon out of his sight. As far as Vance was concerned, his first priority was to see to Dillon; then he would think about Glenn. God, was it his fault that this had happened? He had sensed Glenn was a bit off balance, and even more so of late. Had he caused this? Had he led Glenn on with that quick fuck at Doneghan's?

"Don't do that." Dillon's hoarse words pulled Vance from his reverie. "Don't try to blame yourself for what happened."

“I can’t help thinking that this is my fault. That somehow Glenn thought there was more to our relationship than there actually was.”

“It’s not your fault what decisions others make. You aren’t to blame. Let the police do their job.”

Vance felt Dillon’s warm fingers thread through his own and he leaned back against the couch, trying not to think about what had happened.

“Where’d you learn to do that? Take him down like that? I didn’t know what I’d find when I got to your apartment. But I sure didn’t expect that.”

Dillon grinned. “You can’t spend years on the street messengering and not learn a few tricks. Although I have taken some lessons as well. There’s a great guy I know who’s agreed to teach my employees how to handle themselves on the streets. I pay Artie to lead a session once a month. He’s the best when it comes to street-fighting techniques. I’m glad I haven’t forgotten how to handle myself, even if I’ve gotten a bit rusty since starting my own business.

“I’ll say you handled yourself. I work out, but I’m not sure I could have done what you did.”

Dillon stroked a finger along Vance’s jaw and suddenly the heat flared. “Maybe I can give you a little personal training session now and then. Just to show you some techniques to get you by.”

Vance leaned closer to Dillon; his eyes targeted those intriguing lips. “That sounds a bit like ‘let me show you my artwork.’” He grinned. “But not a bad idea. I guess I wouldn’t mind a few pointers.”

Vance fastened his lips to Dillon’s, hungry for his taste. Dillon dropped the compress he’d been holding against his neck and pushed Vance back onto the couch. He sank his tongue between Vance’s lips. Vance wound his arms around Dillon’s back, his fingers

encountering the raw scrapes left from the confrontation. Dillon's lips trailed kisses along Vance's rough, unshaven jaw, across his chin, and then reclaimed his mouth.

His hands were at the belt to Vance's flannel robe. He loosened it and drew the edges open, exposing Vance's lean flesh. Dillon tore open his own robe and suddenly they were chest to chest. There wasn't room for coherent thought, only the need to be as close to this man as he could be. Vance only just recovered from his last love affair ending, and he had come so close to losing Dillon as well, in an even more horrific fashion.

"I want to fuck you, Vance. Right now."

Vance looked into his eyes and felt his cock thicken with the same desire.

"Condoms," Vance managed to utter.

"Lube," Dillon affirmed.

They both reached for the drawer in the coffee table at the same time and Vance grinned at Dillon.

"Guess they never made it back to the bedroom, huh?" Dillon asked.

"Nope. Not yet."

"I like the living room," Dillon said. "It feels right to do it here."

Vance had to laugh. "Yeah, I guess it does."

Dillon led Vance over to the rug in front of the fireplace. Vance watched as he shucked his sweatpants. His cock bobbed stiff and tall against his flat stomach. Vance shifted to his knees to stroke his fingers through the short, silky black hairs curling at the root of the fat prick. His fingers slid up and over the satiny length of deepening maroon flesh and traced a fat vein riding up to the broad, flared head. He wanted to taste him, to suck him deep inside, to feel him pulsing with his orgasm. To feel the life of this man throbbing, hot, and filling his mouth.

Quickly, he reached for a condom, unwrapped it, and sheathed the rock-hard prick. He looked up into Dillon's face, saw the dark, lusty expression, and dilated pupils, waiting to feel

Vance's lips wrapped around his prick. Dillon gripped the base of his rigid erection. Dillon offering the sheathed rod to his lover. He widened his stance and thrust his hips. A tasty meal just waiting to be consumed.

Vance licked his lips, opened his mouth, and sucked the tip of Dillon's prick inside. He wanted to take his time. Sucking and licking, swirling his tongue beneath the flared hood, wetting, and driving Dillon faster toward his release. He felt Dillon's cock swell even more and then suddenly Dillon pulled free.

"Not like that, babe." He pulled him to his feet and led him toward the piano. "I've fantasized about this."

"About my piano?"

"You and your piano. Turn around."

Vance swung away and bent over the smooth, polished surface of the baby grand. He wiggled his ass. "All yours, sweetie."

He heard Dillon chuckle and then he stiffened as he felt the cold lube at his opening. And then the tip of Dillon's finger pressed inward, opening him, preparing him to take his prick.

It wasn't long before Vance was pressing back against Dillon's penetration. Again and again and again. And then he felt Dillon's dick push at his opening. There was the press of sensation as the head passed through the outer ring and settled inside, dipping deeper and deeper.

Oh God, the heat of his penetration, the friction of desire that erupted into a blazing inferno. It was like someone dropping a lit match onto a gasoline-soaked cloth. The fire inside Vance roared fast and blazing. The passion burned out of control as Dillon hammered into him.

Moans of pleasure, of desire, of lust, filled the room. Vance fisted his own cock as Dillon's thrusts grew more pronounced. Shorter, faster, more powerful surges as finally

Dillon toppled over the edge and Vance was not left far behind. Vance dropped forward onto the cool ebony wood. He felt some level of regret, as Dillon pulled free.

“One of these days, I’m going to hear you play this,” Dillon said. “And while you’re tickling the ivory, I’m going to be playing you.”

Vance couldn’t help laughing at the intriguing idea of being “played” by Dillon while he sat at the piano. He had to admit, that wasn’t something that even Jake had thought of.

He had so needed to make this connection with Dillon after everything that had happened. After coming so close to losing him.

* * * * *

Vance had refused to let Dillon cook dinner, so Dillon settled with preparing the coffee and filling the dishwasher after they’d finished eating. It was strange to Dillon at how easily they seemed to fit together after such a short time. He was certainly feeling the aches and pains of the pre-dawn struggle and was looking forward to a long soak in the tub. With Vance.

He and Vance had just sat down in the living room with their coffee when the doorbell rang. Vance got up to answer it and Dillon was surprised when two detectives followed a white-faced Vance back into the living room.

“What is it?” Dillon asked, concerned by the paleness of his lover’s complexion.

“Dillon, these are two homicide detectives.” Dillon was alarmed by the almost vacant look on Vance’s face. Had Dillon beaten Glenn so badly that he’d died while in the hospital? Fuck. He hadn’t even considered that possibility.

“Please sit down, detectives,” Vance said as he returned to take a seat on the sofa, at the opposite end from where Dillon sat. Vance’s obviously shocked state concerned Dillon, but he turned to the detectives.

“Why homicide?” Dillon asked, not wanting to take anything for granted.

“Mr. Olden confessed to more than the attempt on your life.”

“What exactly did he confess to?”

“Jesus, I can’t believe this is happening. It’s a fucking nightmare.” Vance leaned forward, head in his hands, and for a moment Dillon thought he was going to be sick.

“What the hell is going on?” Dillon was really starting to freak out now.

One of the detectives opened a notebook and flipped up several pages. “He says he’s responsible for killing someone by the name of Jake Hollinger and dumping his body. We have men out following up on that lead right now.”

“I can’t believe he killed Jake. Jesus.”

Dillon felt the earth rupture beneath his feet. He didn’t quite know how to help Vance. *My God, Vance was right, it was a nightmare.* Again, he looked at the detectives.

“Are you certain?”

Vance looked up. His eyes were dark pools of anguish that practically destroyed Dillon to witness. “Jake left town. Glenn can’t be telling the truth.”

“We don’t know for certain. All we can do is follow up on the information that he’s given us.”

One of the detectives’ cell phones started to ring. Dillon tensed as he watched him pull it out of his pocket and answered it. He stood up and walked across the room for privacy. There was little to be able to discern from the expression on his face.

It wasn’t long before he returned. His face told them nothing. “Mr. Keith, would you mind coming down to the station with us? It appears they’ve found the body right where Mr. Olden said it would be. We need someone to identify him.”

“Oh, Christ.”

Dillon thought Vance might lose it right then and there. But within seconds, Dillon saw a change come over him. Vance straightened his shoulders and color flooded his face. His jaw set and anger blazed from his eyes. The look almost made Dillon afraid of what he might do.

“Give me a minute to change, and I’ll be right with you.”

Dillon rose to his feet. “Do you want me to go with you, Vance?” He hated the thought of him facing this alone. He had no idea what he would do if he were confronted with the prospect of identifying a murdered lover.

Vance hesitated but he didn’t turn around to look at Dillon. His shoulders straightened. “No, I need to do this myself.”

Within ten minutes Vance was dressed in a black turtleneck sweater and blue jeans, and headed out the door with the detectives. He turned to look at Dillon.

“I don’t know when I’ll be done with this.”

“I’ll...uh...head back to my apartment. You know you can call me if you need me.” Vance nodded, but Dillon was very much afraid that wasn’t going to happen. He closed the door behind Vance, forcing himself not to pull the man into his arms, wanting to take some of the awful pain from him. But he knew this was something that Vance had to handle alone.

It was with a sinking feeling that the door seemed to shut with such finality. He could only hope that wasn’t the case.

* * * * *

It was a week later while Dillon was scanning through the paper that he saw the notice about Jake Hollinger’s funeral. Odd emotions warred inside Dillon. He’d never really known the man, but he remembered the vibrancy of his passion, ecstasy marking his face, the shimmer of blue-black hair in firelight. He couldn’t help but mourn the loss of such a vivid life.

Weeks passed and Dillon heard nothing from Vance. He knew the man needed time to mourn. He expected that Vance had probably attended the funeral and his heart ached for Vance's loss. His own slight bruises from the attack were nothing compared to the hell that Vance was probably going through right now.

What had hurt the worst was when he'd gotten up the morning after the attack and looked out his window as had become his habit and discovered the closed drapes on Vance's window. In two years, it was the first time he'd seen those drapes drawn. It had cut him deeper than he'd expected and taken him a long time to come to terms with the fact that Vance might never be ready for a relationship with Dillon. Not after everything that had taken place.

The holidays slipped by with barely a whimper and January, with its chill winds had settled in. Dillon spent long hours at work, trying to fill the void so he would stop thinking about Vance. It really didn't do a lot of good, but he kept trying. Time passed, physical bruises healed, but the pain in his heart went on and on.

So it was with a great deal of surprise that Dillon answered the door to his apartment one cold January evening to find Vance standing in the hallway. He looked thinner, his face drawn, lines etched there that hadn't been evident before.

"Hello, Dillon. Can I come in?"

Dillon's heart thundered and he was so afraid he'd make the wrong move. He stepped back from the door, allowing Vance to come into the apartment.

"Have a seat. Would you like some coffee?"

Vance dropped onto the couch. Dillon looked at him and had to wonder when was the last time he'd eaten. He handed Dillon a mug and then sat down in a chair across from the couch. He didn't dare sit too close, not just yet. He didn't want to do anything that sent Vance out of his life again.

The long, taut silence stretched between them until Dillon was certain he could cut it with a knife. But he had to wait until Vance was ready. He'd made the first move by coming here, but Dillon knew there was more.

"I should have tried to find him after he left," Vance said quietly, staring off in the distance. "I shouldn't have just let him go like that. With anger between us. Maybe I could have done something. Could have stopped Glenn." He turned a haunted look on Dillon and he didn't think he'd ever seen so much pain in a man's eyes as was in Vance's right now.

"I went to see Glenn. I had to know why. Apparently, he took Jake to dinner the night before he was scheduled to fly out. Jake confided that he was having second thoughts. About me. He told him once he got settled in California he was going to call me, to ask me to join him. God, if only I'd known." Vance bowed his head and ran a hand through his hair. "It makes me sick to think that I...that I..." The words faltered.

Dillon didn't know what to say, how to ease his lover's pain. What he did know was that Vance had to get it out, he had to lance the wound or it would infect the rest of his life. No one deserved that. No one deserved the guilt that now weighed this man down.

"It wasn't your fault, Vance. You couldn't have known."

Vance reared up, horror drenching his expression. "After Glenn killed him, he wrapped him in cellophane and stuffed him in a fucking freezer."

Dillon couldn't take any more. He surged up from the chair and went to Vance. Wrapping an arm around his shoulders, he drew Vance's tight, ravaged body close. "You're not alone, Vance. You don't have to do this alone. I'm here."

Vance turned and grabbed onto Dillon. "I loved him, man. I loved him, and I let him down."

"You didn't let him down, it was Olden that let you both down. He's the crazy one. Not you."

"I felt Jake in the apartment, you know. I could smell him. Why didn't I realize what was going on? It had to have been after Glenn killed him. He was there, trying to tell me something. And I wasn't listening." He looked up at Dillon. "Until Glenn almost killed you. Then I heard him."

"What are you talking about?"

"I know this sounds crazy, but he woke me out of a sound sleep. Do you think that's possible? I've never believed in that type of thing before. Maybe I am crazy."

"You're not crazy. I've read of people who've been visited by spirits of loved ones. Obviously, he loved you, Vance."

"I haven't felt him since that night. It's like suddenly he's gone. There's no sense of him there anymore."

"You got him justice, Vance. You found his killer and maybe he's at peace now."

"Do you think so?"

"I know so, man. I watched, remember? I witnessed the love between you. He just wanted to make sure what happened to him didn't happen to anyone else."

"Like you? Do you think he knew?"

"About...us?" Who could tell? The living really didn't know what came next, not really. So who could say what Vance had really experienced?

"Yeah, I guess."

"Maybe. But the one thing I can be sure about is that he wouldn't want you to mourn forever. He'd want you to live. You know?"

Vance took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. "I think I figured that out." He looked at Dillon. "Will you give me another chance? It may take a while, but I don't want to lose what we have. I-I've missed you."

“I’ve missed you too, babe. I’m here, when you’re ready. Until then... There’s a Rangers game tonight and I just happen to have tickets. I think you need a night out. Come with me?”

“Are you sure? I haven’t exactly treated you well.”

“That was a damn heavy load laid on you. I want you to come with me. But first I’m going to feed you. You need to put some meat on your bones, babe.”

A corner of Vance’s mouth quirked up. “That bad, huh?”

Dillon cupped his face. “Not so bad it can’t be fixed. It’s going to be okay. Time helps to heal a lot of things.”

“And friendship, I think. The right friend,” Vance said, just before they sealed the pact with a kiss meant to heal the wounds left in the wake of tragedy.

Chapter Eleven

One year later.

Vance pulled the lasagna out of the oven and set it on top of the stove. He heard the sound of a cork popping and turned to grin at Dillon. Dillon set the bottle onto the counter so it could breathe and pulled two glasses down from the shelf just above.

“You’re sure that’s a good enough red to go with my world-class lasagna? I’ve been slaving all afternoon over this dinner.”

He heard Dillon snort. “Shillmadan is one of my best clients -- he wouldn’t pass off cheap wine. It’ll be perfect.”

The last year had been full of ups and downs -- both good and bad. Vance had ended up going to see a grief counselor for several months and that had helped some. But it was Dillon with his strong, broad shoulders who had really helped Vance weave through the traps and pitfalls of his grief over the loss of Jake and his feeling of responsibility surrounding his death.

He hadn’t thought it was possible to love two men at the same time, but he’d finally come to terms with the realization that he had loved Jake, and that love had not negated his

growing feelings for Dillon. Vance had found a bit of peace in understanding the truth of that acceptance.

Glenn had agreed to a plea bargain and would remain in prison for a long time. Thank God there would be no long, drawn-out trial. And they all could begin to heal.

The doorbell rang and Dillon set the wine aside to answer it. Their guests weren't due to arrive for another hour. New Year's Eve, it was going to be the best one yet.

Dillon walked back into the kitchen holding a box.

"What's that?"

"Your present."

"What do you mean? We're already past that."

"It's your New Year's gift. Come into the living room and open it. I want to do it before the others arrive."

Vance turned off the oven so the garlic bread wouldn't burn and slowly made his way into the other room. "A present, hmmm." There was a strange expression on Dillon's face as he handed the small package to Vance. It was intense and anxious.

Vance held it in his hands for a moment, just looking down at it. Then he looked at Dillon.

"I remember the first package you delivered to me."

"Yeah," Dillon said. "I remember it."

Vance looked at Dillon. "I thought you should know. I burned the contents last week."

Dillon stilled as he looked at Vance. "You never told me what was in it."

"They were letters Jake had written to me. We'd had such a bad fight when he told me he was leaving that I grabbed them all and sent them back to him. I just wish I'd known." A twinge of pain shot through him.

There was a silence as Vance stared down at the oblong box in his hands. He'd thought when he pulled that package out last week, it would dredge up all the pain from his lost lover. But when he'd opened it and stared down at the letters -- small notes and cards that Jake had sent him during their love affair -- it was with bittersweet regret and a few tears that remained.

He had loved Jake, but now Jake was gone and he had to move on. The scent of Jake's cologne wafted through the air as he read each letter for the last time before tossing each one into the fire. It was the first time since the attack on Dillon that Vance felt that Jake was close by, once again. And that he understood.

Vance pulled away from the bittersweet memory and again looked at the package resting in his lap. He ripped open the wrappings and realized there was a jeweler's box inside. He looked at Dillon.

"What's this?" Slowly he lifted the cover. He stared at what was inside and felt a lump rise in his throat.

"I hope you like it. I wanted it to be special. To sort of mark this night." He reached over and lifted out the steel-linked bracelet. He waited, the expression on his face tense. Vance shoved back his sleeve. He could have sworn he heard Dillon's whoosh of released breath. Dillon linked the bracelet around Vance's wrist.

"I thought it would look good on you. It's surgical steel so it won't rust. The latch is reinforced so it can't come undone accidentally."

Vance looked into Dillon's eyes. "So it's kind of a forever sort of thing, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess it is."

"That's good. That's real good. I can be kind of tough on jewelry. It doesn't always hold up well." He turned his wrist over to look at the heavy-duty links. Then he returned his attention back to Dillon. "It can weather anything?"

Dillon's eyes had darkened and he slowly nodded, his expression solemn. "Anything. Lifetime guarantee, so I'm told."

Vance reached out to cup Dillon's jaw. "I'm going to hold you to that."

Suddenly he turned away, opened the drawer of the coffee table and pulled out a package.

"What's that?" Dillon asked.

"It's not nearly as nice as your gift to me. But I think you might like it."

Dillon opened the package and then he laughed as he held up the string of anal beads. "For me?"

"For us, babe."

"Damn I wish we weren't expecting company any minute."

"You're the one who invited them. I was more than willing to start our year out with just the two of us."

"Well, inviting Ren sort of led to asking the others."

Vance smiled. "I love the way you are, Dillon. I wouldn't change a thing."

"You do?"

"Yeah, I do. But after they're gone." He lifted the beads from Dillon's hand and dangled them in front of him. "I'm going to show you how these little gems work." He leaned closer and dropped his voice. "One bead at a time, babe. I want you relaxed and ready to play. I'll lube you so good. I'll ease them in and pleasure you so well. You'll come for me, babe. And then I'm going to fuck that tight ass of yours, and you and I are going to take the whole night to celebrate."

Vance trailed his hand down across Dillon's chest until he reached his lover's swelling erection. It was hot and stiff and he couldn't wait until the dinner party was over. He leaned forward and kissed Dillon, tasting his lover, the strong man who had stood beside him, with him, through the worst moments of his life.

When Dillon had stood on his doorstep that night more than a year ago, Vance would never have thought he'd been delivering the most important gift that he would ever receive. Himself. It was a gift Vance would never take for granted and would cherish for the rest of his life. Dillon's lips fastened on his, promising the world.

 THE END 

Adrianna Dane

The first defining love story Adrianna read back in junior high school was *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte, and that set her on the road to her long standing love affair with the romance genre. Her inspiration in writing often can be found by listening to song lyrics and reading poetry by such poets as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Edgar Allen Poe, and Ranier Maria Rilke. But finding inspiration for her stories truly has no boundaries for Adrianna.

She freely admits she is a romantic by nature and adding sensual heat to romance with a dusting of suspense is her motto. *Esmerelda's Secret*, released by Amber Quill Press in June of 2004, was Adrianna's first book, and with that story and her subsequent books has firmly established herself as a voice within the sensual/erotic romance genre.

Adrianna always looks forward to hearing from her readers and she may be contacted at adriannadane@yahoo.com. Find out more about her current releases as well as planned future releases and book signings by checking for updates at www.adriannadane.com.