

ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*

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Barely
Covered

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Barely Covered

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BARELY COVERED

Sedonia Guillone

Dedication

To Mitch, forever.

Acknowledgements

My heartfelt thanks go to everyone at Ellora's Cave for having me here in the first place, for providing the hottest covers for my books and for the most wonderful editors, Helen Woodall and now Jaynie, with whom I'm reunited.

Also, a huge thank you to Sergeant Detective Wyse of the Homicide Unit of the Boston Police Department, for so generously giving his time to answer all my many questions.

Author Note

Barely Covered is the prequel to *Barely Undercover*, which came out in December of 2007. In *Barely Undercover*, Kaz and Damien have already been together for thirteen years. I found these two men so irresistible and hot together that I just felt the story of their first meeting and getting together deserved to be told. That said, *Barely Covered* takes us back to the year 1994, in which you will notice such strange differences in technology as Kaz using a beeper in his police work instead of a cell phone. Though cell phones did exist at the time, they were not in use in the Boston Police Department as of yet, nor were they as commonplace as they are now. I hope you will enjoy Kaz and Damien's story...and murder mystery.

Best wishes, Sedonia.

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Chapter One

Boston, Massachusetts, 1994

Where was that jerk?

Kaz looked at his watch. Forty minutes was long enough to wait in a smoke-filled, noisy corner of this gay strip club Steve had talked him into as a meeting place. Pretty ballsy, especially knowing Kaz was leery of being here. It wouldn't look good for one of Boston's finest to be ogling nearly naked men writhing their hips and asses onstage, even on his own time.

Kaz pulled his beeper from his pocket. It was Steve. Finally.

Fighting his way through the crowd, he found a pay-phone by the men's room. Setting his drink down on top of the phone, he dialed. The sound of the club was muted a bit, so he could hear when Steve picked up on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Steve, where the hell are you? Are you all right?" Kaz plugged his other ear so he could hear over the crowd.

"Oh Kaz! Damn. Sorry. I...got tied up. You know how it is." Steve sounded a bit sarcastic and Kaz swore he could hear another guy in the background asking who Steve was talking to. In any case, the message was clear—the casual thing they had wasn't working and Steve was trying his fortune with someone new, someone who wanted the real thing. The guy was passive-aggressive that way, Kaz had learned in recent months.

Anger surged hot but then Kaz took a deep breath. Maybe he couldn't completely blame Steve. Steve wanted to be more important to Kaz than Kaz's career—or at least *as* important. But with the bad press the Boston Police Department had been getting lately over its "failure" to bring in murderers, being a detective in the BPD homicide unit took more hours than he had to give. "Yeah," he said finally, "I know how it is."

Steve paused. The guy in the background called to him again. "Just a second," Steve told the stranger then, "Kaz, is that it?"

Kaz exhaled. The impulse rose to leave and go to him, but then it faded. No sense in stringing Steve along. He could be a jerk sometimes, but he didn't deserve to be hurt. "Yeah. I'm sorry."

Another pause. "If you say so. Bye, Kaz."

"Bye." He hung up the receiver and picked up his glass. It hurt to have disappointed Steve, but better now than when they had a place together, two dogs and a joint bank account. To break off with him then would be just plain cruel.

Time to go. He went on duty at five the next morning, so better just to get home. Making his way back out to the main part of the club, he looked toward the entrance and huffed. The place was so mobbed it would take an hour just to get to the damn door.

"And now, gentlemen," the announcer said over the cheering crowd gathered in front of the dance platform, "pure hard-on material is coming onto the stage in two seconds. Get ready to drool, guys, and give a warm welcome to...Damien!"

The crowd went wild, arms raised, practically rushing the stage. The sinewy, erotically driven beat of Berlin's *Sex* started playing and colored lights blinked rapidly from one side of the platform to the other, making a light show in the center of the stage.

The press of the crowd forced Kaz back toward the wall. *Oh well*. He decided not to jostle his way out and instead leaned against the sidewall, avoiding the crush of horny guys waving bills. This Damien guy seemed pretty popular, having roused the biggest cheers of the night so far. With an eye to the stage, Kaz took a sip of his Perrier, his cop instincts having told him to remain sober from the second he'd walked into the place. Club Moritz might be Boston's premier gay strip club, brawny bouncers and all, but there was a feeling here Kaz didn't like. Something smarmy that had nothing to do with...

The spotlight panned to the far side of the stage where one arm appeared from the dark shadows. The mere sight roused another round of cheers, whoops and hollers. Kaz sipped his mineral water again. Theatrics had never impressed him.

“Come on! Get the hell out here!” someone nearby shouted.

Kaz’s gaze jerked to the owner of the voice, a big blond steroid monster in jeans and a t-shirt, drunk off his ass. Probably high too. Kaz had seen his type not make it into the police academy. Too much pumping iron mixed with steroid injections had drained all the blood from his brain. Kaz was big too, but being brawny didn’t mean a guy had to be a shithead. Had Kaz not been off-duty, he would have gone over there and questioned him in suspicion of being under the influence.

More cheers drew Kaz’s attention back to the stage. This Damien guy was in full view now.

Whoa. Kaz’s heart lurched. He lifted away from the wall and stared at the man, gaze glued to a strip of sinewy chest and abs just visible between the flaps of a billowy white shirt. Sweat gleamed on Damien’s skin and on the soft hairs glinting on his pecs. Kaz swallowed hard and he gaped openly at the treasure trail funneling down the center of Damien’s abs.

Damien moved then, flipping his head back. That drew Kaz’s look back up. Shaggy hair, the color hard to discern under the multicolored lights, framed Damien’s chiseled face. Damien wore a big sexy smile and his large eyes flashed with promise. Wow, those were some eyes, heavy-lidded yet full of life.

That wasn’t all, Kaz noticed, scanning the guy’s face as Damien drew closer to his side of the stage. Damien’s face was movie star perfection—softly sculpted lips, straight nose with one small bump, gleaming white teeth, right down to a tantalizing cleft in his perfect chin. As he danced across the stage and turned his back, his body-hugging black pants, shiny and smooth, set off his hard round ass so perfectly it almost appeared they were painted on. When he slunk back around to face the audience, those shiny pants did the same for that perfectly outlined package in front.

Hot damn. Kaz's mouth watered. If Damien was supposed to make a guy drool and want to fit that cock in his mouth, he succeeded.

The beat of the song thumped through the air, made the ground vibrate, a backdrop to the jeers and catcalls of the nearly all-male audience. Damien danced back toward the middle where he halted center stage, took hold of either side of his shirt and yanked it open.

That tiny move earned another round of testosterone-filled yells. Kaz could only stare, frozen, as Damien slipped one arm of the shirt partway down, exposing a muscled shoulder. In time to the music, he wound his hips and then his upper body, making the shirt fall open just enough to reveal a coin-sized nipple.

Hot blood pumped through Kaz's chest and gut, right down into his cock. He'd been watching hot guys strip up there for the last half-hour or so, but this Damien guy...

"Get those fucking pants off!" the 'roid monster's drunken jeer sounded over the rest of the crowd.

What a frigging douche bag. For some strange reason, Kaz found himself hoping Damien hadn't heard the lewd remark.

If Damien heard the guy, he gave no indication. He was busy teasing the crowd, whipping them into a froth. Slowly, sensuously he lowered the other arm of his shirt, exposing both shoulders, his chest and part of his chiseled abs. All the while those slim hips never stopped winding.

Kaz blinked. When he opened his eyes, Damien's shirt was off his torso and flying into the crowd, into a sea of reaching hands where it disappeared. Kaz salivated some more, wishing he'd caught the shirt. The urge to press it to his face and breathe in Damien's scent seized him.

Shit! What the hell was going on with him? Since when did he want to smell a guy he'd never met?

There wasn't time to wonder about it. Damien's entire upper body showed now. The spotlight overtook the multihued lights, giving Kaz a glimpse of Damien's real coloring—hair, a rich chestnut, skin tanned, nipples the color of warm cinnamon. And eyes... Damien turned and wound his way downstage again, in Kaz's direction, making Kaz especially grateful for his hawklike eyesight...eyes—a rich shade of green.

The guy was magnificent.

Kaz's heartbeat sped up and heat simmered between his t-shirt and skin. Even the blond 'roid monster's lewd yelling close by faded into the background as Damien continued to dance.

Hands locked behind his head, Damien ground his hips in sensual circles, turning front and back, driving his audience to a pitch. Dollar bills cascaded through the air, showering the stage like paper rain.

Damien's face broke into a wide, dazzling grin. He halted, both hands on one side of his waist.

The crowd roared.

Kaz gulped. Damien was working open his pants from the side. The black material hid a zipper that...inch by inch Kaz could see ran the length of Damien's leg.

Slowly, tortuously in time to the sinuous beat of the music, Damien lowered the zipper.

Kaz shook himself. When had he started panting? Good thing the guys around him were at least as worked up as he was, caring only about watching the sex god on the stage as he revealed one sloping hard thigh. Bit by bit the material fell away. Damien pivoted quickly, concealing his front from the crowd. They cheered and hooted. Damien rewarded them with a round of his hips and staccato flexing of his perfect, round ass cheeks, separated only by a G-string up the crevice.

Hot damn. No wonder the crowd had gone wild when the announcer told them who was dancing next. Kaz's mouth went dry. Never in his adult life had he wanted to tongue a guy's ass as badly as he wanted to right this second. And yet, when Damien

turned back to the front, Kaz found his gaze roving upward, wanting to look into Damien's eyes again. There was something to him, a sparkle.

"Fucking hot!"

Kaz turned. The blond asshole again. The guy was practically slobbering all over himself, a glazed look in his eyes while he stared at Damien. So — *that* was the source of smarminess Kaz had gotten when he walked in. This guy, right here, a few feet away from him. Kaz watched him, sizing him up the way his police training had taught him. A big part of his instruction had been learning to trust his instincts. This character was trouble.

Then Kaz thought of something else. Had *he* been staring at Damien this way? He hoped not. And why did he suddenly feel so protective of Damien? The guy was hot as hell, obviously in control of his body and of the bodies around him. He could take care of himself.

Feeling chastened, Kaz tried to turn and couldn't. He dared to let himself look up at the stage again. And felt a jolt right through his middle. The heat traveled right to the head of his cock.

Damien was just drawing down the zipper on his other leg to the pant cuff. He glanced up at his audience, his face a mask of teasing mischief.

Catcalls and wolf-whistles practically drowned out the music.

Damien ripped the pants away.

The crowd went wild. "Over here! Over here!" various voices called out.

Damien flashed them a grin. He swung the pants in several lasso-like circles over his head and flung them into the audience. The onlookers grabbed wildly as if a million dollars had been tossed at them. Like the shirt, the pants disappeared somewhere and Damien stood, naked, except for a tiny black pouch holding his package.

Kaz swallowed. A lump formed in his throat. His brain felt mad with a strange fever and his heart pumped as if he'd been running. The now-golden lights shone over

Damien's sinewy, undulating body, glinting off his tanned skin, sweat beading like dew in his soft chest hairs and on the strip of hair that plunged down his sleek abs. All Kaz could do now was stare at the guy, transfixed on his incredible body, shaggy hair and movie star face. He'd have paid a thousand dollars right then just to lick the sweat off Damien's chest.

Kaz fought the urge to jostle his way up to the stage. He could easily have done it with his size and brawn, even in this crowd of men. Damien was dancing along the edge of the stage, dipping down, going to his knees, pelvis out so that the reaching hands could stuff bills into his G-string. Yet, strangely, Kaz was glad not to take part. Even if he hadn't been an off-duty police officer, he couldn't help a wave of embarrassment. Damien didn't belong on that stage...not really, no matter how fine he was. Something about Damien spoke to him, told him this was a guy he could bring flowers to and propose to down on one knee and all that romantic crap. Maybe it was the vulnerable expression the guy seemed to have, even through the erotic tease he was giving.

Crazy. That was crazy. Kaz didn't really know such things just from watching the guy dance. This had to be an example of hormones overtaking instinct. However, when it came to the blond 'roid monster, there was no confusion. The guy was trouble.

Just then, Kaz spotted the blond at the edge of the stage. When had he gotten through the crowd?

"Get over here, Damien!"

Even through the thunderous noise, Kaz could hear the 'roid monster yell, waving his large fistful of money toward Damien a few feet away.

Damien danced a bit closer. Kaz saw him look down and then jump back. He hadn't broken a step but Kaz didn't miss the break in Damien's grin as he avoided the blond.

Kaz's gut lurched. Did Damien know this creep? Had something bad happened between them? And why did he care?

"Give a round of applause for Damien!" the voice on the loudspeaker announced through the din of cheers and catcalls.

The lights began flashing again and Damien receded toward the rear of the stage, bills protruding at all angles from the strings across his hips. His hands were above his head and he was still grinning and grinding his hips even as the lights faded.

Disappointment stabbed Kaz. He wanted nothing more than to slip backstage and try his luck with Damien. Then again, that would make him just another one of the slobbering jerks who lusted after Damien's body after seeing him strip. Kaz drank the last of his water and set the bottle on the nearest available surface. Probably best just to go home. Except...

The blond. Kaz scanned the space immediately around him. Only a few minutes had passed between the last part of Damien's routine and the fading spotlight, yet the huge 'roid monster was already out of here.

Kaz's gut clenched. Why he should find the asshole's exit so disturbing, he could attribute to only one thing—the guy had been thinking the same way *he* had moments ago. Only, the blond was actually going to try his luck with Damien while Kaz had decided to leave Damien alone and go home. *No*, he decided. It was definitely something else. The guy's behavior exhibited signs of drug use. His aggressive attitude and the way he'd leered and gone up to the stage, no doubt to cop a feel of Damien's jewels, were not the actions of a man who'd just come courting. Damien had obviously seen it too by the way he'd avoided him.

Dance music pumped over the speakers, so loud, the bass made the entire building vibrate. Through the flashing lights, the writhing bodies on the dance floor in front of the stage flickered in a surreal way. But Kaz barely noticed. His heart pumped adrenaline through his body. That bad feeling he'd had when he first walked into the Moritz now plagued him.

Jostling his way through the press of dancers and throng milling on the sidelines, Kaz made his way as quickly as he could in the direction of the back where he imagined

the dressing room was. The corridor was darker, lit by only a couple of lights, the temperature not so heated by sweaty guys trying to feel each other up. However, a small crowd still lingered. Kaz surveyed the guys hanging around. No blond 'roid monster.

Kaz tapped a guy on the shoulder. "What's going on here?" he asked.

The younger man jerked his thumb in the direction of a doorway. "Waiting to meet Damien."

Damn. There were probably twenty of them. Kaz's uncomfortable feeling intensified and he found himself hating the fact that Damien probably did private dancing with any number of these men. That's what many strippers did to earn extra tips. He turned back to the guy he'd questioned. "Is he in that room?"

"Don't know. No one's seen him since he left the stage."

Kaz got a chill. "Did you happen to see a really tall blond guy?"

The other man shook his head. "Nope. Haven't seen him. Sorry."

Kaz sighed and turned around, hands on his hips. Another moment and he went off searching, that bad feeling like a fist in his gut.

* * * * *

Damien drew in a deep breath and pulled his tank top and jeans on in the quiet, dark corner of backstage only the performers knew about. Thankfully there were little back passages he could go through in this place and avoid the crowds completely. Which was *exactly* what he was going to do after what happened last night, even if he hadn't had a whopping *English Literature After World War I* final to study for.

A shiver passed through him, though he was still hot and sweaty from dancing. That blond creep had been there tonight again, trying to cop a feel. He'd said last night his name was Lance. Good thing they'd been surrounded by people. The memory of the night before was still too fresh. Best if he just got out of here tonight. He didn't need the extra tips so badly that he'd risk running into that guy. He wasn't even going to try to

find the stripping outfit he'd flung into the audience so he could return it to the dressing room. Screw it. He'd replace it later.

Shouldering his backpack, he slipped quietly into the back corridor, rushing past the door that led to the dressing room hall. No doubt there was a crowd there as usual, which probably included the bastard. Another few feet and he'd be free to go home, the only place he really wanted to be right now. The thought of another night giving lap dances and hand jobs, especially after the drunken blond monster had threatened to yank him down by his hair to swallow up his cock, was unbearable. If he hadn't had the forethought to pay a bouncer extra to keep an eye on him, he'd have been in real trouble.

Damien pushed open the back entrance and stepped out into the alley, letting the heavy door click shut and lock behind him. He pulled in a breath of fresh air. Well, city air was never completely fresh, but compared to the smoky, sweaty air in the Moritz, it was. Ah, finally he could sneak out onto the sidewalk and catch a cab home. He turned and took a few steps.

Just as a shadow loomed up before him. "Hey, Damien."

Damien froze. His blood turned suddenly cold.

There, in front of him, blocking his path, was the blond monster.

Chapter Two

Lance...stepped closer. His huge body nearly blocked out the entire alleyway. "I figured you'd try to sneak out this way. Where're you going?"

Damien's heart lurched. He gripped the strap of his backpack and stepped back. "I'm going home. I'm tired."

"You're not going anywhere, Damien." Blond Monster...Lance...moved in, bringing with him the stench of stale beer and testosterone. "We have unfinished business."

Shit! Why did the door behind him have to be locked? Damien's mind raced over the self-defense moves he knew, yet somehow in the face of this giant, he sensed that anything he tried wouldn't work. He'd be overpowered. "No, we don't."

Large hands shot out and gripped his shoulders. Even under the influence Lance was strong. Before Damien knew what was happening, his back was pressed hard up against the brick wall and Lance's huge brawn crushed him from the front.

"Let me go!" Damien brought his knee up, intending to attack the man's groin, but a thick leg trapped his defense.

"Ooh, you little bitch." Lance yanked Damien's arms and hauled him around. He shoved Damien into the brick wall.

Pain shot through Damien's left cheekbone as it scraped the bricks. The other man's knees pinned his legs to the wall and one arm twisted behind him kept him prisoner. He was fucked. Literally.

The attacker's weight kept him pinned while one huge arm wrapped around his front, yanking open the button and zipper of his jeans. Damien screwed his eyes shut while his pants were dragged down. A familiar horror flooded in on him, one he hadn't felt in years, but was as fresh as when it had happened.

"You didn't come through last night, Damien," Lance breathed menacingly into his ear. "But you will now."

Damien's heart pounded. His throat was deadly dry, so dry he couldn't even muster a hoarse yell for help. He couldn't do anything but wait until it was over.

Suddenly Lance's weight fell away from him. Damien heard a grunt followed by what sounded like someone getting punched. He dared to peek over his shoulder. And let out a gasp.

A guy nearly as big as Lance had his attacker on the ground. Lance tried to get up, but the other guy kicked him down and pounced, jamming his knee into Lance's gut.

"Let me up, motherfucker," Lance growled. He flailed and tried to get up then froze when something clicked near his head.

A gun.

The man with the gun reached into his pocket. In the dim light, Damien saw a wallet, which the man flipped open and shoved into his attacker's face. "Detective Frank Kazaminsky, Boston Police Department." He stuffed the wallet back into his pocket.

Lance groaned. "Oh fuck."

"You're under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. Anything—"

"I didn't do anything," Lance said, remaining still while the gun was pointed at him. "This is police brutality."

Damien turned and stared, his heart still pounding, as much with relief now as with fear. Quickly he noticed his pants still hanging around his thighs and pulled them up, buttoning and zipping them with trembling hands as the scene unfolded before him.

"Let's see here," the cop said, "I found you in the process of assaulting this man with the intent to rape him. We won't even go into the possibility of possession and use of narcotics. I'm going to call in a car to bring you in where he can press charges."

Damien's blood froze. *Press charges.* That's all he needed. Lance would come back to get him in revenge. "No. I-I can't do that."

The cop looked up at him. In the light of the dim alleyway bulbs, Damien could make out a rugged face. Dark hair cropped really short, like a typical cop, and dark, piercing eyes. The light also cast shadows on a broad chest straining against his shirt, jacket thrown open just enough for Damien to see the holster strapped underneath. "You mean you want to let this bastard go free?"

"I don't want any more trouble. I just want to go home. If you try to drag him in anyway, I'll still refuse."

The cop sighed. "Shit. All right." He looked down and pressed his knee hard into Lance's stomach, making the guy grunt. "If you come within five hundred feet of this man again, I'll haul your ass in so fast you won't know what hit you. Got that?" He kept the gun close to Lance's head for emphasis.

"I got it."

"Good. Now I'm going to let you up, slowly, and you're going to get the hell out of here or else find yourself cuffed and in the back of a cruiser, heading to your lodgings for the night." With that, he holstered his gun and slowly released the man.

The cop circled around and came to stand in front of Damien like a shield as Lance limped out of the alleyway and disappeared around the corner.

In the next second, Kazaminsky turned to him. Up close, his face was a study in rugged masculinity right down to the nose, obviously broken and healed a couple of times, to the shadow of beard over the strong jaw. Those dark eyes searched Damien's face from under their thick, heavy lashes. "I just want to check you," he said, his voice gentler now. One large hand came up, fingertip landing under his chin, bidding him to tilt his face to the side. "He hit you?"

Kazaminsky's touch sent tingles through Damien's chin. No one had ever defended him that way. And there'd been another time he'd needed it *so* badly. "No," he murmured. "He shoved me against the wall." The air suddenly felt really cold and he

started to shiver. *Shit*, he'd left his sweat jacket inside. No way in hell he wanted to go back in there to get it. But then Kazaminsky slipped his own jacket off and draped it over Damien's shoulders. A beefy arm came out and pressed lightly across his upper back. "Can you walk?"

Damien nodded. It was really difficult to think right now. All he wanted was to immerse himself in hot, hot water and forget this night had ever happened. Even though the protective arm around him now felt very comforting. "I want to go home," he muttered. Then he remembered his backpack and picked it up. "I'm not hurt. Really. Just shaken. Please just put me in a cab." Vaguely he was aware of how the cop shouldered much of his weight as they moved, step-by-step, out of the alleyway, onto the sidewalk.

"I can get a cruiser to take you."

"No." Damien didn't know why he was being so stubborn, just that he had to do this his way, not anyone else's. "I-I'm sorry."

"It's all right. No problem." Kazaminsky spoke to him in a surprisingly soothing tone, a tenor his rugged exterior belied. "With your permission, though, I'll see you home. You shouldn't be alone right now. All right?"

Damien sighed. He didn't know whether to be relieved or embarrassed. "Okay." At least if he wasn't going to be alone as he wished, it was better to be with the man who'd rescued him from getting raped.

Raped. Damien felt the strength drain from his limbs.

Kazaminsky's arm tightened around his shoulders. "I've got you, Damien," he said softly. He reached over and retrieved the backpack from Damien's hand, carrying it for him.

Damien looked at him. "You know my name."

"Yeah. I was there when you danced. I heard the announcer say it." Kazaminsky sounded almost embarrassed. Well, he couldn't be as mortified in that moment as

Damien felt. Just then a cab turned the corner and the cop flagged it down. He opened the back door and stood aside.

Damien slid in ahead of him and sagged back against the seat. It felt damn good to have the cop's help. He'd never felt so drained in his twenty-three years.

"Where to?" the cab driver asked.

"602 Chestnut Street, Cambridge," Damien said. "Off Inman Square."

Wordlessly, the driver pulled away and started driving. Just then, Damien became aware of the large man beside him. "Detective Kazaminsky," he said, though it felt strange to call the other man "detective". He couldn't be much older than Damien, if not the same age.

Kazaminsky looked at him. "Just Kaz."

"Kaz," Damien repeated. His own voice sounded slightly drunk and he felt strange, lightheaded, as if he had downed a few shots of something strong. "You were working undercover in there?" It would make sense. Some very illegal shit went down in the Moritz, the one place where gangsterish gay men carried on with their activities. He caught glimpses of it all the time.

Kaz looked down. "No. Not undercover. Off-duty."

Damien felt his ears prick up. An openly gay cop. He supposed it happened, in spite of the brotherhood he heard the Boston Police Department was. "Oh," was all he said.

"I was actually meeting someone," Kaz went on. He seemed compelled to explain. "He stood me up. I was ready to leave when you came onstage."

Damien released a strange huff. That figured. Maybe Kaz had been looking to get laid too. His valiant rescue dimmed in light of this. "So then you were following me when I left the stage?"

"No," Kaz said, his tone matter-of-fact. "I was following *him*. I was suspicious the second I saw him. I didn't like the way he was looking at you while you danced."

Damien huffed again. "A lot of people look at me that way when I dance."

"That may be, but then I observed the interaction between you when he went up to the stage. I saw the look on your face and the way you avoided getting near him. I realized then there was a problem brewing. He disappeared after you went offstage so I went looking for him." He paused. "I'm glad I found him."

Damien looked at him. His cheeks flushed hot and he felt ashamed...among all the other things he was feeling. "Me too. Thank you. I...didn't mean to be ungrateful."

Kaz smiled at him. The expression softened the ruggedness of his face a bit. "You're welcome. And you weren't being ungrateful at all."

Damien glanced out the window and sighed. There were moments his way to earn money struck him as particularly horrible. This was one of them. "He was there last night too. I'd never seen him before. He wanted a...lap dance. I didn't have a good feeling about him then, but I ignored it." He raked a shaky hand through his hair. Why he suddenly felt compelled to tell Kaz the details, he wasn't sure. Only that it somehow felt...right. "I should have obeyed my instincts. He threatened to force me down on him when I'd finished the dance and started to leave." His cheeks burned with shame. "But inside the club there are bouncers all around. I was able to get away from him." He sagged back against the seat. "No bouncers in the back alley, obviously. If you hadn't been there..." Unable to finish the sentence, he fell silent.

Kaz's hand covered his. The gentle touch reassured Damien and unsettled him a bit at the same time. He looked up.

Kaz's face was in shadows, but each street lamp they passed under gave Damien a glimpse of the cop's sympathetic expression. A kind of compassionate-looking Marlboro Man. "Don't start with 'ifs', Damien," he said softly. "I was there and that's that." He lifted his hand away yet remained sitting with his body turned in Damien's direction, one arm across the back of the seat, as if to put it across his shoulders should Damien need him to.

Damien pulled in a shivery breath. His cheek still stung from the scrape of the bricks, a stark reminder of that helpless feeling he'd gotten, the violence of having been pinned to the wall, forced to accept whatever happened to him.

The images flashed through his mind, a relentless litany of past abuse and present, menacing and unsettling, like the flickering lights that waved over the stage when he danced, blinding him in spots and illuminating the drooling crowds before him in others.

Before Damien realized what he was doing, he'd leaned into the warmth of Kaz's broad body next to him. His right cheek, the one that hadn't been bruised, rested against the larger man's chest. He could hear Kaz's heartbeat.

A beefy arm closed around him. "It'll be all right, Damien," Kaz said softly. "No one will hurt you now."

* * * * *

Kaz released Damien when the cab pulled up in front of Damien's address. Over Damien's protests, Kaz paid the driver and picked up Damien's backpack, ushering him out onto the sidewalk. The night was cool with a balmy spring scent and the elm- and maple-lined street of neatly tended homes belied the scene of violence he and Damien had both just experienced.

Disturbed by the feeling of absence he'd gotten just after letting go of him, Kaz glanced at Damien's house, a craftsman's cottage with a porch of potted ferns and a hanging swing, the kind two people could sit in comfortably, side by side. A fern-lined brick walk led up to the place. One light burned behind the shutters, giving the appearance that someone was home. He turned to Damien. "Is there someone at home who can look after you?" It was crucial Damien had company for the first twenty-four hours. Kaz had learned all about victims of sexual assault and the procedure for aiding them in his coursework at the academy. Truthfully, Kaz wanted to be the one to keep

the man company, but really, there was no way to maneuver that without coming off as weird.

Damien shook his head and pulled Kaz's jacket tighter around him. "No. This was my parents' house but they live in Florida now and my sister Carrie was living here but she spends most nights over at her fiancé's in Chelsea."

Kaz touched Damien's elbow. "Let's get you inside," he said. "I want to examine your cheek and then we can call someone."

But Damien stood firm. A strange look passed through his eyes, illuminated by the streetlight nearby. "Really, I'm fine, Detective. I'm stronger than I look. I've been through worse, believe me." He sounded almost guilty, as if he wanted company but didn't feel he could ask.

"I'm not leaving you alone, Damien. If you don't want me in your house, that's one thing. I would never force my way in, but I can't, in good conscience, leave you by yourself."

Damien sighed. "I'm not against your being in my house. You saved my life, really."

The admission made Kaz feel warmth, the way he had when he'd comforted Damien in the cab. The initial impression he'd had of Damien resurged. The man standing before him just seemed more like...the marrying kind than a stripper, whatever that all meant. He smiled, wanting only to put Damien at ease. "Well, come on then." With his hand on Damien's elbow, he led him up the walk.

The inside of Damien's house was as neat and cozy-looking as the outside. All hardwood floors and moldings, bookshelves and more potted plants. In the main living area, a large fireplace took up most of one wall. The sofa, a large brown pit group sofa of velvety material, faced the fireplace. A furry kind of rug and a glass coffee table completed the utter coziness of the room and made Kaz want to curl up in front of the fire, just holding Damien until Damien wasn't upset anymore.

That last thought was unsettling. Kaz put down Damien's backpack. "We need to make it a bit warmer in here," he said, noticing that Damien hadn't taken off Kaz's jacket even though they were inside. Trauma could often lower a person's body temperature and make it difficult for them to get warm. Damien nodded absently and slipped his shoes off. Kaz did the same to be polite.

Damien nodded. "I'll get the fireplace going." He went to the wall and turned a knob. In seconds the fireplace had flames licking upward, dancing with a gentle glow. One of those propane jobs that made a nice fire without the safety hazards. "Can I offer you something to drink?" he asked. "Coffee or tea?" Though the space was comfortable now from the fire, he still wore Kaz's jacket, as if wearing it not only kept him warm but made him feel safer.

"No, thanks. I'm good. Just sit down and relax." Now was not the time to have Damien playing host. "Really, we should be calling someone for you, a friend or family member."

Damien tensed as he sat down on a section of the brown sofa. "I'm not close with my family," he said, his voiced tinged with that sound people got when they were resentful of family members. "Carrie's all right, but she needs to get on with her life. I won't bother her about this."

Kaz suppressed a frown. As a detective, he'd learned how to put small clues together into a larger picture. Something was telling him that Damien wasn't a stranger to sexual assault. "What about friends?" *A boyfriend, perhaps?*

Damien shrugged, his gaze steady on the gentle dance of flames in the hearth. "No time. I'm either in class, teaching, studying or...working." He glanced at Kaz now. "I dance to pay my tuition, in case you were wondering."

"I figured it was something like that," Kaz answered truthfully. As a cop, he'd learned long ago not to make assumptions about anyone, no matter the appearances. It was the cops who made all kinds of judgments and assumptions who made all the mistakes.

Damien tilted his head, his expression somewhere between disbelief and surprise. "Really? You mean, you don't just think I'm a skanky whore?" The way he asked the question showed he believed that about himself. Kaz could hear it in the tone.

"Of course not." Kaz got a sudden, strange, melting sensation right in the center of his chest. A sensation better off left ignored. He put his attention onto Damien's cheek. "Now let me look at your injury." With careful fingertips on Damien's jaw, he bid the other man to tilt his head so he could look. In the better light, he could see the skin had some small scrapes and was beginning to swell a bit. Damien would have quite a bruise for a few days, but thankfully nothing worse than that. "Does it hurt?"

"Only a little."

Kaz examined the spot a bit longer. He resisted the urge to slide his fingertip along Damien's jaw and over his soft bottom lip. *Dammit!* What kind of creep was he, wanting to feel Damien up? He lifted his hand away. "I'd like to put some ice on it to keep down the swelling."

Damien started to get up but Kaz stayed him with a hand on Damien's arm. "Sit. I'll get it. Where's your kitchen?"

The other man pointed, a bewildered look on his face, as if Kaz's attentiveness were confusing him somehow. "Ice in the freezer, of course. And there are plastic bags in a drawer by the sink."

"Got it." Kaz got up, glad for the bit of space. His response to Damien wasn't professional. Not at all. Nor was pulling the gun on Damien's attacker earlier. No doubt if this incident came to light, he'd be in trouble for excessive force by an off-duty police officer. Chances were, though, no one would ever know what had happened.

Damien's neat kitchen was another cozy room, walls painted light yellow, white curtains on the window and a heavy, antique pine table with country chairs. Kaz quickly put together a compress and returned to the sofa. Gently, he urged Damien to sit back, holding the compress to his cheek.

"You really don't have to do all this...Kaz," Damien said. "I really can take care of myself."

"I'm sure that's true, but just stay quiet and relax." If Damien lived here alone and kept the place this clean while he studied and put himself through school, he obviously had it together. However, everyone needed *someone* at times. Damien came off as someone trying not to need anyone, ever. The way Damien had cuddled up against him in the cab, like a frightened kid, had told Kaz otherwise.

A quiet moment passed with just the glow of the flames in the fireplace.

"How bad is it?" Damien's question made Kaz turn. "I mean, my cheek? I haven't dared to look yet."

"Not bad at all," Kaz assured him. "It's swelling a bit and there are scrapes. You'll have a bruise too for a bit."

Damien made a small sound, a kind of snorting laugh, somehow incongruous with his sleek yet innocent looks. "Guess I won't be working for a while, at least until some makeup can cover it."

"You shouldn't go back to work so soon anyway."

Now Damien sat up and turned fully to him. He put down the compress. "Look, Officer...Kaz, I really appreciate how concerned you are, but this is not a big deal. Really. Okay, it was frightening and all and I'm grateful as hell you were there to stop him. But this was just some toked-up stranger, a nobody with too much testosterone and no brains. That's nothing. Not when you've had the same kind of thing happen to you with someone you trusted. Someone who's supposed to care about you. *That* is the worst imaginable. It makes this incident seem like a walk in the park." Damien fell silent and turned toward the fire, staring into it again. He released a deep sigh.

Kaz stared at Damien. Damien's admission made all kinds of horrible images assault his mind, things he hadn't been there for but couldn't help seeing because something about Damien was so clear to him, clearer than usual, in a weird, disturbing, yet somehow...magical kind of way. And the thing that was clearest? Simple. If

whoever had hurt Damien, the nameless, faceless person he was referring to, were in this room right now, he'd get beaten to a bloody pulp. "Shit, I'm sorry, Damien," he said finally when words would come. Not a textbook answer, the kind he'd been trained to give in such a situation. But life was *so* not a textbook and how could Damien know that Kaz felt compassion if he gave a trained answer?

Now Damien met his gaze. Many feelings seemed to churn in those incredible green eyes. He raked a hand through his thick hair. Kaz watched the shaggy locks sift back into place. "Damn, I shouldn't have blurted all that out, should I? It just kind of...burst out. I guess I wasn't thinking. Just reacting. I mean, you're supposed to be able to tell a police officer that kind of stuff, right?"

"I—"

"No, that's not completely fair...to you, I mean," Damien went on. "There are cops all over the place who are trained to deal with...victims...but I don't go around talking to them about my...about what happened...just because you're supposed to be able to."

Kaz watched him. Damien seemed to be babbling now, perhaps from shock or maybe from something else, but it didn't matter. Talking was healthier for him than sitting there quietly, believing he shouldn't be bothering anyone. For lack of something to say, Kaz reached out and urged Damien to return the ice pack to his cheek.

Obediently Damien held the compress to his injury. The expression he turned up at Kaz showed an odd amazement mixed with gratitude. "Thank you," he added softly. Damien remained quiet a few moments before speaking. "I guess that's why it all tumbled out," he said, his tone hushed now, as if he were embarrassed but still very much needed to express himself. "Not because you're a cop. Although that helps, I guess, because you want to protect people."

"That's true," Kaz agreed, though tonight the word "protect" was taking on dimensions he hadn't ever thought of or felt before in his twenty-five years. The willingness he'd had to actually squeeze the trigger on that blond 'roid monster left a disturbing residue inside him. Not to mention his overwhelming desire to smash up

Damien's other rapist with his bare hands. Those were *not* the impulses that made one a cop. Those were instincts that made someone a wild beast, protecting its young at any price.

"It's just that you're the first person who's ever defended me. In my whole life." Damien's eyes were wide, honest. And his words were sweet and...horrifying at the same time. They confirmed Kaz's observations.

Kaz cleared his throat. "I'm sorry about that."

"What, sorry you defended me?"

"No, of course not. Sorry no one defended you before."

"Oh. Right." He shrugged and a sad look flooded his eyes. Slowly he leaned back against the cushions again, still holding the compress to his cheek. "There I go again. I guess I'm just a bit...I don't know." He sighed, seeming to avoid eye contact. "Thanks," he said softly after another moment. "But I guess it was for the best. I've learned to rely on myself."

Kaz watched him a moment and decided it was safer not to pick up that thread of conversation. The things he wanted to say to Damien about protecting him would just be so inappropriate. "What are you studying, by the way? You mentioned school."

"English literature. I'm nearly halfway through a master's. Or rather, I will be after exams."

Kaz peered a bit more closely at him. "How old are you?"

Damien chuckled and set the ice pack down again. It was probably getting too cold for his skin. "Twenty-three. Same as you. I'm pretty good at guessing age."

Kaz grinned. "I'm twenty-five."

Damien glanced at him sideways. "Okay, not bad. Off by a couple of years. Isn't that kind of young to be a detective?"

He laughed. Damien had obviously been kidding. "Yeah actually. I get flak for it at times."

Damien's eyebrows rose. "You must be really good."

Now Kaz felt his cheeks burn. Damn, Damien was making him blush. "I guess. I never thought about it."

"What do you do? I mean, what department?"

"Homicide unit, actually. I hope one day to work in drug control but homicide needs my skill and expertise." He said this last part facetiously, but Damien's eyes widened.

"I'm impressed!"

"Don't be. I just work too hard." Though he wanted to impress Damien, he'd come off as bragging if he touted all his commendations for service as a patrol officer, not to mention the excessive extra hours he put in without pay simply out of his personal quest for justice. He was on record as the youngest to reach detective and was the object of resentment with some, but he wouldn't have traded it for anything.

"Yeah, but how many people accomplish that at your age? You must be like...a prodigy."

Admiration was clear in Damien's tone and it struck Kaz like a whack to the head. He cleared his throat again. "I don't know if I'd go that far. I'm just ambitious, I guess."

"Still. It's admirable and you catch murderers. It's an important job. Not just anyone can do it."

"I...um...never thought of it that way. So thanks."

A tiny smile shadowed Damien's lips. "No problem." He leaned forward and shrugged out of Kaz's jacket. "I'm warmer now. Thanks for this." He set it aside on a nearby chair.

"Anytime."

"I also feel ready to make something hot to drink. Now can I offer you tea?"

"Are you sure?" Damien seemed to underestimate his own shock response.

Damien waved him off. "Look, like I said, this isn't that big a deal."

Kaz didn't believe him but he wasn't about to argue with Damien either. "All right, but I'm coming with you." He rose and came forward, showing he was going to follow Damien into the kitchen and that was that.

Damien gave him a look. "Okay."

Back in the kitchen, Damien gestured to the table. "Have a seat if you'd like. Are you hungry?"

"No thanks, I'm fine."

"I'm not hungry either." Damien put a kettle on the stove then opened a cupboard and took out a teapot, which he brought over to the sink then stood, waiting for the water on the stove to get hot.

Kaz watched him. Damien's movements were fluid, graceful, and Kaz enjoyed watching the other man's hands as he worked, rinsing the teapot under the stream of hot water then setting it on the counter by the stove. It was...cozy...in a way, and Kaz found himself wishing he were here because the two of them were just hanging out together on a Saturday night rather than because he was watching Damien for signs of...

The water in the kettle was now hissing and bubbling, probably ready to boil in a minute or so. But Damien stood unmoving, his back to Kaz, his hands gripping the edge of the counter, knuckles white. Damien's shoulders heaved and his posture was unnaturally rigid.

Kaz jumped up and approached him, his heartbeat speeding up. "Damien?" he said softly, just over the hiss and bubble of heating water.

Chapter Three

Damien didn't move, didn't respond. His head was bowed. His shaggy chestnut hair hung in his eyes and his breathing came in short, tight rasps.

Kaz moved in closer. What would the textbook say to do in this instance? His mind fogged. Damn if he could remember, his mind felt so confused by the strange melt his feelings were going through tonight.

Damn the textbook.

Kaz lifted a hand and placed it flat on Damien's back. The lean muscles were hard against his hand through Damien's t-shirt. "It's all right, Damien," he said softly. He dared to rub Damien's back in a circular motion. "You're safe now."

Damien didn't look up. He seemed lost in whatever was happening to him, but with each caress on his back, the tension in his body drained a bit. Finally he turned his head. His eyes were misted and churned with that mix of emotions Kaz had seen in them earlier. In the background, the kettle began to whistle.

Kaz reached over and turned the stove off then removed the kettle to a different burner, his other hand still on Damien's back.

Finally Damien turned his head, gaze canted upward. "I guess you were right," he said in a shaky voice. "I'm trying not to need help, but it's not working."

Kaz pulled Damien into an embrace and held him close. The hand that had been stroking Damien's back now passed over his hair. Damien stiffened at first then relented, sinking against him. Kaz's insides went mushy as he cradled the back of Damien's head, his cheek resting against the man's silky hair. Damien smelled lightly of sweat and his body trembled, as if he were cold again.

Kaz also smelled Damien's fear.

It was a strange sensation to smell fear in another human being, but he'd picked up on it before in his work and it alerted Kaz to the churning within Damien, the roil of emotions, conflicts and basic human existential horror that violence elicited. Kaz had always been highly sensitized to these things since he was a kid and had often figured that this bizarre awareness had spurred him on to becoming a cop, putting him in a position where his life's work was to make the world safer so people like Damien wouldn't have to go through what he was right now.

Damien's hands fisted Kaz's t-shirt in the back, as if he were hanging on for his life. *Don't let go of me, please*, the clutch seemed to say.

No problem. He'd hold on to Damien as long as Damien wanted him to. Shit, in this moment, if Damien had wanted him to leave the force and become his full-time bodyguard, Kaz would have seriously considered it.

Not that Damien would ask such a thing. He was feeling vulnerable and frightened now, but Damien was someone who worked hard to appear strong, the way he'd tried to shrug off tonight's attack. No doubt he'd recover and continue on. He'd survived some of the worst already. He'd survive again.

A long time seemed to pass until Damien's trembling ebbed to a mere vibration instead of a constant shivering that rocked his torso.

"How're you doing?" Kaz asked.

Damien pulled back, somewhat reluctantly. "Better, thank you." He blinked, his hands still resting on Kaz's upper arms. "I thought I was stronger than this."

Kaz held his arms loosely clasped around Damien, glad when the slimmer man didn't pull away. "Violence is horrible. You're right to feel this way." He reached up and smoothed back Damien's hair. "It has nothing to do with strength, Damien."

Damien's eyes closed at the contact on his head then opened again when Kaz's hand lifted away. The sheepish yet sweet look in them sent ripples of warmth through Kaz's chest. "I'm sorry," Damien said. His hands faltered on Kaz's arms and his eyes darted back and forth a couple of times. "I'm being such a pain in the ass."

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it?" Damien pulled gently out of Kaz's embrace and took hold of the teapot. "You don't even know me and yet here you are, babysitting me because I'm afraid to be alone right now. If this hadn't happened, you wouldn't even be here."

Kaz immediately missed holding Damien. "I would have wanted to be," he said, the words popping out the same spontaneous way he'd embraced the man.

Damien's shocked expression made Kaz want to kick himself. But then Damien's green eyes lit up. "Really?" His look made Kaz think for a second that the hum of energy that followed their embrace wasn't just a product of Kaz's lust but something mutual.

An image flashed in Kaz's mind of Damien on the stage in those ass-hugging black pants. "Well," he said, "let me put it this way, there were about twenty guys outside the dressing room door, waiting to meet you. And here I am. The lucky one."

Damien's face clouded. "Yeah, real lucky."

Kaz frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Damien busied himself with the teapot again. Kaz watched him pour in the water and then add loose tea from a canister before covering the pot with a towel. Then he faced Kaz again. "It means that I don't consider it lucky for you. About those guys? It's not a big deal they were there. They're just all worked up. I probably got you worked up too. That's what stripping is about. Cock-teasing. It's nothing personal."

Kaz suppressed the face he was about to make. If Damien hadn't sounded so serious, Kaz would have thought he was completely kidding around. "Do they crowd the door like that for everyone who dances?"

"Pretty much." Before Kaz could answer, Damien said, "Let's go back to the sofa." He arranged everything on a tray and started to pick it up.

But Kaz reached for it. Damien was still a bit shaky.

A shy look slipped over Damien's face. "Thank you," he said softly.

Kaz followed Damien back into the living room, still unable to respond to Damien's statements. Damien's answer had mystified—and disturbed—him for some reason. Damien seemed to think of himself as just a body with no other qualities to attract those guys. Surely *some* of the others there saw what Kaz saw in Damien's eyes. He watched Damien strain the tea into a cup before a response formed.

"Damien, don't you think that maybe some of those guys see...something else in you? Beyond what you look like?"

Damien stared at him as if he'd just told a stupid joke. "You're kidding, right?"

"No."

Damien looked away and busied himself with putting the cups and teapot onto the table. "No offense, but it sounds like you live in some kind of dream world." He paused and heaved a deep sigh. He looked up again, his eyes pained. "Maybe once I'm teaching college I'll meet people who won't just want to screw me because of what I look like. But as long as I'm shaking my ass on a stage, more than half naked, I'll never know."

"That's bullshit."

Damien's eyes went wide. "What?"

"Everything you just said is bullshit. I'll prove it to you."

Damien chuckled, a sound full of disbelief. "Sure."

"Just listen. I wanted to join that crowd and try my luck with you too, Damien. I'll be honest. But I didn't feel that way about any of the other dancers before you. If I hadn't gone looking for that suspicious guy, I would have just gone home, only because I didn't want to be some drooling jerk after your body and there was no way you would ever have believed me." His stomach suddenly tightened. These were probably the furthest things from what he should be saying. "And now that I've been completely inappropriate with you, I'll shut up. Before you decide to throw me out of here and rightly so."

To his surprise, Damien smiled and held out a mug of tea for him. He had an incredible smile, sweet and bright, less flashy than the one he'd worn on the stage but just as enchanting. "I don't know if you like milk and sugar."

Kaz took it from him, staring. "This is fine, thanks."

"You're welcome. And you haven't been inappropriate." He picked up his own cup and leaned back, tilting his gaze to Kaz. "Had anyone else said those things, I'd never believe him, but I believe you." The firelight glowed off his perfect skin and silky hair, making him look as if he were in a magazine photo. "Since we're being honest, I'd like to be honest with you."

Kaz's stomach tightened again. Damien had been nothing *but* honest, it seemed, since they'd met. His glance fell on the steam curling from Damien's cup and then onto the beautifully shaped fingers looped through the handle. "Okay. Sure."

"I'd really like it if you weren't so concerned with being professional with me," Damien said. "I've been getting professional counseling since I was sixteen. There's a counseling center for men in Newton and I go there for help. I don't need you to be a cop helping a victim. I'm *not* a victim. The way I see it, you're this brave, gallant guy who saw another guy in trouble and helped him. And now we're sitting here together, having tea and talking. Am I making sense?"

Kaz stared at him. He certainly hadn't expected that. "I never thought of myself as gallant, Damien. I'm just a cop. I can't separate what I do from who I am."

Damien's brow furrowed. "Well, maybe you can try. Why can't it be that you're a man who works as a cop? There was a time you weren't a cop. What were you then? If I didn't separate what I do from who I am, I'd be doomed. I just refuse to think that I *am* a stripper. When the time comes, I get my master's and teach English literature as a professor, then *am* I a professor? What of the stripper who used to shake his G-stringed ass in front of a crowd of drooling guys throwing dollar bills at him? Who am I really then if all that can change?" Damien had him pinned with an intense look. The steam from his tea curled up in front of his face, ignored.

“Whoa, slow down.” Kaz held out his hand. What Damien was saying was strange, but made a kind of sense. Most importantly, though, was that for Damien, it seemed crucial that they drop the roles. “Give me a minute.”

Damien’s smile returned. “Sorry. I know I can be intense. And outspoken. I’m an Aries. Fire sign. We’re like that. Honest to a fault.” He finally lifted his tea and took a sip.

Kaz watched Damien’s lips as they touched the edge of the porcelain then stole a look at the man’s throat, the movement of his Adam’s apple as he swallowed. Watching Damien was like standing in a museum, appreciating a work of art. Unlike a painting, however, Damien was warm flesh and blood with an incredible smile, amazing eyes and an intelligent, quick mind.

Kaz’s heartbeat sped up. His blood pumped a bit harder through his body, sending heated warmth everywhere, down his limbs to the tips of his fingers, toes and of course into his groin. A light throbbing sprang through the length of his cock, making the damn thing tighten against his briefs.

Damien’s question made sense now. What was he in this moment? A man wildly attracted to Damien? Or a cop simply protecting him? There was no clear delineation. However, his body was agreeing with Damien—it too preferred to think of himself and Damien as men, available to each other in a way that “victim” and “cop” prevented. “Victim” made Damien unreachable, someone to treat a certain way, to think of almost clinically, his humanity a kind of abstract thing that shouldn’t concern Kaz as much as making sure Damien’s attacker was taken off the streets.

In other words, Damien seemed to be offering him something else, the very thing Kaz had wanted when he’d watched Damien on the stage, dancing. Not just to screw the guy and get his rocks off. Something else, something that sure as hell didn’t exclude sex but included what he’d felt when he’d looked into Damien’s eyes.

“You’re awfully quiet, Detective,” Damien said. “I didn’t mean to silence you.”

"You didn't. I was just about to say I agree with you. I'll do my best not to be a cop."

Damien's face softened. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

A companionable quiet settled over them and Kaz sat back, half turned toward Damien and sipped his tea. The firelight was pleasant and gave off gentle warmth. Minutes passed without either of them talking. That cozy feeling came over Kaz again even though he still found himself observing Damien, just to make sure he was all right. No matter what Damien said and no matter how much Kaz liked the possibility Damien seemed to want to be with him, Damien had still been the object of violence.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Damien's voice broke the silence.

Again that telltale squeeze in Kaz's gut. Damien was turning out to be as unpredictable as he was hot and intelligent. "Sure. Ask anything you'd like."

Damien turned and set his mug down onto the glass-top table in front of them. "I know it's none of my business, but I'm just so curious. Who...stood you up?"

Kaz cleared his throat. Was Damien fishing? "A guy I'd been seeing," he said. "He asked me to meet him there. I called him when he didn't show, just to make sure he was all right. He broke up with me."

Damien's brow furrowed. "Oh sorry." He fell silent and faced forward, taking a thoughtful sip of tea. At first he appeared quiet but then his green eyes flashed. "What a jerk to handle it that way! Couldn't he just come out with it?"

Kaz stared at him again. So far in their few hours of knowing each other, Damien hadn't said one thing Kaz would have expected him to say. Then again, Damien didn't seem to be the average man. His surprise faded and he shrugged. "It's not completely his fault. He wanted to be more serious. I like him but my work's been more important. He deserves better than that."

Damien made that strange laugh of his. "That's one way to look at it. But if you ask me, he's not only a passive-aggressive jerk to have broken up with you that way, he's a complete moron not to see what he had. Pretty damn stupid to get rid of a man like you."

Kaz's cheeks burned. Damn if he wasn't blushing. And damn if his palms didn't suddenly break out into a sweat. "That's...um...kind of you, Damien, but really, you've had a different first impression. Steve and I met at a party." *Under normal circumstances.*

Damien tilted his head. "So what? Are you telling me you're some completely different guy with Steve than with me just because of this circumstance?"

"Well," Kaz started slowly. Then stopped, struck. Damien's question dug unexpectedly deep and he didn't want to give the man some kind of thoughtless answer. Was it true?

He thought about it, moved by Damien's need. He almost said "I don't know" just when understanding flooded in. This kind of thing happened at various times in his life, a split second when he'd understand something about who he was, like a curtain opening to shed light on a previously dark corner of his mind. Like the time when he was seven and realized he preferred vanilla ice cream to chocolate. Another when he just knew he wanted to be a cop.

The most profound one was when he'd first seen his parents as human beings. Sitting at the kitchen table, watching his mother chop vegetables for a soup while his father talked to her about his day in the window factory where he worked as a foreman. Kaz had suddenly really understood their lives and struggles in his heart and he shed his adolescent tendency to criticize them or feel smothered by them. His mother, born to a Jewish family in Poland had been given to a Catholic family for adoption. Her birth parents had perished in Hitler's camps. Kaz's father, her childhood friend, had fallen in love with her when they both grew into adulthood. They'd clung to each other and their little family had been their whole world. It had often made Kaz feel suffocated growing up but when he'd understood his parents, the terror of war they'd grown up with, and

his mother's subconscious anxiety over having been given up by her real parents who'd then been murdered, he could no longer feel suffocated.

Strange that in this moment, facing Damien on the sofa, his core of beliefs and image of himself challenged by a man who, less than two hours ago had been nearly raped, had now become one in which he learned another of his heart's secrets. Faced with this understanding, he could no longer deny that though he'd liked Steve, he hadn't *loved* him nor been in love with him. There'd been seconds here and there when a tendril of sweetness would rise up in him when he looked at Steve, but for some unknown reason would fade away. Steve must have sensed it and had been right to leave him.

Damien's gaze hadn't left his in the silence that followed his question, as if he understood somehow this process was going on inside Kaz and was respectfully waiting for it to reach its conclusion.

Only then, when Kaz had acknowledged his most recent inner truth, did he realize his body had tilted closer in to Damien's. "Yes," he said finally. "I do treat you differently."

Damien's face fell. "That's what I thought." He looked so crushed. "Well, so be it. It's what I get for trying to force you to be someone you're not. If you're a cop, then I have no right to—"

"Damien, stop." Kaz put a hand on Damien's arm. He cleared his throat. This night had gone so vastly differently than he'd imagined when he'd gotten out of the cab at the Moritz on his way to meet Steve. Nothing could have prepared him for this, for the newness of it, for the squeeze in his heart at Damien's fallen expression, or for the sudden and bizarre combination of protector and love slave to this beautiful man he was finding inside his heart. Had he felt that way about Steve, he'd have been there with him right now, naked bodies entwined in bed. But he didn't.

A few hours ago, had someone told him that this night he'd look into a stripper's eyes and...find Damien, he'd have told that person to go shit in his hat. And yet that someone would have been one hundred percent right.

Damien was silent. His green eyes were wide. The look in them reflected confusion, upset—the very things Kaz wanted Damien not to feel. All he could do was tell Damien the truth. Damien was too smart for anything else and would see right through him. “You don't understand,” he said finally. The words came with difficulty because he'd never said them before to anyone and hadn't yet formulated because he was feeling them for the first time in his life.

“Understand what?”

Kaz glanced down to where his hand rested on Damien's arm. Mutual awareness of the contact seemed to sizzle between them. He cleared his throat. Shit, he needed so badly to say this right. “I didn't mean what you think I mean. I-I'm not treating you differently because of how we met. It's...well...because you're you.”

Damien's expression remained clouded. “I don't understand.”

Kaz exhaled. “I mean that I like you more in the few hours I've known you than I ever liked him in six months.” He took a deep breath. “You make me want...to...give you diamonds and roses and all those kinds of things. That's what I felt even when I saw you dancing. Well, not only what I felt, but *also* what I *felt*.” He'd also gotten a major hard-on, watching Damien's incredible body writhe and glisten under the lights.

Silence followed with Damien staring at him, eyes still wide. The spectrum of feelings that moved through them so often was there, processing...understanding. One of Damien's hands closed over his, lacing their fingers together. ““How many loved your moments of glad grace,”” he said, ““And loved your beauty with love false or true, But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you, And loved the sorrows of your changing face.”” He smiled, looking suddenly shy. “William Butler Yeats. He's one of my favorite poets in the whole world. I've always wanted what he expressed in those lines, you

know, someone who would see beyond the outside. I've never felt that from anyone else before."

Kaz's insides rioted. Another momentary flash lit his mind with understanding. He kind of liked this romantic thing. The firelight, the quoting of poetry, of knowing he'd made Damien feel appreciated in a way the man had obviously craved for so long.

It made him want more.

Damien's hand felt so warm. The simple touch sent tingling heat through his whole body, a sensual caress that had him getting hard again. His gaze dropped to Damien's sultry lips. He *had* to taste them so badly. Before, even a kiss would have seemed forbidden territory. Now...

Damien's thumb brushed over the flesh of Kaz's palm. The tiny movement nearly sent Kaz spinning into some kind of ecstatic state. "Kaz?"

"Yeah?" Kaz's sight was blurred. His mind spun and his body pumped blood through every inch of him.

"When are you going to kiss me?"

Chapter Four

Damien's heart pumped like crazy. His body pulsed and throbbed in places that hadn't pulsed and throbbed in so long...maybe ever. Sometimes it had with Eric, before Eric went away, but not like this...not with someone he could trust. The way he trusted Kaz.

Kaz was looking at him now, lids heavy, yet also as if Damien had pushed a cattle prod into his rib cage. "I...I... Whenever you want me to."

Damien leaned into him. Heat radiated off Kaz's muscled body through his white t-shirt. Lifting his free hand, Damien brushed several fingertips along Kaz's jaw. Mmm, nice. The skin there had that rough smoothness he liked, heavy beard yet clean-shaven. Kaz's breath caught softly and Damien could sense his hesitation in the air between them, as if the larger man were engaged in some kind of inner battle. "What's the matter?" he asked Kaz.

Before Kaz could answer, he thought of something awful and sat back. "Oh shit. I'm throwing myself at you. That's not what you wanted, is it?" He looked down, feeling really horrible. Figured, the first time in his life he made a move on someone because he felt so free and safe with him, it would freak the guy out.

Gentle fingertips under his chin bid him to look up. Kaz's body heat closed in on him. "I'm sorry, Damien. I keep screwing up. It's just that...you're so different...for me." The pad of his thumb slid along Damien's bottom lip.

Wow. That last sentence was romance embodied, almost as good as any of the love poems he'd studied throughout his coursework. Damien's eyelids fluttered. Kaz's touch was incredible and he smelled really good, a scent heated by their closeness. A little bit of sweat, a lot of musk and a touch of something spicy, aftershave probably. "It's okay," he whispered, dizzy from the words and scent and feelings cascading through him. His

body felt as if it were melting into the cushions behind him. He sank back, face tilted upward.

Kaz was staring back down at him, his dark eyes velvety. "Guess I should take this off," he said softly, thick fingers working to undo his gun holster.

"I guess so." Damien watched Kaz slip off the holster, muscles bulging with his movements, set the weapon aside and turn back to him. Without thinking, Damien lifted his arms and pulled Kaz into them. Broad, strong man filled his arms and thick back muscle filled his palms. A delightful shiver passed up his torso, making him smile. This must be what it felt like to get high.

Their eyes locked for one more second in the glowing light. Something romantic and yet filled with more meaning than that sizzled in the exchange of gazes. Then Kaz's lips closed over his.

A sigh escaped Damien. His eyes closed, lips parted, all in one smooth movement of surrender. Their tongues met and slid together, a warm dance of moist heat. Kaz tasted as good and masculine as he looked and smelled. And as incredible as his brawn felt.

With each slide of their tongues together, Kaz's thumb brushed across Damien's cheekbone. Passion trembled under the whisper-light touch and in each lick of Kaz's tongue against his.

Damien hadn't kissed much, but his limited experience had taught him that he could feel a guy's essence in his kiss. Kaz's essence was good. Full of a tenderness Damien could feel Kaz was discovering in himself. And he was discovering it because of Damien. Because this had become the night they'd found each other. The understanding made Damien tremble. *I like you more in the few hours I've known you...*

The awkward, tumbling-out way Kaz had confessed showed it hadn't been some kind of line and had made Damien nearly launch himself onto the larger man.

Damien brought one hand up to Kaz's dark hair. Though short, it was so soft against his fingertips. He caressed it, exploring the fade of it into the strong column of

Kaz's neck, which Damien cupped. The tendons moved under his fingertips as Kaz kissed him. Damien sighed into Kaz's mouth while tracing the line of Kaz's hair along his neck. Maybe all this wasn't ultimately real, a fantastic release of tension from the violence of what had happened. But it didn't matter. For a little while Damien felt safe enough to let out his passions, and he was going to enjoy it.

He dared to slide one hand down and tug at Kaz's t-shirt until a portion of it left a gap large enough to steal into. His fingertips landed on the ridge of muscle along Kaz's spine. Mmm, the skin was warm and smooth there and he caressed it back and forth, aware of the muscle beneath it. Kaz moaned into Damien's mouth. Encouraged, Damien slid both palms farther up, squeezing and stroking every inch of brawn that met his hands. With each caress, Kaz's breathing got heavier until he was panting into Damien's mouth. Like a match tossed into a puddle of gasoline, heat flared in Damien's body, a sheer carnal need to feel Kaz everywhere. With a demanding wildness he didn't even know he had in him, he yanked at Kaz's t-shirt, desperately trying to slide it over the man's head.

Kaz pulled away from their kiss and sat back. His dark eyes were hungry yet still cautious, making sure Damien was all right. Then Kaz lifted off his t-shirt and tossed it aside in one smooth movement.

Damien's heart jumped. Kaz was built like a god. Broad chest, small dark nipples and silky hair over rounded pecs that funneled into a thin, mouthwatering trail down the center of his abs.

Kaz descended again, covering Damien's body with his. Kaz's lips landed on the side of Damien's neck and Damien reclaimed his embrace of Kaz's wide brawn. He felt a large hand slide into his hair and cradle the back of his head and tilted into it so that Kaz could lick his way in hot little kisses over Damien's throat.

Lost in delight, Damien stared blankly up at the swirly pattern in the ceiling. Shadows from the gentle lighting and fireplace danced off the plaster, yet to Damien it appeared to be a hazy sky of some sort, like the cap of heaven lifting and letting him in.

Maybe he'd done something right, something good that he didn't even know about to have the incredible fortune of Kaz on top of him, kissing him, raining more soft nibbles along his jaw before reclaiming his lips.

Then, somehow, they were moving, rolling. Whether Kaz had pulled Damien or Damien had pushed, Damien couldn't tell, but he found himself on top of Kaz, straddling the man's narrow hips. Damien lifted up his shirt and pulled it off, still staring down into Kaz's face. Kaz's hands landed on Damien's shoulders. "Damn, Damien, you're unbelievable."

"Unbelievable, good?"

Kaz's chest heaved. "What do you think?"

Kaz's fingertips rubbed Damien's shoulders while he looked up at Damien, face darkly flushed. His touch slid down Damien's arms, an appreciative exploration that then landed on Damien's clothed hips.

"I'd say, good." Damien stared down at him, captured again by the godlike man. Wordlessly, he ran his hands over that broad chest, his gaze locked with Kaz's dark eyes.

The man's lids were heavy as was his breathing. "How are you?" he breathed.

A pleasant shiver passed through Damien's body. "I'm really well, thank you." He slid his touch over the hard, round caps of Kaz's shoulder muscles. "And you?"

A sudden lazy grin curved Kaz's sensually shaped lips. "Never better."

Damien returned the smile. Kaz made him feel completely bold. Completely free. Normally, a man of Kaz's size and sheer physical strength would put him on edge. Kaz was different...like the dream guy he'd so often imagined for himself. "Are you trying to charm the hell out of me, Detective?" he asked, tracing the ridges of Kaz's triceps and biceps.

"Why? Is that what I'm doing?"

Damien continued his exploration down the furrow between Kaz's pecs. The chest was one of the most beautiful parts on any man, but Kaz's was especially incredible. Damien raked his fingertips through the swirls of dark hair then down the center of Kaz's stomach. He stopped just above Kaz's belt buckle then slid up again. A sudden pang gripped him. "I don't want you to think I bring guys home all the time and climb all over them." His hand rested on Kaz's chest.

Kaz's hands closed lightly around his forearms. "I don't think that, Damien. Honest." His voice, though husky, was also kind and sincere.

Damien's burden lifted and he could smile again. "I'm glad, because I don't."

Kaz's touch slid up Damien's arms, around his upper back. Gentle pressure bid Damien to lean over. "Kiss me again, Damien."

Damien's heart fluttered. That was one order he'd obey happily. Closing his eyes, he pressed his lips to Kaz's. Kaz sighed. His broad chest rose and fell. His lips parted softly and his tongue brushed Damien's in a teasing invitation. Kaz's hands caressed Damien's back and Damien could feel that tremulous passion in the light touch. Kaz was being so careful with him, so caring.

The heat in Damien's body flared again. A wave caught him up and he rocked his hips. Their erections rubbed together. Electric fire shot through Damien's groin, making his breath catch. Kaz groaned and pressed his fingers into Damien's hips. The warmth of Kaz's two large hands was like a brand, heating Damien's skin even through his pants.

"Damien," Kaz whispered, his head tilting back.

Damien smiled and sat up. Moving his hips, his body fell into a rhythm, grinding and swaying to an invisible, sensuous music Damien couldn't hear but felt in his soul. His hands wandered, up and down, around Kaz's broad chest, over his nipples. Kaz pulled in a breath. This was one lap dance he wanted to give with his whole heart and soul.

"You like that?" Damien whispered, all seduction now.

Kaz grinned. "Dumb question." His voice was tight, hoarse with need.

That made Damien chuckle. He passed the fingertips of both hands over Kaz's nipples, back and forth, until the small disks tightened into peaks and Kaz's chest was arched toward him.

"Damn, Damien." Kaz's eyelids shuttered then closed.

"Enjoy."

Kaz didn't answer. Perhaps he couldn't. He was panting now, sharp breaths, his chest heaving under Damien's wandering hands. Kaz's hard-on pushed against Damien's, so hot and huge, Damien felt it would burn through the man's clothes. The thought brought a smile. The fact that Kaz was letting him take control, letting him touch and feel and do whatever he wanted was all the aphrodisiac he needed.

Damien lifted his hands away and brought them to the button of his own pants. "Hey, Detective."

Kaz's eyes opened and met his.

"I have something for you." He tugged on the button, bringing the other man's gaze even with his groin.

Kaz's breath hitched. He stared at Damien's fingers as they worked open the button then the fly.

Damien's heart thundered. This was no longer just a lap dance, a means of getting the guy beneath him off so as to get a good tip. His own body wasn't in mechanical mode, merely going through the motions. He was on fire. Emotions and desires streamed through him, intense and beautiful. He was opening, revealing himself to Kaz as if he were a work of art Kaz had created. Kaz had rescued him, found him a victim, a nervous wreck who'd had one weird boyfriend a few years ago and nothing else but the stripper thing ever since. Now here he was, feeling free, loving, passionate.

Kaz stiffened. He swallowed hard and Damien saw his Adam's apple slide in his throat. "Damien, are you sure about this?"

Another thrill skated through Damien's body. It rocked him in invisible places. He pinned Kaz with his gaze. "Yes." He pulled his pants open. He was still wearing the G-string he'd danced in and his cock was so hard, it seemed to be trying to escape the pouch of cloth.

Kaz's gaze dropped and the man's breath hitched again. The way he was acting, he'd have thought this was *his* first time, or that he felt as Damien did, like an artist watching his masterpiece being revealed to him.

With a thumb hooked over the material, Damien pulled the cloth down. His cock sprang free, already leaking from the tiny opening in the head. Light made the seeping moisture gleam, as if inviting Kaz to lick it off. He palmed the shaft and lifted it a bit. Kaz's hungry gaze made him feel wanton, daring, as if nothing he did would be the wrong thing. It also made him mischievous. He gave his cock a couple of easy, languorous strokes. Pleasure shimmered through his cock, down into his balls, the sensation fueled by Kaz's stare, glued to his stroking hand. "You want to touch it, Kaz?" Damien's voice was silky to his own ears, oozing with promise of erotic abandon. As if all Kaz had to do was touch his cock and the world of ecstasy would open to both of them.

"Do I?" The words were tight, husky. "Yeah."

Damien stroked up and down again. That felt good, but not as good as Kaz's hand would feel. "Touch it," he whispered.

Kaz obeyed. His fingertips landed on the head, which he traced, almost delicately. Damien pulled in a breath and stared down, watching Kaz touch him. He would have thought such large, thick fingers incapable of such lightness, but that same care and caution the man had showed until now was also in his light strokes over the firm head. Each stroke sent a whisper of heat down Damien's cock. He held it supported in one hand, offering it to Kaz for more attention. "That feels so good," he breathed.

Kaz's gaze flicked up to his. "I'm glad," he said, and slid his fingertips down the shaft and back up. More pleasure zinged through Damien's cock, down into his balls

and even upward, like a lick of flames through his abdomen and into his nipples. Tilting his hips forward slightly and letting go of his cock, he submitted more. The tip was leaking now and Kaz gathered the moisture on his palm and stroked Damien's entire hard length, light quick strokes that took Damien's breath away. Kaz's other hand slid around Damien's hip and rested on one ass cheek, squeezing the round muscle.

"You feel good, Damien," Kaz said, his voice low and husky. His own erection strained in the front of his jeans. Poor man. A hard-on that big and full was probably painful.

Reaching forward, Damien's hands landed on Kaz's belt. His arm blocked Kaz's hand from stroking him, but Damien didn't care. He really wanted to see the cock that made up this bulge in Kaz's jeans.

He began to work open the belt when a large hand covered his. "Only if you want it, Damien." Kaz's gaze, though velvety, was also caring.

"Yes, I want it."

That lazy grin returned. "Then please." Kaz lifted his hand away and rested it again on Damien's thigh.

Heart pounding, Damien opened Kaz's belt then the button and zipper, leaning back enough to accomplish the task. Pulling aside the denim revealed white briefs through which the outline of Kaz's package showed perfectly, complete with a dark spot where his cock had leaked a drop of pre-cum. Just above the waistline was the trail of dark hair that traveled upward, interrupted only by the delicious-looking indentation of the man's navel.

To his own surprise, Damien's mouth watered. Reaching out, his fingertips landed on Kaz's abdominal muscles, which he traced. Kaz hitched a breath and laughed.

Damien pulled back. "What's so funny?"

Kaz's lips still curled in that sexy grin he had. "Ticklish there."

Damien chuckled. A warm feeling flushed his chest at the unexpected pleasure of discovering this little detail about Kaz. He wondered where else the man might be ticklish. So far, finding out was a lot of fun. "All right, then," he said, smiling, "I'll go elsewhere."

"Fine with me."

Reaching out again, Damien let his fingertips land over Kaz's bellybutton. He slid his fingertips over it, loving the warm, smooth skin and hard, chiseled plane of Kaz's stomach. Touching the dark trail of hair, he followed it with the pad of his index finger, lingered a moment at the waistband then dared to trace Kaz's mouthwatering tumescence over the white cotton.

Kaz sucked in a breath. His cock twitched under the material. "He likes you, Damien."

Heat flushed Damien's cheeks. Damn, he was blushing. Strange, considering he stripped off his clothes and wiggled his ass for hundreds of horny guys at a time. Yet somehow this was different. "I like him too."

The firelight glowed in Kaz's dark eyes, hidden partway by his lids and thick lashes. "We both like you enough to wait for you, if we must."

That made more warmth flush through Damien's chest. The flow of seduction he'd had going earlier had been broken now by the tentative exploration and sweet words, but in seconds, it revived. He leaned over and brushed a soft but hot kiss across the other man's lips. "No waiting needed," he said, his voice silky again. Before Kaz could answer, Damien slipped the fingers of both hands under the waistband and freed Kaz's cock. The thick hardness sprang out and stood straight up. Damien's mouth watered again. Never had he wanted to taste a cock as much as he wanted to taste Kaz's.

Slipping down, he tugged on the briefs, enough to show the other man he wanted to take them off. Obediently, Kaz lifted his ass and Damien dragged both briefs and jeans down. Thankfully there was enough room between the sofa and coffee table that he was able to kneel down and work Kaz's clothes all the way off, setting them aside.

Then Damien looked up again. His heart thudded in his chest.

If he'd thought Kaz looked like a god before, completely naked, the man was nothing short of absolute magnificence.

Wow. His gaze roved upward, over the man's thickly sloping calves then thighs, dusted with soft black hairs. "Kaz, you're gorgeous," he breathed, and slid one palm over a muscled thigh, heading in the direction of that thick erection, blushing red with veins and a drop of pre-cum oozing from the tip.

Kaz stared at Damien a few seconds, struck silent by the awe in Damien's voice. Sheer appreciation radiated from the man's green eyes and, for the first time since Kaz had started getting naked with other guys, he felt his cheeks heat up. From the moment he'd seen Damien up on that stage, he'd had this feeling of...something different, an alternate universe of human interaction that allowed for...well, magic. Even the touch of Damien's hand on his thigh reminded him of that.

Finally he found the power of speech. "Thanks, Damien," he ground out, his voice thick from being so turned-on. "But really, you're the gorgeous one."

Damien rose up on his knees and leaned into Kaz, his body between Kaz's thighs, chests pressed together. Heat zinged through Kaz's nipples and through his cock, which brushed against Damien's. Damien still wore his pants but they were wide open, down past his hips, and the pouch of his G-string was still tucked down, leaving his hard-on exposed. Damien's lips were close to his, and Damien's scent invaded him, dizzying him as if he were floating in an opium cloud.

The erotically mischievous smile Damien had worn on the stage now returned. It lit up his green eyes. Before Kaz realized what was happening, Damien slid back down Kaz's torso, both hands on Kaz's thighs and leaned forward. In the next second moist heat invaded his cock. Kaz's vision blurred under the onslaught of pleasure. First just the head but then Damien's shaggy chestnut hair swung with his downward slide and

the erotic, wet heat invaded more than half of Kaz's hard length. "Damien," he managed in a hoarse whisper.

Whether Damien heard him or not, he couldn't tell. Damien's head was bobbing faster now, as if he were sucking on a candy, the fingers of one hand clasped around the base to hold it up while he feasted. The pressure was perfect, not too hard, not too light yet just awkward enough to let Kaz know Damien hadn't done so much of this as to get a professional grade at it.

Firelight danced off the reddish tint of Damien's shaggy hair with his movements. Kaz found himself staring at it in a kind of ecstatic haze. Damien's hot mouth, soft lips and gentle clasp on the root of his cock had Kaz imprisoned, immobile. He clutched at the sofa cushions to keep from grasping Damien's hair.

Damien lifted away and gazed up at him, his lips gleaming, eyes wide. "How's this, Kaz? Is it good?"

At first Kaz could only stare at him again, breathless, but then the look on Damien's face, Damien's concern about pleasing him and the man's sheer beauty took him up in a wave. He reached for Damien and gently tugged him up onto the sofa next to him. "It's perfect," he said, his voice husky. But somehow it wasn't enough. He needed to look into Damien's eyes, needed to feel the man's sleek, perfect body against his.

Surging forward, he covered Damien's lips with his, sliding one hand into Damien's hair. Damien sighed into his mouth and Kaz felt the other man's surrender in the way his arms encircled Kaz's torso, bringing Kaz down on top of him. Damien sank onto his back in the sofa cushions, pressed by the weight of Kaz's brawn. Their chests rubbed together and Kaz groaned at the way Damien's chest rubbed his nipples.

Kaz pulled slightly back and looked down at Damien. The man's lids were heavy over his eyes and his lips were swollen from the kissing and sucking he'd done. Light sweat gleamed on Damien's flushed skin, releasing his musky scent and his back was slightly arched, as if silently demanding more than he was getting. Damn, he was magnificent. Gently, Kaz took hold of the waist of Damien's open pants. "May I?"

Damien nodded without hesitation. "You may," he breathed, chest heaving.

Kaz slid the pants and G-string off Damien, down his perfectly sculpted legs and dropped the clothing to the floor. He paused a moment to take in the vision of Damien before settling back down.

"Is something wrong?" Damien's voice pulled him from his captured state.

"What?"

"Is something wrong?" Damien looked worried now. "You...stopped."

"Hell no, nothing's wrong." He grinned and smoothed one hand over Damien's chest. "Just appreciating the view."

Damien's face broke into a smile. He tugged Kaz's arms. "Get back down here, Detective."

Gladly, Kaz sank back down onto him. The sofa was narrow enough that one of Damien's legs was sunk practically between the cushions, but his other leg necessarily hooked around Kaz's hip. The press of Damien's inner thigh against Kaz's hipbone sent a thrill through Kaz's whole body. He smoothed back Damien's hair with one hand, still gazing down at him. That magical electricity hummed between them, distinct to Kaz even in his heated state simply because it was so very new.

Maybe Damien was feeling it too, the way he was gazing back up, eyes wide, lips parted in a look that appeared to be wonder. Damien's fingertips rubbed against Kaz's back muscles and the ball of Damien's foot pressed Kaz's ass cheek. Damien was the image of sweetness, innocence and mind-blowing sensuality. How anyone could have hurt Damien was beyond him. The mere thought made a white-hot surge of anger pass through him.

Damien stilled. "Kaz, what's wrong? You stopped again."

Kaz started caressing Damien's hair. His body craved to rub against Damien, sliding their cocks together until they both came, but his thoughts were overpowering him. He sighed. "I'm sorry. I was just thinking. I can't believe anyone would hurt you."

Damien's eyes misted. One of his hands slid up Kaz's back and into his hair. Damien's fingers raked softly through Kaz's hair and Kaz felt the trembling in the other man's fingertips. To Kaz's surprise, Damien's other hand slid down to his ass and squeezed one cheek. That made Kaz groan and move his hips. A jolt of pleasure shot through his cock.

"Kaz, please, kiss me." Damien punctuated the request with another ass squeeze. His parted lips were so moist and velvet-looking Kaz put aside his disturbing thoughts and obeyed.

Damien's mouth was creamy soft. The way he surrendered, so openly, so warmly, as if he were trying to give Kaz his soul through the sweet dance of their tongues together. Kaz groaned again and surged over Damien. Bracing himself as best he could on the narrow sofa, he thrust his hips. Sheer heat blasted through him at the rub of their cocks together.

Damien pulled in a breath and his fingers tightened on Kaz's ass cheek. He answered Kaz's thrust with a lift of his pelvis and the press of his heel on the back of Kaz's thigh.

Damn, this was heaven. Damien was heaven. Like Kaz had always imagined an angel would be. Not the little winged chubby things he was told about as a kid, but a man like Damien, hot and intelligent with large soulful eyes and a killer body. *Yeah, this is heaven.* Rocking against Damien, their bodies entwined, mouths hot and moist, locked together, Damien's breath panting into his mouth, Damien underneath him, seeming lost in ecstasy.

It was now more than okay to rub against Damien, to indulge in the pure bliss of Damien's body, his trusting surrender, the heat of his perfect skin and muscles and the sweet but hot way they were locked together. In fact, Damien seemed to be demanding it, not in words but in the way his hand clutched Kaz's ass cheek, pulling him with each thrust. Time felt as if it had stopped, distilled down to this moment, this spot, the two of them, the licks of fire through Kaz's body each time their cocks rubbed together. Sweat

gathered in the space between their sliding bodies. The air filled with the sound of harsh breaths and the quiet sound of the sofa cushions being crushed and moved underneath them.

Damien moaned. His body stiffened and the gush of his climax spurted between them. That did it for Kaz. Just seeing Damien's cum splash set him off. He'd always gotten turned-on by that, but now it was even hotter because he knew Damien had enjoyed himself enough to come. The wave of his own climax crested and exploded, adding to the splash on their torsos. After which he lay over Damien, breathing heavily, his lips pressed to Damien's because he didn't want it to be over.

Damien's fingers moved in Kaz's hair then down the back of his neck.

Kaz lifted his mouth from Damien's. "Was that all right for you?" he asked, totally serious. It mattered so much that Damien had a good time.

Damien's eyes appeared glazed and a smile curved his lips. "You're a detective," he said, "what does the evidence tell you?"

Kaz chuckled. "I'll take that as a yes."

Damien passed his hand down Kaz's back. "How about for you?"

That was almost laughable. "I know you're not a detective, but how do I seem?" He grinned.

Damien's eyes sparkled. That look was so incredible it made Kaz's heart jump. He frowned suddenly. "You don't have to...leave, do you?"

"Absolutely not." He slid a fingertip along Damien's bottom lip. "I'll stay as long as you want or need me to."

"Really?"

"Really." Truthfully, he'd never spent the night with anyone, not even Steve, which was the issue that had really sparked the contention between them. Kaz had always felt so restless after sex, he'd always had an excuse about work or some other thing that had him out the door within about fifteen minutes.

Now? He didn't want to leave for anything.

"That's good," Damien said softly. "So would you like to shower?"

"Sure. Then I think you should get some rest."

Kaz lay on top of Damien a few minutes more. This last hour or so had been so magical, once he got up, it would be over. He rested as long as he dared then lifted himself off Damien, who got up, gathered their clothes then turned off the fireplace.

"This way," Damien said, pointing to the stairs.

Kaz followed him up into a bathroom off the hallway. The shower was one of those old-fashioned things with the curtain around a claw-footed tub. He watched Damien adjust the spray and wait until steam curled out from behind the curtain then stepped in after him.

Once under the deliciously hot water, Kaz picked up a cloth and soap. "I'll wash your back," he said.

The water had wetted down Damien's hair and skin, running in droplets down his perfect muscles, beading off his nipples. Damien, naked and dripping wet, was as hot as Damien writhing around on a stage in a G-string or Damien straddling him, rubbing their cocks together.

Kaz's groin tightened again. He ignored the threatening erection and concentrated on rubbing the soapy cloth in circles over Damien's back.

Damien's head tilted forward and his body relaxed under the wet massage. "You're so good at that," he murmured.

"Thanks." He continued rubbing the cloth over Damien's perfect ass cheeks and down the backs of his thighs, kneeling down as he worked. Reaching Damien's front again, the other man's erection bumped his cheek. A thrill traveled through Kaz's chest, down his stomach, right into his cock. He looked up at Damien, who was staring right back down at him, water dripping off his shaggy wet hair and face. Damien didn't

speak and Kaz dropped the washcloth and dared to brush several fingertips down the hard shaft.

Damien moaned. Though he didn't move, his hand smoothed over Kaz's wet hair, a silent act of permission to continue.

Kaz's heart flipped. The sense of perfect fantasy overcame him again. How many guys got to be with a man this incredibly fine? He rubbed the pad of his thumb up and down the hard length again, appreciating every inch of silky skin, the fine network of veins, the ruddy color. His mouth watered and Damien's fingers on his hair agitated against his scalp with each tiny moan he gave.

Kaz leaned in and captured the head in his mouth. Mmm, Damien was incredible, like the finest meal. Closing his eyes, he slid his other hand around to cradle Damien's ass cheek. He swore he heard Damien whisper his name as Damien now sagged against the tiled wall, fingers trying to clutch Kaz's short hair.

Squeezing Damien's perfect, hard ass, Kaz took Damien's cock in deeper. The shaft slid against his tongue in the sweetest way and Kaz felt as if his brain were melting out of his head. Damien's harsh breaths and moans spiraled in his ears and Kaz sucked faster, pulling back and sliding down on Damien's cock in a quick, light rhythm, guided by Damien's sounds. Never before had going down on a guy felt like an act of worship, but here he was, worshiping every inch of Damien he could touch and taste.

"Oh, Kaz," he heard Damien whisper over and over again. Maybe Kaz was imagining Damien's sense of freedom, Damien's surrender to the pleasure he was receiving, something he hadn't taken for himself before because he hadn't felt safe enough.

That thought, teasing through the haze of Kaz's mind, only made Kaz hotter for Damien. If that was possible.

Kaz slid his hand from Damien's ass cheek to cup his balls, which he kneaded gently while his lips and tongue slid up and down Damien's cock in its fevered rhythm.

Damien released a long, low groan. His body stiffened.

Kaz pulled back as Damien's cum splashed between them and rinsed away with the shower.

Damien stood, panting, staring down at Kaz, eyes wide as if he couldn't believe what had just happened.

Kaz remained on his knees, his hand sliding up and down Damien's thigh. Arousal thundered through his body, but something was different. He was so captured. So taken with Damien's beauty and the sweet astonishment on the other man's face, he couldn't move right away.

Finally Damien tugged at Kaz's arm. Kaz rose immediately to his feet and captured Damien's lips. One hand slipped into Damien's shaggy hair, cradling the back of his head while he tasted Damien's mouth deeply, passionately, sipping the droplets of water off his smoothly sculpted lips, tasting his skin, feeling this...heat, this...something swirling between them that made his heart burn for Damien.

Damien's hand held Kaz's hips, pulling him close. Without thinking, Kaz rubbed his hard cock against Damien. Damien squeezed Kaz's ass cheeks, pulling him close, silently inviting him to thrust against him, the slide of wet skin and Kaz's hard cock against his sleek abdomen.

Kaz cradled Damien in his arms, one hand cupping the back of his neck while he rained kisses and licks over Damien's jaw and neck.

Damien tilted his head back, his body forward for Kaz to rub against him. The pressure built in Kaz's cock fast and hard. He'd wanted to make it last, but he was just too hot. The feel of Damien in his arms, the taste of Damien's skin and lips, the sweet way he seemed to revel in the pleasure...

Kaz groaned, his lips against Damien's while his climax pounded through his body, spilling cum between his and Damien's bodies.

For what felt like a long time, he rested against Damien, breathing heavily, feeling Damien's heavy breathing against his chest. When he lifted away, Damien was looking at him again with that amazed look from under heavy lids.

Kaz felt suddenly tongue-tied. He smoothed Damien's wet hair off his face but didn't speak.

Damien stared at him several moments longer, one hand resting on Kaz's chest, the other on the side of his waist.

Kaz bent quickly and retrieved the washcloth. "I didn't finish," he said over the spray of water.

But Damien took the cloth from him, smiling. "Your turn."

Kaz felt the impulse to protest but stopped himself. Somehow it would seem patronizing not to let Damien reciprocate. Wordlessly he surrendered the cloth and turned.

Damien started rubbing the soaped-up cloth over his back. His movements were easy and gentle. "You have the most incredible back," he said. Awe was clear in his voice.

Kaz glanced at Damien over his shoulder. Praise was always something that had made him feel strange. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, Detective." He continued down Kaz's spine and copied what Kaz had done, rubbing his ass cheeks and thighs. "Is that good?"

Something in the way Damien asked the question made Kaz upset. He turned and gently grasped Damien's shoulders, pinning him with a look. "Damien, you don't ever have to worry about pleasing me, okay? You're...beautiful."

Damien looked startled then puzzled. But after a moment he nodded. "Okay."

Kaz leaned over and brushed a kiss across his lips. "Let's finish up and go to bed. I'm beat. I go on duty at five a.m."

Damien's face fell. "You mean you have to leave then?"

Kaz's heartbeat rose. Damien looked really disappointed. He didn't need to. Staying here with Damien was the only thing he wanted to do. Something he'd never wanted to

do before. "No, I don't have to get up and run out. But I can get called out at any time once I'm on duty."

Damien smiled. "That's a relief."

He grabbed the soap and handed it to Damien then finished washing himself when Damien handed it back to him. They dried off in companionable silence and then Kaz followed Damien back out into the hallway, his clothes in one hand.

Damien led him into a bedroom. This room was decorated as cozily as the living room downstairs, large, cushy-looking bed, neutral, warm tones in the rugs and bedspread, plants and more bookcases.

Kaz watched Damien pull the covers down and gesture. "Hop in, Detective."

Kaz's gut did a small flip. Should he tell Damien this was a first for him? Something kept him quiet. Just in case...

Damien turned off the bedside lamp and settled in next to him. "Kaz?"

After putting his beeper on the bedside table, Kaz pulled the covers up over them and rolled onto his side, facing Damien. "Yeah?" A bit of light from the street lamp outside filtered in, casting Damien's face in shadowy light. For some reason this made Kaz's heart race. Every moment of his contact with Damien had brought something new, something unexpected. Something sweet and hot at the same time.

"I'm really glad you're here. I...hope you're comfortable." He sounded timid, small, and Kaz realized this might be a first for Damien too. At least he hoped.

"Me too, Damien. I'm really comfortable. Don't worry." He reached out and pulled Damien into his arms.

Damien sank willingly into his embrace and Kaz rested his cheek against Damien's damp hair. The man's sweet aroma filled his senses and Kaz closed his eyes, suddenly understanding what the love songs he'd heard all his life meant.

The next thing he remembered was the beeper going off. An insistent rhythm that made his eyes jolt open. In the reaches of his sleepy consciousness, he recognized that sound. It had woken him up on many an occasion.

Damien lifted his head, sleepy and puzzled as Kaz worked out of their entwined state. No time to enjoy the fact he'd held Damien while they slept. "What's that?"

"My beeper." Kaz flicked on the lamp and picked up the beeper. It was Central. "I need to use your phone."

"Of course."

Kaz dialed Central where the dispatcher picked up on the second ring.

"This is Kazaminsky."

"Kaz, hi. Sergeant Reynolds called in a hit."

"Hey, yeah." Energy rippled down Kaz's spine. Reynolds was his investigative team supervisor. Which meant he was about to be called to a crime scene.

"Sorry to bother you in the wee hours."

Kaz looked at the clock on the table. Not quite six. Shit, he'd only been asleep a few hours. "What is it?"

"A body's been found on Tremont, near the Club Moritz. Caucasian male, about six foot two, blond hair. The name in his wallet is Lance Nielsen."

The words were like a cattle prod. Sleepiness evaporated and he was completely alert. "I'll be there as soon as I can." Shit! He slammed down the phone and vaulted from the bed, fumbling for his clothes. Dressing was a chore with the way his hands trembled. "Shit! Shit! Shit!"

"Kaz?" Damien sat up, watching him, a look of sheer alarm on his beautiful face.

Kaz pulled up his jeans and turned. Somehow he knew the answer to his question before he even asked it. "Damien, do you happen know what the guy's name was? The guy who attacked you?"

"Only his first name, why?"

"What was it?"

"Lance."

Shit!

"Kaz, did something happen?"

Chapter Five

Kaz recognized Lance Nielsen the second Sergeant Reynolds lifted the white sheet covering the body. Damien's attacker. That was him all right.

Nausea rose in the pit of Kaz's stomach. Had he somehow killed this guy the way he'd knocked him around and beaten him to the ground? It didn't make sense, a man that size just dropping dead from a bit of roughing. Kaz grew acutely aware of the crowd of onlookers behind the yellow police tape, as well as the crime scene photographer in the background, snapping one photo after the next while he and Reynolds waited for the pathologist to arrive on the scene.

"As you'll see," Reynolds said, "no stab wounds or bullet wounds. Only bruising here on the cheek. I've called the medical examiner's office. They're sending Mackenzie down now."

Kaz fought to keep his panic down. Nielsen's cheek showed bruising in the pattern of Kaz's knuckles, but that was it, no places where he might have been delivered a fatal blow to the head. Even Nielsen's wallet and college ring were all intact. "Sergeant, listen, I need to talk to you before Mackenzie gets here."

Reynolds' brow furrowed. "Sure." He followed Kaz over to the side, away from the crowd.

"There's something important I need to tell you," Kaz said, his heart practically leaping into his throat. He went on to tell Reynolds exactly what had happened the night before, saying only that he'd heard trouble in the alleyway from where he'd been on the sidewalk and went to investigate.

When Kaz finished, Reynolds raked a hand through his hair. "Holy shit, Kaz. I can't believe it. Shit."

"That's exactly what I said when you called me." The nausea resurged and Kaz's thoughts flew to Damien. Damien had been freaked out by the death but had remained calm, calling a cab while Kaz dressed. "Look, I have Damien's phone number. I'm sure he'll come in and confirm the fact that we both saw him alive when we left the Moritz. I took Damien home in a cab. He'd been a victim of sexual assault and there was no one else to help him."

Damien had then scrawled his phone number on Kaz's palm in ballpoint pen, as if afraid Kaz wouldn't call with news unless the number was indelibly etched on Kaz's person.

Reynolds exhaled just as Mackenzie's car pulled up to the curb. "Well, that said, if you were anyone I was questioning, I'd need to let you go based on what I have so far, even if you weren't my friend and a damn good cop. Let's keep it quiet until we know more. If you say you left him alive, of course, Kaz, I believe you. Now work with Mackenzie. If she takes the body down to the ME's office, go with her and keep the records. I'll have Detective Wallace work on finding contacts. You and he partner on this."

"Thanks, sir."

"No problem."

Just then Mackenzie approached, turning their attention back to the situation at hand. As the pathologist, she'd be able to determine much more about Nielsen's cause of death.

Mackenzie estimated the time of death to be somewhere between midnight and one in the morning. That meant Nielsen had died very shortly after Kaz had gotten into the cab with Damien. Minutes really, considering that Nielsen had been found barely two blocks from the club.

Mackenzie stood up. "Well, like you said, he hasn't been shot, stabbed or beaten to death, although it looks as if someone roughed him up a bit shortly before he died."

Kaz's gut flipped over. "Do you believe that could have been the cause of death?"

“A couple of punches to the face on a guy this size? I seriously doubt it. It’s highly more likely he had something in his system that made his heart give out. He certainly shows all the signs of heavy steroid use. A tox screen will give us more answers.”

Kaz nodded, only slightly relieved. He rode to the lab with Mackenzie while Reynolds stayed at the crime scene to make sure all possible evidence could be gleaned from it, including any testimony from possible witnesses.

* * * * *

“Cause of death,” Mackenzie said three hours later, “triiodothyronine in a lethal amount.”

Kaz stood at the side of the autopsy table. He nearly gripped the edge to keep his knees from buckling with relief. So he *hadn’t* killed Nielsen.

But this meant that someone else had.

“What exactly is this triiodo—?”

“T3 to make it easier,” Mackenzie cut in. “It’s a thyroid hormone, one of the regulating hormones found in the human body. In some individuals, the thyroid is out of balance, either producing too much or too little and must be regulated with a synthetically manufactured T3. In this man’s case, however, he was overdosed with it.”

“Maybe he had a medical condition and had a prescription?”

Mackenzie nodded. “That’s certainly possible, but no prescription dose would be so high as to make his heart stop. What happens when a person has too much of this hormone is that for a while they become aggressive, hyper, they feel physically invulnerable. Mentally, a person in this state would believe themselves beyond the boundaries of normal human behavior.”

Kaz perked up. “He might get into a fight or feel perfectly within his rights to assault someone? In your professional opinion.”

“Absolutely. I actually read about a recent case of it in my trade journal. Someone out in California. That’s not the only one in history but the most recent. In any case, it

always ends up the same way. No matter how big and strong the person was, the high concentration of T3 overwhelmed the heart rate, basically causing it to short itself out, it beats so hard. Put that together with the large amounts of steroids and alcohol in this man's system and it's a miracle he went as long as he did before dying."

"How long would you say the drugs were in his system?"

"I would guess a minimum of two hours. Perhaps ingested through the last meal he ate. There were remnants of steak in his system, though mostly digested. Whoever gave him the drug would have to have gotten close enough to him or have been in a position to have access to his food."

"Thank you, Mac."

"No problem. I'll leave him here until whoever his people are come to identify him."

Kaz went up to the street to get a cup of coffee and contact his partner while chewing on the information the pathologist had unearthed. This was shaping up, no doubt, to be an intentional homicide. In his estimation, Nielsen hadn't appeared suicidal. He would have had to either ingest the poison or inject himself somehow with it, knowing the effect it would have on him. In Kaz's brief experience of the man, it was probably not a stretch to guess that there'd be people around.

Kaz turned and saw Dan Wallace on the sidewalk, heading toward the front entrance of the ME's office. Frankly, it was a relief to have been paired with him. Sergeant Reynolds was thoughtful that way, knowing many of the others in Homicide were jealous of Kaz making detective so young. Wallace wasn't that way, not only because he was African-American and suffered his own discrimination on the force but he respected Kaz and had once told him over beers that he "admired a white boy who worked so hard to get where he was instead of relying on connections". Kaz had laughed at the time but he knew Wallace had been dead serious.

Wallace saw him and came into the coffee shop. "Hey, Kaz. I came just to see you. Got some information."

"Great. Have a seat." Kaz bought him a cup of coffee while Wallace opened the folder he'd been carrying.

Wallace accepted the coffee with a thanks and turned the papers toward Kaz. "Basically so far, the identification in Nielsen's wallet was a student ID from Boston University. The home address was in Wellesley. Turns out it's the victim's parents. George and Betty Nielsen. The Wellesley police contacted them and they're coming down right now to ID him. Probably will get here in about a half-hour."

The next step was to find Nielsen's next of kin to confirm his identity and then to call Damien and let him know what was going on.

Kaz suppressed a groan and sipped his coffee instead. Informing parents of a child's death was one of the worst parts of this job. Didn't matter whether the deceased had been a prick or not. Parents most often didn't see things that way. "Apparently there's more."

"Yes. Background check on Nielsen shows the police at Boston University had brought Nielsen in after he attacked one of his fellow fraternity members. In the report, the victim Jonathan Given claimed Lance had tried to force him to perform oral sex on him. No charges were pressed. Not sure of the circumstances there."

"Wealthy parents, perhaps," Kaz said. "They are known to buy off their kids' trouble at times."

Wallace nodded. "In any case, I'll try to locate Given while you deal with the parents."

"Sounds fair to me." They sat together a few more minutes, finishing their coffee and Kaz filled Wallace in on the part about Damien, not his personal interaction with Damien after the attack of course, but what had happened between Nielsen and Damien.

Wallace headed back to Homicide and Kaz went into the ME building and used the phone on Mackenzie's desk to call Damien. He looked at his palm and dialed Damien's number scrawled there.

Damien answered immediately after the first ring, as if he'd pounced on the phone. "Kaz? Is that you?"

"It's me." The sound of Damien's voice made his heart flip, reminding him of those moments spent on the couch in front of the fire. They both needed more of that as soon as possible.

"Are you all right? I've been a basket case. Forget about studying for my final."

"Maybe this will help. Nothing I did to Nielsen caused his death."

Damien exhaled. Relief practically flooded the line. "Oh thank God. What did happen? Do you know yet?"

"Drug overdose, some kind of thyroid medicine. Made his heart give out. It had been in his system for a while. Maybe even a couple of hours. Seems that someone probably put it in his food or drink." Just as he said it, a bad feeling took root. Something he wanted to ignore. But it stayed, like an invisible worm floating in his consciousness.

"He was murdered." Damien's voice came out hushed, tinged with horror.

"It's looking that way." Kaz sank down into Mackenzie's chair and raked his fingers through his hair. "Listen, Damien, I need you to tell me anything you can about this guy...about your interaction with him. I'll need to come over later with my partner and take down a statement, all right?"

"Of course, Kaz. I'll tell you whatever I can. I'm afraid it's not much though. I'll be home, studying."

"I'll see you then, sweetheart." Kaz started. The endearment slipped out before he realized he would say it.

Damien got really quiet. Seconds passed before he spoke again. "I liked that," he said softly.

Kaz cleared his throat. "Me too."

* * * * *

Kaz waited in the lobby of the building for George and Betty Nielsen. He guessed the couple approaching the glass doors just now was them and introduced himself. Betty Nielsen was matronly, dressed as if she were First Lady of the United States. Her eyes were red-rimmed and her hands remained clutching her purse, as if clinging to her life. Her husband, large and red-faced with fleshy jowls, looked like a much older, worn-out version of his son. Kaz wasn't completely fooled by the man's quiet exterior.

Down in the morgue, Kaz led the couple to the glass partition behind which their son's body lay, covered by a sheet. At Kaz's signal, the attendant lowered the sheet off Nielsen's face. Betty Nielsen burst into tears. "My son!"

Her husband stared through the glass, his face motionless except for a hard glint in his eyes. "That little faggot did this, I'm sure," he muttered. He looked up at Kaz. "You go talk to him."

Kaz cleared his throat. "Who is this, Mr. Nielsen?"

"The one who converted him, made him unnatural."

"George, please."

George ignored his wife's plea. "Lance would have been a normal man were it not for that little fairy. I told Lance to work out in a *man's* gym, not one of those fairy health clubs."

"Tom Egin," Betty Nielsen offered, dabbing at her eyes. "They live...lived together."

"I see." Kaz jotted the name on his notepad. "I don't have any other address for your son at the moment other than your home in Wellesley."

"He lived at 110 Elm Street in Cambridge," Betty Nielsen said through her tears. "Porter Square."

"Thank you," Kaz said softly. "I'm very sorry for your loss. I know this is a terrible time, but if you could answer a few questions, anything you know might prove helpful to catch whoever did this to your son."

Mrs. Nielsen nodded. "All right." Her husband remained morosely silent. Kaz took that for his agreement. He led them out of the morgue and up the stairs to an empty office then took out his notepad.

"Are we suspects, Detective Kazaminsky?" Betty Nielsen looked alarmed.

"No. I need to keep records of every part of my investigation."

The older woman nodded and dabbed again at her eyes.

Kaz prepared his first question. "Did Lance have any enemies you know of, anyone who might have wanted to do him harm?"

"The little faggot."

Betty Nielsen glanced at her husband. "Tom was Lance's...boyfriend. I guess that's what those people call their...significant other."

"That's fine." Kaz jotted it down.

"As my husband said, they worked out in the same health club."

"How long had they been together?"

"A little over two years. They moved in together right after Lance graduated Boston University. It was a shock to me and George, of course."

Thankfully George Nielsen remained quiet.

"You intimated that Lance and Tom had some discord. Do you know anything about it?"

Betty Nielsen dabbed at fresh tears. "We didn't have much contact with Lance. I used to call him about once a week to see how he was and ask him if he needed anything from home. I never met Tom, but I know Lance can...could be argumentative. I can't imagine that they didn't have friction."

Kaz nodded. "Was there much friction in your home before Lance moved out?"

"What are you getting at, Kazaminsky?" George Nielsen leaned forward. "Are you implying that I might have done something to my own son?"

Kaz looked at him. "I'm just trying to get a complete picture here. Are you aware that in college your son was arrested by campus police for attempting to sexually assault one of his fellow fraternity members?"

The Nielsens tensed and Betty made a show of sniffing and wiping at her nose. "We knew about that incident," she said. "I never believed it. Lance was difficult, but a sexual offender? Never."

Right, Kaz thought. *Never*. He made a mental note that Lance's mother had serious illusions about her son and was, therefore, completely able to lie about him.

George Nielsen spoke again. "If you're asking whether we fought, of *course* we argued sometimes. Fathers and sons always have arguments, especially when a father sees his son going down a completely wrong road."

"Are you referring to his homosexuality, Mr. Nielsen?"

Nielsen looked like a bulldog about to growl. "Of course that's what I'm referring to. How would you feel if your son told you he wanted to—"

"George, please. I beg you, stop. Anger won't bring him back." Betty Nielsen covered her eyes with her sodden tissue.

"Mr. and Mrs. Nielsen, thank you for your time. I'll have an officer drive you home."

"We drove ourselves," George Nielsen said.

Kaz accompanied them back downstairs and then paged Wallace to meet him back at Central where they could get a patrol officer to take them to Cambridge. It was time to speak with Lance's boyfriend.

* * * * *

The door finally opened to Kaz's knock. The man was dark-haired, blue-eyed, pale-skinned and almost as brawny as Nielsen had been. His dark hair was wet, as if he'd just come out of the shower. The bathrobe he wore told Kaz that's where he'd been.

"Tom Egin?"

Egin's brow furrowed. "Yeah."

Kaz flashed his badge and beside him, Wallace showed his. "Detectives Frank Kazaminsky and Dan Wallace of the Boston Police Department."

Before Egin could respond, an effeminate voice piped up in the background. "What did Lance do this time, Detective?" A slightly built, dark-haired man materialized from somewhere behind Egin, his thin arms crossed. He looked up at Kaz with a knowing expression.

Kaz ignored him and kept his gaze on Egin. "Is this the residence of Lance Nielsen?"

"It is, Detectives. What's going on? Is Lance in trouble again?" When Egin spoke, his voice sounded as if it were coming out of a voice box sized for a cat. A complete juxtaposition to his brawny size.

"You could say that. May we come in?"

Egin stood aside and offered Kaz a seat on the sofa. The furnishings were part beer-soaked frat house with hints of taste in the custom-made bookshelves and pieces of decent-looking art on the white walls. Kaz and Wallace took seats on the sofa while Egin settled on an adjacent chair.

The outspoken thinner man sat next to Egin, so close their legs were touching. "So what did he do this time?" he asked, voice huffy. He seemed to want to be Egin's voice.

Kaz looked at him. "And you are?"

"Alan Levitz. I look out for Tom because he refuses to look out for himself with that bully around."

"Alan, it's okay." Egin put a hand on the guy's arm. "What happened, Detectives? Is Lance in serious trouble? We've never been sent a detective before."

"I'm afraid so," Wallace said. "Lance is...dead."

"No!" Egin's eyes widened. His already pale skin blanched further.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Egin," Kaz said. "His body was found near the Club Moritz just before six this morning. He was...poisoned."

Egin's face fell into his hands. "I was afraid of something like this." His fingers agitated in his hair.

Kaz grew alert. "You were expecting someone to try to kill him?"

Egin looked up, his face a mask of misery. "I-I just meant that he made trouble. He could really get on people's bad sides."

"Like yours?"

"Don't suspect Tommy," Levitz interjected. He'd been rubbing Egin's back over his blue robe, though his pinched face showed only disgust. "Tommy put up with everything from Lance. Serves Lance right." He shook his head.

"That's cold," Tom Egin said then covered his face again. "I loved him." His large shoulders quaked.

"What did you mean by that, Levitz?"

Levitz scowled at him. "If you're going to suspect me, Detectives," he said, "don't. I couldn't stand the guy. I *hate* how he treated Tommy. But I wouldn't have done that to him." He leaned closer in to Egin. "When you love someone, even though they have terrible taste in men and allow themselves to be abused, you don't hurt the person they love because that would also hurt them."

"All right," Kaz said. Alan Levitz was going to the top of his suspect list. He pulled out his notepad. "But you both sound as if you have some idea of who would have done this."

"I don't," Egin said.

"Neither do I," Levitz added. "You'd have to question just about everyone Lance ever came into contact with."

"That's all well and good, but I'm afraid we'll need you to answer some questions, Mr. Egin, if you would."

Egin nodded, not lifting his face from his hands. He didn't seem terribly responsive to Levitz's comforting rubs on his back.

"When was the last time you saw or spoke to Lance?"

Egin sat up now. His blue eyes were red-rimmed the way Lance's mother's had been. In a way, the two people had a similar feel about them. "Last night. We had supper together."

"Here?"

"No. Nick's Steakhouse, on Mass. Ave. Just before Harvard Square. We used to go there almost every weekend. Lance liked the dollar beer pitcher thing they have on Saturday nights." Egin's voice broke on the last words and he buried his face in his hands, sobbing.

Levitz shook his head again. "Don't be fooled by Tommy's grief, Detectives. Don't get me wrong, he adored Lance. Like Romeo and Juliet those two were." Levitz sounded disgusted by that and it was quite obvious he wanted Egin for himself. "Just don't let Tommy make you think Lance was his knight in shining armor. Lance was anything *but*."

Egin raised his now-tearstained face. "Now you can shut up, Alan. Don't talk about him that way." At that, he got up and stormed into another room, slamming the door. Sounds of his sobbing came muffled through the wood.

"I'm sorry." Levitz's voice softened. But his next words showed he was more of a bulldog with a bone and would say his piece no matter what. He looked briefly at Dan then Kaz. "Better that he's not in the room. Tommy won't tell you this, but Lance was abusive, verbally and physically. Good thing Tommy is so big. Lance could have really hurt him, maybe even killed him." He leaned toward Kaz, his concern for Egin now

coming through as sincere. "They had a fight last night, at the restaurant. Lance got up and left. That's the last either of us saw of him."

"You were there?"

Levitz nodded. "Yeah. Lance started with his usual thing, baiting Tommy, talking about other guys he'd screwed or wanted to screw. It started before we got there actually, in the car on the way over. Lance started in about some stripper."

Kaz's gut lurched but he kept himself together. "Did he...say a name?"

Levitz looked up, recollecting. "The name he mentioned was Damien. It stood out to me because of that movie, you know, the one where the devil's son was named Damien?"

Kaz's heart sped up. "I know the one. So go on."

"*The Omen*. That was it. Anyway, it always pissed me off when Lance did that. It's so cruel to taunt someone that way when you supposedly love him. Anyway, he talked about Damien and how he watched the guy strip and what a body he had and how Damien gave him a lap dance and a blowjob."

Kaz cleared his throat, ignoring the sudden sweat in his palms. "And?"

Levitz sighed. "It was so clear how Lance just wanted to make Tommy cry or something. Lance started in that he was going back to the Club Moritz and get Damien again, only this time he'd fuck the guy up the ass because Tommy wasn't giving him enough at home. He went on about how hot Damien was for him and wouldn't even charge him. On and on. Finally Tommy told him to fuck off and go if that's what he wanted. Lance said 'fine'. And then he walked out."

Kaz raked a hand through his hair. "For what it's worth, Levitz, you can tell Mr. Egin that Lance was lying about Damien. I've interviewed Damien myself and Damien refused to perform oral sex on him and avoided him. He'd even paid a bouncer to keep an eye on him so that Lance couldn't force himself on Damien."

Levitz cocked his head. "Are you saying Lance lied?"

"About that, he did."

Levitz sighed again and his shoulders slumped. "Poor Tommy."

Kaz suddenly thought of something, the first words George Nielsen had said, calling Lance's lover a "little faggot". The man certainly hadn't been referring to the brawny Tom Egin. He fixed Levitz with a look. "Why did Lance's father think you were Lance's boyfriend?"

Levitz looked for a second like a deer trapped in a car's headlights. Then his face hardened. "Shortly after Lance moved in here with Tommy, that gigantic prick...prick senior, that is...barged in here, demanding to see the faggot who'd converted his son. That was how he phrased it. Tommy wasn't home, but I was here, doing some decorating things." He waved. "You can see I wasn't completely able to keep the place free of Lance's influence."

Kaz nodded with a glance at the beer steins and pennant flags with college emblems on them that decorated some of the bookshelves.

"I figured that if I said I was Lance's boyfriend, I'd prevent a scene. If Nielsen saw that Tommy was a big, strong guy, he'd probably have been more likely to pick a fight. Thankfully my ploy worked. He didn't attack me physically, even though he threatened me verbally, you know, things about shoving certain inanimate objects up my ass instead of his son's cock. And then I threatened to call the police. That got him to leave."

Kaz noted that on his pad as well. Funny how George Nielsen had failed to mention that little incident. The mention of Damien still had him shaken. "Did anyone else witness the fight last night at the table?"

At that, Levitz looked blank. He shrugged. "The place gets pretty crowded on a Saturday night. The only person who might possibly have caught wind of the argument was the waiter. But I couldn't tell you for sure."

"What was his name?"

"Eric," Levitz answered without hesitation. "I don't know his last name, but he's waited on us a bunch of times in the last few months. He's cute. Slim, a little taller than

me, dark blond hair, cut short, an earring in his right lobe. Blue eyes. Kind of absentminded. Gets our orders wrong just about every time but seems good-hearted enough."

Kaz nodded as he scribbled the name and description down. Turned out Levitz had been the most helpful so far of everyone Kaz had spoken to. "I have a question for you, Mr. Levitz."

"Alan."

Kaz nodded. "What, exactly, is the relationship between you and Tom Egin?"

Levitz sighed again. "I wish we were lovers, but Tommy has been true-blue to that asshole since they met. Of course I'm hoping there's a chance for me now." His eyes suddenly looked stricken. "That probably sounded really bad. Look, I love Tommy and I do want him, but I could never have taken another man's life to get what I want, not even Lance's life. I content myself with playing friend and emotional protector."

As if the words were a reminder, Egin's sobbing could be heard again through the door.

Kaz rose to leave, pulling a card from his wallet. "My number is here. If you or Mr. Egin think of anything else that might be helpful, please call."

"I will, Detective." Levitz accepted the card and accompanied Kaz to the door. "I'm sorry about coming off so aggressively earlier. I'm just...overprotective."

Kaz squelched the impulse to tell Levitz about his own issue with overprotectiveness. "No problem. I know how it is."

Kaz ended the interview and got back into the patrol car with Wallace. "What did you make of that?" he asked his partner. Wallace was a damn good detective with an uncanny ability to smell rotten fish, which was why their interviewing style was usually to have Kaz ask the questions while Wallace observed.

Wallace sighed. "I'm not sure. Usually it's really clear. I've been at this three years now, and I know from experience that gay couples are some of the worst homicides we

come across. You'll see that when you've been at it longer. That guy sure seemed heartbroken, but really...you never know with people. They're damn complicated."

"That's for sure." Kaz remembered all too well the many domestic assault scenes he'd been called to as a patrol officer. Numerous times the couple had been gay or lesbian and the violence between them had been vicious.

Wallace looked at him from deep-set eyes. "I will say this though. That little guy is trouble, no matter what crap he spouted about love."

Chapter Six

Nick's Steakhouse on Mass. Ave was closer to Egin's residence than Damien's was, so Kaz and Wallace made that stop first. Kaz felt himself brighten at the thought of going back to Damien's, even to question him. Strange how that in six or so months of dating Steve, Kaz had never missed him, never looked forward to getting back to him the way he was now with Damien. Not that Steve hadn't been good-looking. He was, in fact. And the sex had been enjoyable too.

Damien was just...different.

A hostess greeted Kaz and Wallace at the entrance of the darkly lit place. High booths of heavy wood and a bar in the center gave the place a typical pub-like atmosphere. "Table for two?"

"Actually, we're not here to eat." Kaz showed the young woman his badge. "I'm looking for someone who works here. Eric. I just need to ask him a few questions."

She showed no particular reaction. "He just clocked in. I'll get him for you."

"Thanks." Kaz stood while he waited instead of taking one of the seats lining the front waiting area. A minute or so later the hostess reappeared. A guy, probably about Kaz's age, fitting the description Levitz had given of Eric, followed her. Kaz's eye fell on the gold stud in Eric's right earlobe just as Eric came to a stop in front of him.

"You wanted to see me?" Eric's large blue eyes shifted uneasily between Kaz and Wallace.

"We just need to ask you a few questions."

"No problem. Let's go over to one of the booths in my station." He led Kaz and Wallace to a quiet corner. Being just after the lunchtime crowd, the place was mostly quiet. A television above the bar played a baseball game, the sound a light droning, not

loud enough to distract. Eric settled across from Kaz, his hands folded on the table in front of him. "What can I help you with, Detectives?"

"I'm investigating a homicide." Kaz produced a picture of Lance Nielsen, a photocopy from the police record. "This man, Lance Nielsen, was found dead this morning near Club Moritz on Tremont Street."

Eric studied the picture. "No way! I know him. Well, I don't really *know* him. He was a customer here. I waited on him and his friends." He handed the picture back to Kaz. "That's a shock. He was just here last night."

So that much, at least, was true so far. "What I need from you is anything you might remember that could be helpful, for example, the interactions at the table, anything you might have heard, contact with anyone else in this restaurant."

Eric pursed his lips for a moment, thinking. Then his face lit with remembrance. "I do remember something. This guy, Lance Nielsen, you say?"

"Yes."

"He and one of the other guys had an argument. It wasn't the first time. They argued just about each time they were here, especially after Nielsen had drunk a pitcher of beer. It was almost like they were staging it or they were...I don't know, enjoying fighting or something."

"Do you know what this last argument was about?"

"Yeah, actually. From the bit I caught when I set their plates down it was about a guy. Lance Nielsen was drunk and he was talking about a stripper, someone named Damien. I didn't get all the details but I could pretty much gather what was going on because the man he was arguing with looked really upset. The third guy with them kept telling Nielsen to stop, but he wouldn't. He made lewd gestures with his hands. I kind of put the picture together. I served another pitcher to him and he drank it then got up and left."

"Did the others leave with him?"

"No. They stayed a while, talking. I got the sense the smaller guy was trying to make the other one feel better. I guess there's a gay couple thing going on and one was cheating on the other or something like that. I'd overheard enough snippets of their conversations these past few months to guess."

"And no one else visited their table?"

Eric shook his head. "Not that I saw. If one of them got up to use the restroom, I wouldn't know if they met and spoke with anyone on the way or coming back. It gets busy on Saturday nights here." Eric shifted in his seat and something in the movement told Kaz there was more to what Eric was saying than was being revealed.

"Well, thank you for your help, Eric." He pulled out another card and slid it across the table toward the other man. "If there's anything you remember or can think of that might help, please give me a call."

"I will, Detective."

Kaz watched Eric pocket the card. Best to know where to get a hold of Eric in the future Kaz's intuition told him. "What's your full name, Eric? In case I need to reach you."

"You can always get a hold of me here."

Hmm. Didn't want to give his last name. Not good. "Well, in case you're not at work. Surely you're not here 24/7."

Eric shifted again in his seat. "Smith is my last name." He scribbled a phone number on his pad and ripped the sheet off, handing it to Kaz. "I live in Arlington."

"Address?" Wallace asked.

"Um, no. I've been staying with a friend. Sandy. She's there now, if you want to call. I don't have my own place right now."

Kaz accepted the phone number. "Thank you, Eric." He pocketed the number. "Thanks again for your time."

"No problem, Detective."

Kaz and Wallace left and got into their waiting cruiser.

"I'll call there afterward and check with the manager about this guy's real name," Wallace said. "I'd do it now, but I have a bad feeling about that guy. If he sees us poking around, he'll bolt."

"Yeah, you're right." Kaz jotted down more notes and gave the officer driving Damien's address. As much as he was looking forward to seeing Damien, he wasn't looking forward to embarrassing him in front of Wallace or of getting Wallace's impression of Damien's character.

One thing was for sure, Kaz sure as hell didn't want Wallace seeing anything about Damien he didn't want to see.

* * * * *

Back at Damien's house, Kaz knocked on the door. His stomach felt as if someone had put it in a vise, even though Wallace had assured him he'd be sensitive to the fact Damien had been Nielsen's victim.

In moments the door opened and Damien emerged, Kaz noted, dressed in a concealing baggy t-shirt and sweatpants. He opened the door wider. "Hi," he said softly.

"Hi, Damien. This is Detective Dan Wallace."

Wallace greeted Damien courteously and Damien led them inside and ushered them over to the sofa.

Kaz's gut flipped over. If only Wallace knew what had happened on that sofa the night before.

Damien already had a pot of tea waiting and poured for them. Kaz watched and stared a bit at his beautiful profile. After what had passed between them, this felt so cold, so distant.

In a word, the situation *sucked*.

Kaz accepted the cup and saucer from Damien, as if those same hands hadn't stroked him off and felt every part of him mere hours ago. "Thank you, Damien. We just need to ask you more about what happened with Lance Nielsen. Anything you remember that could help." His voice sounded apologetic to his own ears and he saw understanding flicker in Damien's green eyes.

"Of course. Well, Friday night I got to the Moritz about ten thirty. I usually go on at eleven so I give myself a half-hour to get ready, warm up, put on whatever getup I'll be wearing."

"You hadn't seen him up until this point?"

"No. I'd never seen him before in the place. Even if he'd been there, he'd never approached me. It gets so crowded."

"I see, go on." Kaz listened carefully, not just to Damien's words, but to the sound of his voice. Better that if Damien became a suspect, it was done before Kaz got really attached to him. So far, thank God, Damien's voice didn't hold a trace of anything suspicious.

"I went out and did my routine at eleven. I danced for probably fifteen or twenty minutes like I usually do and then went to the dressing room, as usual. As you saw last night, that's where the guys all go who want to try to get some extra."

Kaz's gut lurched. Sudden jealousy spiked him. "I remember."

"Lance Nielsen was there. He wanted a lap dance." Damien paused and sighed. "You know, he made me nervous from the get-go and really, I usually pick and choose more carefully. I don't know why I ignored my instinct. Perhaps it was that fifty-dollar bill he waved in my face. Sometimes I get worried about finances. I allowed it to take over my good judgment." His expression tightened. There were other things, personal things, Damien couldn't say in front of Wallace, Kaz sensed.

That made Kaz's heart soften. "Everyone gets nervous about money. This isn't exactly a cheap part of the country to live in and you're in school."

"Thanks. That helps."

"No problem. I'm sorry to make you rehash this whole thing."

"It's all right. I want to help."

"So you went and...lap-danced the guy." Kaz became vividly aware of Wallace as soon as he asked the question. Thankfully his partner was nothing but professional.

"Yeah." Damien sounded positively blue now and Kaz sensed the other man was starting to feel responsible for Nielsen's death. "I explained to him clearly beforehand that a lap dance includes only a hand job, and for legal reasons, the guy can't undo his pants. Club Moritz could get busted for prostitution. I know that the other dancers bend and break the rules all the time, but I don't want to be one of them. I *try* to have principles."

"I understand." Had someone else said it, Kaz wouldn't have believed him. But something about Damien was straight. No pun intended. "Go on."

"He agreed to it, but then when we were in the actual situation, he opened his pants and started demanding I give him a blowjob. I refused and said the dance was over. He hadn't come yet but I saw where it was going." Damien paused and looked at them both.

Kaz's heart thumped. He itched to pull Damien into his arms. If he could have erased the past abuse Damien suffered, he would have. "Did Nielsen become violent with you then?" he asked.

Damien nodded. "Not physically. He said, 'Hey, I paid you fifty bucks'. I told him that didn't matter, we'd agreed on the services. As I was walking away, he said, 'I won't forget this, you little bitch'. That made my blood run cold but I didn't look back. I left. We were in a back room that's semiprivate. I pay one of the inside bouncers a few extra dollars to keep an eye on me. If Nielsen had tried to attack me, he'd have been stopped."

"I see." Kaz ignored the green-eyed monster raking his insides. This had happened *before* he'd even ever laid eyes on Damien. And it wasn't exactly as if Damien had been

enjoying himself. "What about last night, Damien? Did you pay someone to watch over you then?"

"No. Because I planned to leave immediately after my dance. I used a backstage corridor only the staff know about. Nielsen said he figured I'd try to sneak out the back door to avoid him. Which is exactly what I did." He paused. "And so that brings us up to the moment you stepped in."

Kaz sighed and rubbed his temple where he felt the first stirrings of a headache. Before he could say anything, Damien spoke again.

"Kaz, I've watched enough detective shows to know that there's a really good chance I'll end up on the list of suspects here. After all, it could be said I had a motive. But I promise you I was at home all day yesterday until I left for the club. I took a taxi there. I can even tell you the company it was and the number of the cab. Six oh two. I remembered it because it was the same number as my house."

"I believe you, Damien." Kaz jotted down the information to include in the statement he'd type up.

"I won't lie and say I've never had revenge fantasies," Damien went on. "Part of my therapy was imagining all the ways I'd kill my uncle if I could. But I would never have done any of it. I've had one fight in my whole life, when I was sixteen. I was at a party and some assholes there were torturing a stray dog on the sidewalk outside the house. I jumped them and threw some punches. That's how I got the bump on my nose."

"I know you're not violent, Damien." Kaz gave Wallace a quick glance. Wallace nodded, a signal to Kaz that he'd been able to assess Damien's responses. At the moment, there really wasn't anything more he could ask Damien. He wanted to tell Damien he'd come back and see him when his shift was finished at four, but didn't dare say anything in front of Wallace. "Thank you for answering these questions." Kaz stood, leaving his tea untouched. Next to him, Wallace stood also and thanked Damien for his time.

"You're welcome. I wish I could tell you more, but there isn't anything." Damien walked them to the door and Kaz noticed Damien didn't ask to see him again.

Kaz's stomach made that flopping sensation again and Kaz decided to call Damien as soon as he went off-duty. Before crossing the threshold, Kaz let his gaze linger on Damien's while Wallace walked down the front steps. "Bye."

Damien held Kaz's stare until he turned. "Bye, Detective," he heard Damien say to his back.

In the cruiser, Kaz remained quiet, afraid to ask Wallace his assessment.

"He seems all right," Wallace said, giving Kaz relief. But in the next breath he said, "Though really at this point, Damien is the only one with a more solid motive."

Kaz pulled in a breath. "Why, because Nielsen attacked him?"

"Precisely. Which means he'd at the top of the list, unless we can get more on the fighting between Egin and Nielsen."

Kaz's heartbeat raced. "Yeah, what that waiter Eric said seemed to point toward a possible crime of passion." He didn't want to sound too upset about Wallace's opinion. Not that Wallace would condemn him or anything. He just wasn't about to announce the fact that he was falling...that he really liked Damien.

Back at Homicide, Kaz typed up Damien's statement as well as the reports on the interviews he'd had with the Nielsens, Egin and Levitz, and then Eric the waiter. When he'd finished, he looked at his watch. Nearly three thirty. He went off the clock at four and the night team would take over after a briefing.

Wallace came over to his desk and sat down across from him. "Well, the guy Nielsen attacked at Boston University is living out of the country now, in London. The manager at Nick's Steakhouse verified that Eric's last name is Smith and that he's on the payroll, full time, and has been since February. Eric was also telling the truth about his friend. I called there and she verified his story. Said he's been in California for the last eight months and came back to this area recently. I ran his name through the system. Nothing there. No priors."

Kaz picked up a pen off his desk and tapped it on the surface. "So if Eric wasn't lying about who he is, why was he cagey about telling us his last name? Why would he lie? And his story about Egin and Nielsen definitely corroborates the friction between them."

Wallace sat back. "Maybe he's just afraid of cops."

Kaz nodded. "They sometimes are." Eric was definitely hiding something but chances were it had nothing to do with the murder. His statements were all verified so far. There could be any number of reasons a person was afraid to give their name.

When the afternoon team came on, Kaz and Wallace briefed them and Sergeant Reynolds about their findings. And then Kaz had an idea. "Is someone available to go to the restaurant and just hang out there, undercover? Keep an eye on this Eric Smith, just to make sure there's nothing else going on."

"We'll take care of that," Reynolds said.

Kaz stood up to leave. "But please, page me if anything develops."

* * * * *

After leaving the building, Kaz took the T to Central Square and walked to Inman. His stomach flipped again, something that had never happened to this degree until he'd met Damien. Finding a pay-phone, he dialed Damien's number. Damien picked up on the third ring. "Hey, Damien?" Kaz said at the other man's hello. "It's me, Kaz."

"Kaz? Hi! I...thought you wouldn't call again."

"Why not?"

"Because...I don't know."

Kaz sighed at Damien's sad tone. "Damien, I'm really sorry. I didn't want to have to interview you that way. There's just no way to do it without a partner there."

"That's all right. I figured." He paused. "Where are you?"

Kaz smiled even though Damien couldn't see him. "I'm a few blocks from your house. I went off-duty at four."

"Oh great! Do you...want to come over?"

Hell yeah. "Sure. I'll be there in a few minutes."

The jumping around in his stomach increased as he neared Damien's front door stoop. He rang the bell and waited. In seconds he heard movement inside and then the door opened and Damien was there in front of him. Their eyes met.

The impact nearly sent Kaz stumbling backward. Every nerve ending in his body suddenly sizzled, full of awareness, as if the rest of the world had just vanished, leaving only him and Damien, right there, in that spot, in that moment of time.

Damien's smile lit up his green eyes. Something about the way he stood there, quiet, doorknob in hand, made Kaz think the same thing was happening to him.

"Hey, Detective."

"Hey." The sudden lump in Kaz's throat wouldn't allow for more than that syllable. He hoped it would clear up, so he could also tell Damien how damn hot he looked in a t-shirt and jeans. Though, truth be told, the man could wear a burlap sack and look incredible.

Better still, wearing nothing.

The thought propelled Kaz forward, as far as the threshold. Closer, so that he and Damien were now in each other's personal space.

Protocol would demand that Damien step back and invite him in, but Damien stood there, staring up at him, his eyes full of shifting feelings, as if Kaz's movement into his range of body heat had stolen away his own ability to act and think.

The bruise on Damien's cheek made Kaz remember the circumstances of their meeting. Kaz felt a momentary confusion, followed by clarity. Suspect or not, Damien was a sweet, beautiful man who drew him as no one else ever had. And Damien had been hurt.

Kaz reached out and cupped Damien's cheek, the one that hadn't been bruised, and brushed the pad of his thumb across Damien's perfect cheekbone.

Damien's eyes closed for a second and he covered Kaz's hand, still quiet.

Kaz swallowed, clearing his throat for speech, though Damien had him so dazzled, he was sure he'd trip over his tongue anyway. "It's nice to see you," he managed to say.

"You too. I was worried you'd...changed your mind." He lifted Kaz's hand from his cheek and turned, ushering Kaz into the house, closing the door behind them and slipped off his shoes.

Once inside, Kaz turned to him again. "Why would I have changed my mind?" he asked, and gently pulled Damien against his front. His body seemed to know what to do even though his mind became a pile of mush around this incredible guy.

The other man yielded gladly and embraced him. His palms pressed into Kaz's shoulder blades. The rub of their fronts together ignited Kaz's groin, but he refrained from starting to grind his hips against Damien's. Instead, he raked his fingers through Damien's hair. Damien smelled good and his body was so pleasantly warm and hard against Kaz's chest.

"I don't know," Damien said finally. "So many things can happen."

An ache tugged in Kaz's chest. In the larger adventure of his life he'd often considered how nice it would be to have someone to come home to after a day of chasing down criminals...

Kaz rubbed his fingers deeper into Damien's hair, loving the silkiness against his fingertips. Damien seemed to enjoy it too, judging by the way he was kind of melting against Kaz, his lips parting, eyelids lowering. "Well," Kaz said softly, tilting his face downward, "I don't see why that would happen." He closed the space between their lips, a kiss with Damien suddenly being the only thing in existence he wanted right now.

Damien sighed and his lips parted. Damien's fingertips pressed harder into Kaz's back muscles. Damien seemed to have wanted this kiss just as much as he did.

Kaz coaxed Damien's lips apart and slid his tongue against Damien's. Warm, soft, moist, yielding. Damien's kiss was everything good.

Eyes closed, Kaz let his upper body sink closer to Damien's. The warmth trapped between their bodies increased, as did the tightening in Kaz's groin. His cock hardened, pressing against Damien's with a life of its own.

Kaz pulled away from the kiss, panting. "I'm sorry," he breathed. "I don't mean to be so...greedy."

Damien's lids partly hid his eyes. His face was flushed. "I can't imagine you ever being greedy," he said. "Especially with me." Damien's hands slid from Kaz's back and he stepped away. "If anyone's being greedy, it's me. You barely slept, and you haven't even had a chance to go home and change." He eyed Kaz, assessing. "And I doubt you've had a chance to eat anything, either. Am I right?"

"Yeah."

Damien shook his head. He picked up Kaz's hand and started leading him again. "And here I am, stealing kisses."

"That's all right with me," Kaz said. His body mourned the absence of Damien against him, as well as the taste of Damien's mouth. He felt slightly drunk. Drunk on Damien.

Damien grinned over his shoulder. "I'm glad you approve, but I don't."

Seconds later Kaz found himself in Damien's kitchen. The air smelled like some kind of wonderful food. He took the seat Damien offered, already feeling at home. Damien sure knew how to make a sweet nest.

"Make yourself comfortable, Detective," Damien said, putting on a mitt and opening the oven. "I made you something."

That's when Kaz noticed the table was set for two, complete with a small bottle of red wine and a basket of warm garlic bread. Kaz's heart squeezed.

Damien smiled that shy smile again. "I...made dinner for you, just in case," Damien said. With a spatula he cut into whatever delicious-smelling food was in the baking dish and set up two plates.

Kaz saw cheese dripping and his mouth nearly watered. "Looks like lasagna or something."

"Yep."

Kaz chuckled. "That was awfully nice of you."

"My pleasure." Damien carried the plates over and set one down in front of Kaz. "I don't usually eat things like this, but I can't keep you fed on boneless, skinless chicken breasts and steamed vegetables." He patted the brawn of Kaz's arm. "These need more nourishment than that."

"Is that what you eat? Steamed vegetables?"

Damien looked almost sheepish. "Mostly. I have to watch my weight." He sighed and sadness passed over his face. "The way I look has been my meal ticket lately, so I need to be careful."

Kaz nodded, though Damien's admission made him feel as sad as Damien looked in that moment. "I understand." Maybe the day would come when Damien didn't need to earn a living from stripping anymore.

Then the sparkle came back into Damien's eyes. "In the meantime, enjoy. Some lasagna now and then won't make me fat."

I'll help you work it off, Kaz thought, and restrained the words from slipping out. Without trying to, Damien made him want to be so careful, so considerate. Respectful. Not like the guys at the Moritz. Not like Lance Nielsen.

"When you're done," Damien said between bites, "I'll put your clothes in the wash I was going to do today. That way you won't have to go home."

Kaz heard how much Damien wanted him to stick around and his heart squeezed again. Maybe he was...different for Damien too. He nodded and a tickle started up in his gut. Taking all his clothes off could mean more than getting them washed...

He nodded. "Sounds good. I appreciate you taking care of me."

Damien's smile faded and his gaze was serious, sweet. "Well, you took care of me. Now it's my turn."

Kaz's heart flipped over. "Thanks, Damien," he said softly.

Damien looked at him a moment longer then picked up his fork.

Kaz followed Damien's lead and wasn't disappointed. The food melted in his mouth, as good as anything he'd ever tasted, and that was saying a lot since his mother was a great cook. He made sure to tell Damien so and noticed that though Damien thanked him, the other man was mostly quiet during the meal, not asking about the investigation. Just as well since aside from the fact Damien was not in the clear as a suspect.

After the meal, Kaz offered to help Damien with the dishes, but Damien refused, piling everything into a sink full of sudsy water, insisting it would all keep until later. "Time to wash your things," he added softly, and picked up Kaz's hand again.

Kaz followed, liking the way Damien led him from room to room each time. The man had such a sweet way about him.

Damien led him to a small laundry room just beyond the kitchen. There was enough space for a washer and dryer then a table behind them on which sat a small basket and a pile of folded towels. Damien picked up the basket. "This is for the things in your pockets, so nothing will get lost." He set it back down and leaned back against the washing machine, a shy look on his chiseled features. "Should I give you privacy?"

Kaz grinned, though inside he felt suddenly as shy as Damien looked. "Absolutely not. I mean, that is, if you don't mind."

Damien's tantalizing smile spread across his perfect lips, belying the slight blush that crept into his cheeks. "I don't mind."

I can't believe I'm blushing. Damien tried not to stare at Kaz, but couldn't help himself. The man had the perfect underwear model build, the kind one saw on those

packages that only showed the guy from the neck down but still made underwear shopping an enjoyable activity.

Damien took Kaz's jacket and hung it on a wall hook by the back door. Conveniently, the laundry room also served as a mudroom in the winter with its back entrance.

Kaz stood in front of him in his white t-shirt covered only with the gun holster. The straps made the white material stretch even tighter over the guy's broad chest and the effect made Damien slightly breathless. Kaz's arm muscles flexed in the act of undoing the straps while Damien watched, his own body already tightening again in all the right places.

Kaz placed the gun and holster into the basket and then stripped off his t-shirt.

Damien let out a small breath then remembered at the last second to take the shirt from Kaz and toss it into the open washer. More muscles on Kaz's torso flexed as did his pectorals and then his shoulders and biceps as he dug into his pockets, pulling out keys and wallet. And something else.

Damien glanced away from the colorful packet of condoms that also landed in the basket. He remembered then that Kaz had been going to meet a lover the night before, when he'd been stood up.

When Kaz looked up, he paused, a tiny grin teasing at his lips. "I guess it's your turn to watch me strip now. Though I admit, I'm not nearly as graceful."

Damien's heartbeat sped up and his mouth watered to taste the skin stretched over Kaz's collarbone as his fingers raked through that silky, dark chest hair. Kaz's small, dark nipples were already tight peaks, as if having Damien watch him undress had been an immense turn-on. Damien managed a small laugh. "You're doing fine, believe me."

No music or flashing lights were needed. Kaz had a natural way about him. He was obviously an athlete, accustomed to movement, graceful in spite of his sizeable brawn.

Damien's gaze glued itself to Kaz's hands now as they unbuckled his belt and slipped the leather strap through the belt loops. The belt went into the basket and then Kaz's wide fingers were on the button and then the fly. Kaz didn't seem to be in a rush, yet he wasn't moving slowly, either, just enough to tease Damien's vision and the rest of him with the uncovering of his magnificent body.

Kaz opened his jeans, giving Damien a flash of white briefs. Damien remembered them from the previous night, as well as the thick, hard member tucked inside. Damien's mouth watered a tiny bit and he realized the ragged breathing he heard was his own.

Kaz's mischievous grin returned. "Think I could get hired at that place?" Before Damien could answer, Kaz pushed his jeans down in one slide, which took them just to his knees. He turned slightly, giving Damien a fabulous view of his wide, sloping thighs and hard ass cheeks flexing under the thin white material of his briefs as he worked off his jeans and socks.

This time, instead of handing Damien his things, Kaz stepped up to him, the way he had at the front door and dropped the clothes into the washer himself. Damien looked up at him, Kaz being nearly a head taller, and swallowed. He was feeling a bit dizzy now, as if Kaz's scent were a cloud of haze-inducing incense. Raw power and heat radiated off Kaz's large muscles.

Damien stared into Kaz's eyes for several moments. That...connection...he sensed when they looked at each other this way sizzled between them.

Kaz's large hands closed gently around his wrists. Damien's insides jumped and confusion clouded his mind for a moment.

"Just one thing left, Damien," he said in a low husky voice, and drew Damien's hands to the waistband of his briefs.

Damien cleared his throat, which had suddenly dried up. His gaze dropped down to the spot Kaz had brought his hands to. The trail of dark hair below Kaz's bellybutton disappeared behind the elastic. Where the enormous bulge waited to be revealed.

Damien could see its outline stretching the thin white material, three-pointed — the head of Kaz's cock and the heavy sac of his balls just below that. Damien's underwear model fantasy come to life.

One of Kaz's hands left Damien's wrist. Kaz passed a hand over Damien's hair. Damien looked up.

As usual, Kaz's eyes, though simmering and dark, also showed care. "Take it at your pace, Damien," he said, his voice husky. "I mean it." His hand rested on Damien's hair.

The tender gesture proved as erotically stimulating as Kaz's nearly naked body only inches away. Damien nodded. Sexual energy trilled along every nerve ending in his body. All he wanted to do now was rub up against Kaz's nakedness with his own.

Still looking into Kaz's dark eyes, Damien lowered the elastic. He heard Kaz's breathing deepen, as if somehow this were a pivotal moment between them.

Damien's gaze dropped again. Kaz's cock strained upward, thick and veined. Cum already glistened at the tip. Damien's mouth watered the way it had last night when need had overwhelmed him. For the first time, he'd wanted so badly to fill his mouth with a cock and had felt the freedom and safety to do it. He touched the gleaming droplet and lightly rubbed the moisture over the whole plump head with two fingertips.

Kaz's breath hitched and his hand slipped from Damien's hair to his back, rubbing it in tight circles. In the next breath Kaz leaned in and his mouth closed over Damien's.

Damien's eyes fluttered closed. His lips opened to the hot swirl of Kaz's tongue around his. Kaz smelled and tasted so good and his kiss made Damien feel as if he were sinking into the most luscious warm pool.

Damien slid his hand along the shaft of the larger man's cock. The pads of his fingertips explored every ridge, every contour and nuance of its shape and size. The longer he explored, the more heatedly Kaz kissed him, as if channeling the arousal Damien made him feel into their kiss so he wouldn't attack Damien in mad lust.

That gave Damien a pang in his chest. Kaz was so caring. The way Damien had always imagined the right guy would be. God knew he'd held out enough, waiting for the right guy after Eric had left him. Now here he was.

The right guy. Damien felt it in his bones.

The knowledge freed him more. His exploration got bolder and he slid his hands down, cupping Kaz's balls. The sac was hot and heavy in his palm and Kaz moaned into his mouth. His balls seemed to be an erogenous zone for him so Damien stayed there before continuing on, gently squeezing and kneading, guided by Kaz's responses as to what felt best for him. The gentle kneading seemed to be the one. So Damien indulged him, discovered all the possible ways a man's balls could be kneaded to give Kaz the most pleasure possible.

Kaz seemed to realize that in the way he nipped and licked at Damien's lower lip then continued along his jawline and the side of his throat.

Damien groaned. Kaz had found an erogenous zone Damien hadn't even known about himself. Kaz paused over the skin there, breathing over it, giving it gentle licks with the tip of his tongue. The giving and receiving of each other's pleasure seemed to be the focus. What Damien had always hoped sex could be.

Damien slid his hand around to Kaz's ass cheek. The hard muscle quivered under his hand. This part of Kaz he'd discovered the night before and had enjoyed the hell out of squeezing and caressing. Kaz had the most perfect hard, round ass cheeks imaginable so Damien indulged himself, now squeezing both cheeks with both hands, his arms around Kaz while Kaz moved his trail of kisses and licks to the other side of Damien's throat and along his collarbone.

Eyes closed, Damien tilted his head back, smiling. If anything was better than this he couldn't imagine what it would be. Caressing Kaz's ass with both hands, he used the movement to lower the briefs down at the same time then slipped them over the man's broad thighs.

Kaz pulled away, his face darkly flushed, and slid the briefs down, stepping out of them. Lifting them, hanging from his fingers, he dropped them into the washer. "All ready," he said softly.

Damien nodded. "Mine need washing too," he said, even though it wasn't true. He lifted off his shirt, dropped it into the machine and then did the same with his pants and bikinis, all under the other man's heavy-lidded gaze.

"Damn, Damien," Kaz breathed. "You're just...words don't do it justice." He shook his head and reached out, brushing an appreciative caress down one side of Damien's chest. The look in his eyes, though full of want, also radiated appreciation, as if Damien were the most incredible man he'd ever laid eyes on.

At least that's how he made Damien feel.

"Thank you, Detective."

"Nothing to thank me for. Just true."

Damien managed a smile though his face burned mercilessly, and not just from arousal. He turned to measure detergent into the washer, closed the lid then started it with a turn of the knob.

Just then, the heat of Kaz's muscled body closed in behind him. Kaz's large hands rested on Damien's shoulders and warm breath passed over the nape of Damien's neck. Damien stilled under the almost-reverent way Kaz's lips brushed his skin. Kaz pressed his face into the back of Damien's hair and the heat of his broad chest pressed against Damien's back.

Damien rested his hands on the edge of the washer. The sound of water filling the machine drowned out his soft moans each time Kaz's lips whispered over his skin. Kaz's hard cock pushed into the crevice of his ass, although Kaz didn't start rubbing his hips. Instead, Kaz's hands slid up and down Damien's arms, seeming to savor every inch of them, tracing the etchings of his muscles as if memorizing them.

One hand slipped around to Damien's chest. Thick fingers raked through his chest hairs then grazed his nipples, slow, careful circles that sent a zing of heat through them, tightening them immediately.

Kaz's cock pushed deeper into his crevice, sliding up and down. Only after several moments did Damien realize *he* was the one making it happen. Kaz was standing still. That could mean only one thing.

Damien wanted it. *Bad.*

Excitement shot through his chest, making him tremble. Not even with Eric had they done this. Damien had thought about it, had even begun to prepare for it, getting the necessary lubricants and condoms and stashing them away in his bedside table for the big occasion. But it had never happened. Eric had backed away.

Thing was, Damien felt even safer now. Kaz had some maturity. He was protective and strong, not just in body but obviously in personality. As Damien had felt moments before, Kaz was the right guy.

"Please do it, Kaz," he whispered above the sound of the washing machine before he could lose his nerve.

Kaz's lips lifted from Damien's skin. "Do it?"

Damien turned his head slightly but, from their position, couldn't really see Kaz's face. "Yes. It. I'm ready. I want you." He pushed his ass out just a bit and rubbed Kaz's cock to make it perfectly clear.

Kaz's breath caught and that thick cock surged. Damien could practically feel it rub his entrance.

"Are you sure, Damien?"

"Yes."

Kaz kissed Damien's lips and reached past him into the basket, retrieving one of the condoms. He ripped it open and rolled it on.

Damien watched the sheer rubber cover the hard shaft. Hard to believe it was his first time.

Kaz finished and reached for Damien again. "We need something more," he whispered. "Do you have lube?"

"Not here. But I do have something." Heart pounding, he reached into a nearby cupboard. The laundry room also served as an extra pantry. He happened to have a new bottle of olive oil, the only fat he allowed himself to cook with. He unscrewed the cap, breaking the seal. "We can use this."

Kaz took the bottle from him, still seeming reluctant. "I just want to know you're positive you want this, Damien."

"Yes. I am."

Kaz grinned and kissed Damien's back. "Then I'm more than happy to oblige you." He drizzled the oil into his hand and set the bottle on the dryer. Damien glanced down, watching Kaz's large hand coat his erection with the fruity-smelling oil. Damien turned and braced himself.

"I'm just going to get you ready," Kaz whispered. Then several oily fingertips pushed into Damien's crevice and rubbed around his hole.

Damien pulled in a breath. His body tensed at first then relaxed under Kaz's finger massage. He pushed his ass out a bit, giving Kaz space.

"Just relax, sweetheart," Kaz's voice crooned. "I'll make it good for you. I promise." One thick finger probed his hole then pushed.

Damien pulled in a breath as Kaz's finger invaded the tightness. He moved it in and out, stretching Damien's passage open. Then a second finger. Damien gasped at the invasion of pleasure.

"How's that, Damien?" Kaz's voice was a sensual caress, as was his touch.

"Really good." Damien's eyes shut and his consciousness rested on the sensation of fullness, the stretching, the waves of pleasure that seemed to caress like fingers to the other parts of him. His cock, his balls, down his thighs. Even into his nipples.

"Good. Just a bit more." Kaz scissored his fingers slightly apart and thrust in and out some more.

Damien groaned and relaxed. His body was opening more each second.

Kaz's fingers slipped out and then Damien felt the push of Kaz's cock head. It was much thicker than his fingers had been and slippery from the olive oil. One of Kaz's hands rested on Damien's hip while the other guided his cock in.

"Still good?" Kaz's voice still held concern even though it couldn't have been easy for him to hold back like this.

"Very good." Damien pushed back a bit, forcing Kaz to slide in deeper. He heard Kaz's breath catch and his fingers pressed a bit hard into Damien's hip. This was obviously good for him too.

Kaz pushed. Damien pushed back. The tight ring of muscles in his ass stretched, opened more, he wanted Kaz deep inside him so badly.

"You feel so good, Damien," Kaz rasped. "Like a tight silk glove."

The praise sent shivers of warmth through Damien. Gripping the edge of the washer, he gave a sharp push back, impaling himself on Kaz's cock.

They gasped simultaneously. Damien turned his head. Kaz's eyes were glazed but Kaz reached out and caressed his cheek. That hand slid down then and splayed over Damien's chest. Kaz's chest, hot and sweaty now, pressed to Damien's back and Kaz's lips once again rested soft and hot on Damien's skin.

Kaz's arm across Damien's chest anchored them in place. Kaz's breath thundered close to Damien's ear as Kaz eased his cock out partway and thrust back in.

Thrills cascaded through Damien's whole body. He stood firmly, gripping the edge of the washing machine, which vibrated under his fingertips, strangely erotic in concert with the incredible fullness in his ass.

Kaz withdrew and plunged in again. The movement pushed Damien's front against the washer. The cool metal sent icy heat through his cock. The sensation was incredible. He remained sandwiched between the machine in front and Kaz's hot, muscular body riding him from behind.

Lost in heaven, Damien sagged a bit, supporting his weight on the machine, absorbed in the sensations assaulting him from every angle. He'd never thought it could be quite like this...

Kaz moved faster. The thickness of his cock rubbed Damien in the most wonderful places, especially over his prostate. If he'd been wearing shoes, he'd have jumped out of them each time Kaz hit that spot.

In the haze of his mind, Damien heard the water in the machine agitating the clothes. Kaz's groans and ragged breathing echoed hotly in his ears. The cool metal of the machine rubbed his cock while Kaz rubbed the insides of his tight passage.

"I'm not going to last much longer," Kaz panted near his ear. "You're...so...tight."

Damien turned his head slightly. "Don't worry," was all he could say through his blissful haze.

"Thank you." Like a racehorse let out of the gate, Kaz rode Damien faster, harder, which only increased the rubbing of Damien's cock against the machine. Kaz gave a powerful thrust that sent Damien over the edge. The pressure in his cock released and he sagged back against Kaz as the waves plowed through him.

"Oh yes," he heard Kaz whisper. Several hard thrusts followed then Kaz's body stiffened. Damien felt the pulses of Kaz's climax. Time seemed to freeze, punctuated only by the workings of the washing machine. As if in symbolic unity, the machine paused and then made the spurting sound of water as it began to rinse the clothes.

Kaz clung to Damien from behind, breathing heavily against his back, his arm still across Damien's chest. Sweaty heat molded Kaz's chest to Damien's back. Damien closed his eyes and tilted his head back. What a feeling it was to be surrounded by this hot, protective man. The best guy he'd ever met. His first real lover.

And hopefully his only lover.

Kaz lifted his head and Damien felt a quick press of lips on his shoulder. "How are you, Damien?" Kaz asked softly.

"I'm great. How about you?"

Kaz's cock had softened enough that he slipped out and turned Damien in his arms so they were face-to-face. "How do I look?"

Damien studied Kaz's heavy lids, the satiated grin on his lips, the sweaty flush on his cheeks. "I think you look how I feel," he answered.

"And how's that?"

"Happy."

Kaz's grin faded. He reached up and raked a hand through Damien's hair. "I'm glad you feel happy, Damien. That was my aim."

Behind them, the machine had just finished the first rinse and the second one began.

Damien registered it in the back of his mind while the reality of what had just happened settled fully into his consciousness. The act he'd feared and loathed since the abuse no longer had that power. Kaz had transformed it into a beautiful thing, the way Damien had wanted it to be, had cherished and nurtured in his dreams and fantasies. Kaz had made it real.

Tilting his head up, Damien pressed his lips to Kaz. He lingered there, his hands slipping around Kaz's torso in an embrace. Kaz pulled him close, as if sensing Damien's thoughts and feelings.

Just then, the washing machine fell silent.

Kaz ended the kiss. "Maybe we could go upstairs and get into bed while the clothes dry," he said softly.

Damien smiled as Kaz slipped the rubber off and threw it in the nearby pail. "Good idea." Quickly he opened the washer and threw the things into the dryer along with a softening sheet. He turned it on then led Kaz out of the room, back upstairs.

Damien had left the bed unmade, hoping for this moment. Kaz climbed into Damien's bed ahead of him and patted the space next to him. Kaz spooned him from behind, and within seconds the larger man's breathing had fallen into the steady rhythm of sleep.

The sound and the feeling of safety in Kaz's arms lulled Damien to sleep.

* * * * *

When he opened his eyes next, it was nearly dark outside. He felt Kaz stir behind him. Hard to believe it had been less than a day since they'd met. It felt like a year.

Kaz sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. "How long did we sleep?"

"A couple of hours."

Kaz smiled at him. "Been a long time since I napped like this." He sat up and swung his legs over, sitting on the edge of the bed. "I'm going to go to the bathroom and call in. See if anything's developed since I left."

Damien threw back the covers. "I'll get your clothes. Wait here."

"No problem."

Downstairs, Damien pulled the things from the dryer, threw his on and then went back upstairs. Kaz was sitting on the edge of the bed, seeming lost in thought. "Here you go, Detective. Nice and clean."

"Thanks." Kaz accepted his clothing and set them on the bed.

When he came back, Kaz hadn't moved, his gaze riveted suddenly on the nightstand. Damien's latest letter from Eric sat open with a photo of Eric his friend had sent.

Kaz picked up the photo and stared at it. "It can't be," he muttered. His gaze jerked up and he held up the photo. "Who's this?"

Damien's heartbeat sped up. "That's Eric."

"Eric? Eric Smith?"

"Yes."

Kaz stared again at the picture. The room seemed to fill with tension. "How do you know him?"

Damien cleared his throat. Kaz was suddenly a different man from the one he'd been getting to know. A *very* different man. "I had a boyfriend once. The only one...until you."

"And?"

"That was him."

Chapter Seven

Damien's blood went cold. He watched Kaz study the picture as if he wanted to rip Eric right from the paper into the room. *Shit!* Had he been drawn to another crazy weirdo who'd wiggled-out on him? It sure was looking that way.

"Kaz," he said nearly in a whisper, "Are you jealous? Because you don't have to be. Let me explain."

Kaz looked up, still wearing that intent expression, but when their eyes met, he softened, obviously realizing Damien's distress. "No. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to alarm you." He held up the picture. "This is the last person I questioned before coming back to your house this afternoon," he said. "He's a waiter who'd served Nielsen last night before Nielsen went to the Moritz."

Damien froze. "But that's impossible. It couldn't have been Eric."

"Why not?"

"Because he's in California where he's been for the last eight months. I just got a letter from him yesterday afternoon, postmarked from Los Angeles. He didn't say anything about having moved back to Boston." Damien went to the bedside table and picked up the envelope, which he showed to Kaz.

Kaz took it from him and studied it. He pulled the letter out. "This is Eric's handwriting?"

"Definitely. I've known him for six years. We met at the counseling center. He's only a year older than I am and we were the two youngest guys there so we became friends."

Kaz's hand landed gently on Damien's arm and Damien let the other man usher him over to the bed. "Sit down and talk to me, please."

Obediently, Damien sank down on the edge of the bed, which put him at eye level with Kaz's groin. Kaz was still naked yet seemed oblivious to his bare state.

Silently Damien held up Kaz's clothes.

Kaz paused and gave him a small grin. "Thanks." He took the clothes and set them aside. "Go ahead. I can listen while I get dressed."

Damien watched Kaz pick up his briefs and start stepping into them. Kaz's beefy thigh muscle flexed with the movement.

Kaz pulled the white briefs the rest of the way on and peered into Damien's eyes. "Damien?"

Damien blinked. "Sorry. I was...captured."

Kaz grinned again then went for his jeans. "Please go on. About Eric, I mean."

Damien shrugged. He hadn't spoken to anyone else about his relationship with Eric. "There's not a lot to tell, really. After we started to be friends, we basically became joined at the hip. We understood each other, or at least it felt that way for a long time. You know what I mean? We...supported each other."

Kaz had slipped on his jeans and was pulling up the fly. That done, he sat down next to Damien, his t-shirt in his hands. "I understand. So you weren't boyfriends the whole time?"

Damien shook his head. "Hardly. We weren't *together* for long at all." He looked into Kaz's eyes. "When it came to sex, we barely did anything. We slept in the same bed most of the time, but that was really because we both had nightmares and felt safer when the other was around." He paused. "Are you sure you want to hear this part? Is it...relevant?"

Kaz sighed and his broad chest heaved. Damien glanced down. Even in the midst of these things going on, the sight of Kaz's incredible physique captured him. "In a murder investigation, *everything* is relevant," Kaz said. "And if the guy I spoke to is the same guy, it'll matter."

"All right." Speaking about it made him remember that feeling of weirdness he used to get with his friend. "Mostly we just hung out together, the way friends do. We went to movies, on walks, kept each other company. The only thing different about us was at night...the hard part for both of us...Eric didn't go home. He stayed with me. That's when it got strange. You'd think two gay guys sleeping in the same bed, we'd be at each other all the time. Not that I didn't want to do anything. I did. It was innocent really. Just giving each other hand jobs, some kissing. I always had the feeling Eric was doing it to humor me because he was afraid that if he didn't, I wouldn't want to be friends with him."

A wave of intense sadness passed through him. Even though he'd made a point of not running away from past memories, Eric's story was especially painful. "Of course I always reassured him I'd never stop being his friend. He insisted he knew that but deep down I don't think he ever believed me."

"Is that why you're not together?"

Damien's heart gave a small jump. "I don't know. One day he told me I was too good for sex. That sex is dirty, something for lowlives and he wouldn't touch me anymore. It was kind of freaky but I know his story so I understood. That's why I just went along with whatever he wanted."

Kaz's expression remained softer. "Can you tell me what did happen to him, to make him that way?"

Damien winced. Eric's story still had that effect on him after all this time. "His parents are wealthy. They have a big beautiful house out in Newton and used to throw parties on the weekends...orgies, really. They used to make Eric...have sex with their guests. Whoever wanted him could have him."

Kaz's face darkened. "That's fucking sick."

Damien's shoulders sagged. Just thinking about it sapped the life from him. "Tell me about it."

"What the hell is wrong with people?"

"I don't know. The poor guy has never been able to come out of it. He never could hold a job or stay in school. Then, about eight months ago, he said he was going to California. Maybe if he got far away from here, he'd be able to do something with his life. He's been doing better, holding a job, making friends. I thought. But now you're saying he's here." Damien stood up, his heart pumping. "I want to go see him. To see if it's really him."

Kaz picked up the bedside phone and dialed a number. A few seconds later, he punched in some numbers and hung up the phone. "You're not going down there."

Damien's blood chilled again. "What?"

"I'm sorry, Damien. If this is the same man, it means he lied to me about knowing you and that he lied to you about where he's been the last few months. We don't know if he's dangerous."

"Eric's *not* dangerous. And anyway, what about the letter?" He shook it in the air.

"He could have prewritten the letter, mailed it to someone in California in a separate envelope and then had that person mail the letter to you."

That drained feeling took over Damien again and he sank down onto the bed, the letter in his lap. "Why would he go to such trouble? Why wouldn't he tell me he's here?"

"Good questions. We need to find out." Damien's phone rang. Kaz picked it up. "Scot? This is Kaz." He said a moment later, "Are you still there?"

Damien watched Kaz, heart racing. "Kaz?"

Kaz held up a hand, quieting him. "Okay. Listen, you need to bring him in to Central for further questioning. Officially detain him for obstructing a murder investigation. He lied to me and Wallace today. I'll see you down there." He clicked off and shoved the phone in his pocket. "We're bringing him in," Kaz said. "You'll come with me and identify him."

A spike of anger shot through him. "Please don't order me around. You're arresting someone who's been a friend to me."

Kaz stilled, his t-shirt halfway over his broad torso. He tugged it the rest of the way down and pinned Damien with a look. "Such a good friend he's been lying to you for months."

Damien stood and faced him. A moment passed before he realized he was gripping the paper so hard it was crumpling. He loosened his hold and set it down on the bed. This sucked.

"And we're not arresting him, Damien. We don't have sufficient evidence to make an arrest. However, as I said, he's impeded a murder investigation." The larger man sighed. His wide hands went to his hips. "Look, I'm sorry I got bossy with you. This can't be easy for you."

"No, it's not, Kaz." His heart ached in his chest as if a fist squeezed it. He got up and went to put his clothes on. Kaz was waiting for him by the bedroom door. "Kaz, please, just be careful with him, okay? He's messed up, severely dysfunctional in some ways, but he's not a bad person. And he's *not* a killer. I'd stake my life on that."

Something passed through Kaz's eyes, feelings that Damien couldn't quite identify but made the larger man's rugged face appear much softer. Kaz's large hand cupped his cheek. The touch made warmth pass through Damien's body, draining a bit of the tension in his back. "Let's go," he said softly.

* * * * *

Damien rode with Kaz to the station. It was nighttime now, hard to believe, not even twenty-four hours after Kaz had rescued him from Lance Nielsen. It had always been unsettling to him how quickly things could change.

Kaz led him inside and up a set of stairs. Damien kept his hands in his pockets, shivering now even though he wore a light jacket. As much as he'd missed Eric and

would like to see him, he so didn't want the man they'd brought in for questioning to be Eric. Eric should be in California, having a better life.

Kaz put his hand on the doorknob of a closed room. The door had a glass window but the blinds behind it was drawn, blocking Damien's view into the room. "You ready, Damien?"

Slowly he nodded. If his throat got any tighter, he was sure he'd choke. "Go ahead."

Kaz opened the door and stood aside, gesturing him in.

Damien paused one more moment and braced himself. One more step gave him a partial view of a man seated in a chair by a large table. The man's head was down but the hair color was definitely Eric's.

The man looked up. His eyes widened.

Damien's heart lurched. "Eric?"

Eric shot up from his seat. "Damien!" He stood, looking bewildered. Damien had often seen that look on his friend's face.

Damien's upset melted. He'd never been able to be angry with Eric. He just knew too much about him and could only go to him and pull him into an embrace. "Hey, Eric. I've missed you."

He felt Eric stiffen in his arms even though Eric's hands grasped at his shirt in the back. "Don't hate me, Damien. Please. I beg you."

Damien squeezed him tighter. "I could never hate you," he said softly. "I'm just so glad to see you."

At that, Eric's body relaxed and he returned the hug. Eric's fingers clutched at his jacket and Damien could practically feel Eric's racing heartbeat through their clothes. "They didn't tell me you were coming. I'm sorry, Damien. I'm sorry I lied."

Damien squeezed Eric closer. Really, Eric had so often made him feel as if he were the parent and Eric the child. Eric needed so badly to feel loved and accepted. Gently he

pulled back and squeezed Eric's shoulders. "It's all right." He picked up Eric's hand and held it firmly. That's when he became aware of Kaz.

Until now Kaz had hung in the background, observing, Damien noticed, obviously doing his best to be careful as Damien had asked him earlier on the way to the station. When Kaz came forward, Eric's eyes lit with recognition. "You're the cop who came to ask me questions," he said. "You're working with those other guys? The ones who sat in my station all evening?"

"Yes. When you were reluctant to tell me and my partner your last name earlier today, we put a watch on you. This is a murder investigation, you know."

Eric turned to Damien, looking wildly frightened. "Damien, I didn't kill anyone, I swear! Please tell him!"

Damien looked at Kaz. "Kaz. He's telling the truth. I know it."

Kaz motioned for him to get Eric to sit down, which he did, then Kaz took a seat at the table. "Eric, we need you to tell us the truth now. Why did you lie to me about Damien? When I first questioned you, you acted as if you didn't know who he was."

Eric's face almost twisted and Damien could see the life-or-death panic in his eyes. "Please, Eric, tell him. Is it related to why you didn't tell me you'd come back from California?"

"Yes." Eric's shoulders hunched. "But it doesn't have anything to do with a murder. I swear on my life!" He whipped his gaze up to Damien. "It only has to do with you and not getting you angry at me. If I tell you, you'll get angry."

Damien squeezed Eric's hand. "I promise I won't get angry with you. When have I ever been angry at you? In six years, have we even fought once?"

Eric paused, as if the thought had never occurred to him. Slowly he gave a weak smile. "No."

"Well then, what happened? I thought things were going really well for you there. That's what it sounded like in your letters."

Eric looked down and heaved a deep breath. "I *was* doing better for a while, but then, I don't know, it just changed. I couldn't concentrate anymore. I..." His lower lip started trembling.

"You what?" Damien prompted as gently as he could, though dread filled his chest like an icy claw. He hated the little doubt that seeped into him, like a poisonous fume. Could Eric really be capable of murder?

"I...broke our pact."

"What pact?" Kaz interjected.

Eric looked at him, though he avoided eye contact. "Damien and I made a pact years ago that no matter how bad either of us felt, we wouldn't use drugs. Damien's always honored it. And I did too...until about five months ago. I started using cocaine. Then I lost my job. I got kicked out of the place I was staying. I didn't have anywhere to go. And I missed you, Damien. I wanted to be near you again, but I was too ashamed to show my face to you. I was sure you'd hate me for breaking our pact."

"Oh, Eric." Damien reached out and smoothed a hand over Eric's hair, as if he were a little kid. "When will you trust me? I could never hate you."

Eric turned sorrowful eyes on him. "I've been trying to get myself together again so I could tell you I was here without having to tell you what a damn loser I've been. And then this happened." Suddenly his eyes went to Damien's cheek. "Damien, how did you get that bruise?"

"Lance Nielsen attacked me." He gestured toward Kaz. "This man saved me from him."

"Oh my God, Damien! The way that Nielsen guy was talking about you, as if you two were hot and heavy. It sounded like you were happy." Eric's face crumpled and he reached up, tentatively brushing two fingertips on Damien's cheek underneath the bruise. "I'm so sorry." He looked up at Kaz. "Damien is the best person in the whole world, Detective," he said.

Damien met Kaz's gaze for a moment and the look on the other man's face rocked him to his toes.

"I can believe that," Kaz said.

Damien cleared his throat and turned his attention onto Eric. "Where have you been staying, Eric?"

Eric looked sheepish. "Sometimes at a friend's house in Arlington. Mostly in my car."

"Where's your car now?" Kaz asked.

Damien turned. "Kaz? Why do you need to know where his car is?"

"I'm getting a warrant so I can search it."

Eric's hand tightened on Damien's.

The icy fingers of dread scratched at Damien's chest again. "Is that really necessary?"

"I'm afraid so."

Kaz was still quaking inside from the jealousy raking through him. He hadn't been prepared for that response while observing Damien and Eric together. Even though Damien's behavior gave no indication of romantic feelings for the other man, it was obvious the two cared deeply for each other. Also, the withering look Damien was giving him now made him feel as if someone had stuffed live worms down his gullet. He sighed. "I'm sorry, Damien." He peered past Damien at Eric who sat, still hunched-shouldered, looking like a whipped dog. "I'm sorry to you too, Eric."

Eric looked at him, wide-eyed. "It's all right. I can't imagine there's anything in there to incriminate me. All I have is my laundry, some CDs and a toothbrush." He turned back to Damien. "Sandy, a girl at work, lets me use her shower and even crash on her couch some nights," he said.

Kaz put a hand on Damien's arm, grateful when Damien didn't pull away. "If you want, you can wait here with Eric. Just hang out, and as long as there's nothing in the car to be concerned about, I'll let him leave."

Damien gazed up at him. The withering look drained from his green eyes, replaced by something softer and Kaz felt that invisible something between them flare again.

"All right," Damien said softly. "I'll stay here with him, of course."

Kaz squelched the impulse to lean down and kiss Damien's lips. Had it really been less than an hour ago they'd woken up in bed together? "Thanks."

He left a uniformed officer to keep an eye on them, went downstairs and made his way to the restaurant to look at Eric's car.

The car was a dark blue Chevy Impala, not much to speak of, the paint dinged and dented. Kaz remembered something Alan Levitz had said about Eric being absentminded. Certainly the outer condition of Eric's car bore that observation out.

As did the interior. There was a typical dirty-car smell with a worn-out deodorizer in the shape of a pine tree dangling from the rearview mirror. The seats were battered and ripped in places and Eric's belongings were strewn everywhere, like the filthy bedroom of a sloppy adolescent. A far cry from Damien's fastidiously kept house. Strange how the two men were such close friends, yet one had thrived in the face of what had been done to him while the other couldn't seem to keep his head above water.

Wearing rubber surgical gloves, Kaz began his search in the backseat. True to Eric's word, there wasn't anything there but dirty laundry stuffed into plastic bags. Kaz rifled through the bags then pushed a hand into the crevice of the seats. Nothing. There wasn't anything on the floor, under the front seats or the back floor mats. The map-holding pouches behind the front seats were also stuffed with nothing but meaningless flyers Eric had taken off his windshield and simply stuffed back there instead of throwing them away. Kaz backed out, closed the door and moved to the front.

Shining his flashlight on the front seat area, Kaz froze. There, on the passenger seat floor, was an empty glass vial. Kaz picked it up and deposited it into a plastic bag for

the lab. The rest of his search produced nothing else except empty candy wrappers and a half-drunk plastic bottle of soda.

He went to the nearest pay-phone and dialed the night sergeant's line. "Sergeant," he said when Sergeant Hope picked up, "It's Kaz."

"Detective. You have that 'I found something' sound in your voice."

"I certainly do. That warrant you got me to search the car turned up a strange glass vial, perhaps something that could hold poison. I'm going to bring it over to District Four myself but I was hoping you could call ahead and push it through. This trail is too hot to let it wait until tomorrow." Unfortunately Kaz didn't have any personal favors to call in or particularly helpful connections, but he could only hope that the BPD's goal of improving its conviction record over the next few years would give the sergeant some pull down at the crime and latent fingerprint labs, both in the same building. Both of which he desperately needed right now.

"I'll certainly call immediately. We'll have someone fingerprint Eric Smith in the meantime. They'll need to go down to District Four as well for comparison."

"Thanks, Sergeant. I'm on my way this second. Oh, Sergeant?"

"Yes?"

Kaz's gut lurched at what he was about to ask. "Could you request that the man with him, Damien Royce, voluntarily give his fingerprints? We need to eliminate him from the suspect list."

"Will do, Detective."

With a sigh, Kaz hung up the phone and returned to the car. He closed the car door and stood back to take a last sweeping look of the car's exterior. The passenger side window was about a third of the way down. Kaz snapped a couple of photographs and made his notes. He had a uniformed officer drive him to District Four where he delivered the vial himself to the one of the techs in the crime lab.

Kaz rode back to Central. On the way, his stomach tightened almost painfully. What would Damien's response be, having one of the detectives come in and fingerprint him and Eric? All he could do was hope that performing his job in this case wouldn't ruin what seemed to be a really good thing with Damien.

All the way up, tension pulled in Kaz's back. He could only hope that Damien would exercise the same forgiveness with him he'd given Eric for deceiving him.

There wasn't any more time to reflect on it. The interrogation room loomed ahead. The uniformed officer keeping watch outside the door stood aside for him and he went in. His heart thumped.

Damien and Eric sat, leaning in toward each other, their heads bent together as if in a private huddle. Eric was laughing at something Damien must have said to him. The intimacy between the two men practically infused the air.

The sight was like a fist in his gut. Kaz coughed from the impact.

Damien straightened in his chair. "Kaz, can you let Eric go now?"

"I'm afraid not yet."

Damien's brow furrowed. "Why not?"

"Because I found something on the passenger side floor of the car." He looked at Eric. "A glass vial. I've sent it to the lab for analysis. I should have the results as soon as they can develop them."

Eric looked stricken. "I don't have any glass vials in my car. I swear."

Kaz got a glance of Damien squeezing Eric's hand. Suddenly it felt as if Damien were standing on the edge of a cliff and Kaz was falling...plummeting away from him with absolutely no way to get back.

While waiting for the prints, Kaz returned to Eric's car, making a slow, meticulous round of the outside. No other prints but Eric's were found anywhere else on the car.

He came to a stop on the passenger side and stared at the partially open window. Perhaps the vial had been dropped through the window. If so, then whoever had done that would not have needed to touch the car.

He went back upstairs to the interrogation room. This time, Damien and Eric were sitting quietly, as if waiting for awful results of a medical test and were unable to engage even in light banter. They both straightened when he walked in, their eyes pinned to him.

"Detective Kazaminsky?" A female voice commanded his attention from the doorway.

It was one of the uniforms. She held a piece of paper in one hand. "I have your results here from District Four."

Kaz started to go out but Damien's voice called him back. He turned.

The other man stood up, his green eyes pinning Kaz. "Don't leave, Kaz. Tell us." Though he was standing now, Eric's hand never left his grip.

"All right." The sensation of an iron weight pressing down his chest nearly took Kaz's breath away. But he retrieved the papers the officer held out to him and read it. Relief poured through him. "You're clear, Eric. The glass vial has turned out to have contained the substance that killed Lance Nielsen, but it's not your fingerprints on them." He looked at Damien. "Or yours. However, it's best if you stay in town in case we need to question you further."

Eric's face broke out into a relieved grin and his eyes misted over. "I will. Thank you."

Damien too looked jubilant and gave Eric a big hug. "I knew it." He looked up, beaming. "Thank you, Kaz."

"No problem. I'm sorry you both had to go through this. Just one thing."

Eric froze. "Yes?"

"Did you leave your passenger side window open while you were working?"

Eric made a strange huff. "Yes. I always forget to close it. I'm really absentminded." He started to walk out again.

But Kaz whirled around, his heart suddenly pumping. "What did you say?"

Eric froze again and turned. His expression was full of fear, as if Kaz might arrest him for making such a declaration about himself. "I'm absentminded?"

Kaz stared at him. He felt as if an invisible door opened, letting light pour into his mind. Unlike that kind of revelation that showed him something about himself, this kind of understanding was more like the pieces of a puzzle flying into place, creating a path in front of him. "That's it. Eric, you need to tell me *everything* that happened yesterday evening when you waited on Lance Nielsen and the men he was with."

That deer-in-the-headlights look came over Eric's face again. "I told you everything I remembered when you questioned me this afternoon. I didn't hide anything. Well, except for the thing about knowing Damien."

Kaz glanced at Damien but Damien was looking at Eric.

"Kaz means he needs you to tell him things you *didn't* remember. Right, Kaz?"

Kaz exchanged a look with Damien. "That's right. Something that might seem insignificant but is really important. For example, did you make any mistakes when you served them their meals?"

Eric appeared to reflect. Then his face lit up. "Actually, yes, I did make a mistake. I accidentally mixed up their dinners. I served Lance Nielsen his boyfriend's dinner and vice versa. The boyfriend started pouring salt over it and then realized it was the wrong one. He brought it to my attention and I corrected it. I needed to handle the plates with a towel because they're so hot."

Kaz exchanged another look with Damien. "I've got to go," he said after a couple of seconds trapped in Damien's understanding gaze. "I guess Eric can drive you home when he gets his car." No doubt, Damien and Eric had a lot of catching up to do. A whole past life that had nothing to do with Kaz.

Damien's brow furrowed. "See you later."

"Bye." Kaz left the two men standing in the room and reported to Sergeant Detective Hope. There wasn't time to type up Eric's statement now.

Hope gathered the other detectives in his office so Kaz could debrief them. Kaz stood in front of their chairs as he told them of the latest developments. He could practically hear the criticism in their heads and knew that a couple of them called him "the bloodhound" behind his back, but they listened respectfully.

"Even though the murder weapon was found in Eric Smith's car," Kaz went on, "I found the passenger-side window open enough that someone passing the car could have tossed the empty vial in there, perhaps in an effort to frame Eric since he'd been the one waiting on Lance Nielsen, Egin and Levitz. Egin and Levitz are placed at the scene where the poison was put into Nielsen's food. The time of victim's death occurred approximately two and a half hours later, the time needed for the poison to take effect in his system."

Kaz paused and swept his gaze across the solemn faces. "Both Egin and Levitz had motive and opportunity. Eric Smith witnessed Nielsen and Egin arguing on more than one occasion in which Egin was upset and Nielsen would get up and leave. Levitz seems to have strong feelings for Egin and hated Nielsen. Both men have motives that would constitute a crime of passion."

"Kaz," Scot cut in, "the evidence is still largely circumstantial. The poison could have come from anywhere. Nielsen could have had other enemies, someone who may have wanted to frame Egin simply because of the friction between them. We don't know enough. The hit just came in the wee hours this morning."

Kaz nodded. "You're absolutely right. But I still say there's probable cause here and we have enough to arrest them and get fingerprints."

"I think you're jumping," Detective Miller, a paunchy man in his mid-fifties, said. "I've been on Homicide for over twenty years and I say you can't just arrest these guys on this flimsy evidence."

"I'm going to authorize it." Sergeant Hope's voice broke the tense pause between Kaz and Miller.

Kaz looked up at him. "Sir? You agree with me?"

The sergeant nodded. "We can't overlook the fact that the kid was asked to switch the plates. And then hours later, the victim dies of T3 poisoning and a vial containing traces of T3 are found in the waiter's car outside the restaurant? And Smith's fingerprints aren't on the vial? And neither is the other suspect Damien Royce, who also had motive and opportunity." He nodded again. "I rarely see a trail this hot. We need to jump on it. We're looking at a very possible crime of passion." He pointed to Scot and Miller. "You two will accompany Kaz to Egin's residence and make an unwarranted arrest on probable."

"Yes, Sergeant," Scot said as he and Miller rose from their seats.

Chapter Eight

Damien watched the door long after Kaz left the room. He squelched the urge to run after Kaz and exact a promise from him that Kaz would come to his house later. Now was certainly not the time to bother the man, yet something about the way he'd said "bye" had a ring of finality to it, as if Kaz didn't want to see him after this.

The mere thought made Damien's breath come in short little rasps. For the first time since he'd seen Eric tonight, his friend's distress took a backseat to his own feelings.

"Are you all right?"

Eric's voice pulled his attention. He turned to see Eric watching him, concerned. His heart squeezed. Eric seemed incapable of concern for others except for a moment here and there. In the months of Eric's absence, Damien had grown to see that it had really been the best thing that the two of them weren't involved in a romantic relationship. That would have been nothing but problems and not even the enjoyment of sex to temper it all. Eric's face came into focus through Damien's panic over Kaz. Finally he nodded. "I'm all right." Slowly he sat back down next to Eric.

"Damien," Eric said after a few quiet moments, "thank you for staying with me. And for not hating me. I'm really sorry."

Damien turned and studied Eric's face. The other man's light blue eyes looked truly sorrowful. "You're welcome. And don't worry, I understand."

Eric sighed. "You always understand, Damien. You're the best friend a person could ever hope for."

"Thanks," he said, hearing the hollowness in his voice. Kaz's exit was still haunting him, making it hard to give himself fully to their conversation, as much as he wanted to.

"How long have you and that detective been together?"

Damien stared. He'd taken it for granted that Eric never noticed anything beyond his own personal body and concerns. "How'd you know?"

Eric offered a sideways grin. For the first time almost since Damien had known him, the other man's eyes glinted with mischief. "The way you two look at each other. It's...sweet."

Damien's cheeks burned. "Only a day if you can believe it."

"Wow, love at first sight kind of thing, then. Like in your poetry books."

Damien smiled. "Yeah, I guess so."

"You always wanted to believe that could happen. And it did. I'm happy for you."

"Thanks, Eric."

"And he's hot. Looks like a real stud."

Damien laughed even as a pleasant shiver of remembrance passed through his body. "Yeah. He is." Not that it mattered. Damien sobered. Something was definitely wrong. Then it hit him. Maybe Kaz was jealous. Perhaps he'd misinterpreted Eric's and his interactions. That would certainly be dumb, especially for a detective. Didn't Kaz see how emotionally crippled Eric was? He was like a damaged child. Eric didn't need a partner, he needed a full-time parent-therapist kind of person. "But I think he believes you and I...you know."

Eric shook his head. "He doesn't need to worry about that. Even if I were going to stay around, you and I are just friends. Really good friends."

Damien sat up straighter. "Where are you going? I thought you'd come stay with me and keep working at that restaurant."

Sadness filled Eric's eyes. "I'd just be in the way, Damien. You and the detective need space. And privacy. And I'm a hard case. I'm not in denial about that." He paused and took a deep breath. "Mimi has invited me repeatedly to go and live with her. When this all blows over, I'll go there."

Damien blinked. Eric was full of surprises, as always. "Oh well, that's good."

Mimi was an older woman with a small farm in upstate New York. Eric had stumbled onto her property when staying at a nearby resort with his parents as a kid. Mimi had befriended him and he'd kept her a secret from his parents for fear they'd imprison him and never let him see her. "She's really sweet."

Eric nodded. "Yeah. I love her. Remember that summer when you and I went there?"

"That was great." For two weeks during Damien's summer break from undergraduate studies, he'd learned to milk goats, pick herbs and vegetables and make homemade bread. They'd also gone swimming in the pond by her house. It had been one of the best times Damien ever had. "I was sorry when I had to leave."

He felt the tension drain partway from his upper body, knowing Eric would be safe and happy there. He reached out and covered Eric's hand. "But you don't have to. That's a good place for you." And Mimi treated Eric the way he should have been treated at home, with love and not molestation. Damien had always sensed that Eric was in love with Mimi but just didn't know it. Yet. As long as Eric could bring himself to accept real love, to live the life that was true to his heart and not run away, he had a chance to heal.

"It is." His voice sounded hopeful yet also sad. "You'll come and visit me there, won't you?"

"Of course."

"You can bring the detective too. Mimi won't mind. She loves you and she loves guests."

"Okay," he said, feeling suddenly very blue. "I'd like that." If he and Kaz were together after tonight.

* * * * *

Kaz knocked on the door to Tom Egin's house. Scot and Miller stood with him while several other patrol officers waited on the street as backup. There was just as

good a chance that Egin would resist him as anything else. No one answered. He knocked again and called out the man's name.

Finally a light went on in the upstairs window. After another minute or so, Kaz could hear the deadbolt in the front door sliding back as well as a chain. Then the front stoop light went on over Kaz's head and the door opened.

Alan Levitz stood there in a pair of boxer shorts and an open bathrobe, as if to communicate what he'd been doing until interrupted. His face lit with recognition, though also with caution. "Detective Kazaminsky. It's kind of late. What can I do for you?"

"We're here to arrest you, Alan Levitz, and Tom Egin on suspicion for the murder of Lance Nielsen." He proceeded to read Levitz his rights while Miller signaled to the patrol officers behind him and went into the house with them to repeat the process with Tom Egin.

Scot had the handcuffs on Levitz and Miller and the patrol officers appeared, leading Egin who wore a bathrobe.

"At least let us get our damn shoes," Levitz said.

"Of course." He motioned the officers to accommodate them and then led them both into the waiting cruiser.

Down in Central, each man was put into a separate interrogation room. Kaz went into Levitz's room with Scot first while Miller questioned Egin in the other room. He set up the tape recorder and gave the preliminaries before turning his attention to Levitz.

Levitz looked at him, his face lightly shadowed by stubble. "What's the meaning of this, Kazaminsky? On what basis are you arresting us? What proof could you possibly have?"

"An empty vial showing traces of T3, the substance that killed Lance Nielsen, was found outside Nick's Steakhouse."

"Then arrest Eric! He must have put the stuff into Lance's food and then kept the thing in his car. I told you he's absentminded."

"Yes, you did make sure to tell me that, Levitz. Except that first, I didn't say that the vial was found in Eric's car. You did."

Levitz looked down.

"Moreover," Kaz went on, "there are two sets of fingerprints on the vial, neither of which match Eric's. There's no need to worry if your fingerprints don't match. You'll be free to go."

"It was a natural assumption Eric did it. After all, he's the one who has control over the food before it got to us. And he could have had someone else put the poison in it."

"Except that Eric had no conceivable motive to kill Nielsen." Kaz suppressed a shudder. That wouldn't have been completely true but for the evidence. Had the fingerprints on the vial been his, his motive could have been to protect Damien from Nielsen or to keep Nielsen away from Damien in the future.

"This is ridiculous but...all right." Levitz's voice had a quaver to it.

Kaz had Levitz fingerprinted while Miller did the same with Egin in the next room. Then the detectives left each man to stew while the prints were sent down to District Four. The results would probably take at least an hour, so Kaz waited on the other side of the glass window, observing the two suspects along with his colleagues.

He sighed. A sudden image rose in his mind of walking into his office and finding Damien there, waiting for him. Fat chance of that now. No doubt he'd gone home with Eric and the two of them were cozily getting reacquainted. In spite of the fact the two men didn't seem romantically drawn to each other, there was obviously *something* between them the way Damien had held Eric's hand and comforted him, the way their heads had been bowed together and they'd been laughing, as if absorbed into a private world only they knew about. Oh well. At least he'd had the immense pleasure of making love to a guy as incredibly hot and beautiful as Damien, with the kind of looks

one saw in porn flicks, total fantasy material. And Damien had seemed pretty hot for him in return.

Ignoring the sudden ache in his chest, Kaz put his attention back on the two men. As if they were in the same room, they both looked down, as if avoiding eye contact with anything but the tops of their thighs.

Finally an officer came by with the printouts. Kaz looked at them before passing them to Scot and Miller. "Positive," he said. "Both sets on the vial match these two guys."

"Shit, Kaz," Scot said. "Maybe you really are a bloodhound."

Kaz raked a hand through his hair. For once, Scot wasn't vibing him with that jealous undercurrent. "All we need to do now is find out which one is the actual killer. Let's start with Levitz." He opened the door to Levitz's room and went in ahead of the other two. The three of them took seats on the opposite side of the table and Kaz pressed the play button on the recorder. "So," he said after speaking the preliminaries into the tape, "it turns out your fingerprints are both on the empty vial. The only question remains, which one of you is a murderer and which one of you is an accessory to murder."

"I did it." Levitz's voice cracked though he spoke with determination. "Tommy saw the vial in my hand and asked me what it was. When I...told him, he took it and tossed it through an open window of a car. We didn't know it was Eric's car."

Kaz remained silent. He studied Levitz's face. Anguish showed on the man's thin features. He seemed to really love Egin. Enough to go to prison for a murder Egin committed. For a few seconds he drummed the fingertips of one hand on the table. "Are you sure that's your story? Perhaps Egin is confessing right now and you'll be in the clear."

"If he does confess, he's lying. I already confessed. What do I sign?"

"You don't sign anything," Kaz said. "I don't believe you'd knowingly make Egin an accessory to murder, Levitz. You're not the one who killed Lance Nielsen. Your friend did."

"That's not true! Tommy's innocent. How could I be making him an accessory? He didn't know." Levitz was working hard to maintain a determined glare.

"Both of you touched that vial, Levitz," Kaz said.

"Come on, Levitz," Scot interjected. "Tell us what really happened. You already told Detective Kazaminsky the truth earlier today. You wouldn't have killed Nielsen because Egin loved him and to have hurt Nielsen would have hurt Egin and you love Egin."

"So much, in fact," Kaz went on, like a tag team with Scot, "that you were willing to face the wrath of George Nielsen—a violent man who might easily have wrung your neck—to keep Egin from having to deal with him." Kaz leaned over, pinning Levitz with a look. "What I think really happened was that absentminded Eric reversed Nielsen's and Egin's dinners when he served them. You saw Egin empty the vial of T3 into the food and then have Eric switch the plates back. After Nielsen left, you made sure to take the empty vial from Egin and dump it into Eric's car, hoping to frame him if it came to that."

"That's crazy," Levitz said. "How would I know which car was Eric's?"

"Eric had been waiting on you three for a few months. You were probably familiar enough with him to know which car was his. Besides, when I first brought you into this room, you stated that the murder weapon had been in Eric's car, even when no one here told you that was the case."

Kaz rose and turned off the tape recorder. "We'll see what your friend has to say." He led Scot and Miller into the second room and they all sat down. He turned on that tape recorder, said the preliminaries and looked at Egin, who continued to remain silent. "Your friend in the other room just confessed to murder, Egin. Don't you have anything to say?"

"Not without my lawyer here."

Kaz sat back. He was now obligated to wait for Egin to have counsel before pushing at him. But really, it didn't matter now. The rest of the truth would come out. Including the fact Levitz had really lousy taste in men. "Fine," Kaz said, "you can wait for him or her in our accommodations." He switched off the tape recorder. There was enough recorded to put Levitz and Egin into the hands of the legal system now. He nodded at Scot and Miller. They left the room and he turned to them. "It's over for us," he said. "I'm going to write up my report."

"Hey, Mr. Bloodhound," Scot said, "you're off-duty. Leave the work to the rest of us."

Kaz grinned and shook their hands. "Thanks for not hating me."

Scot clapped his shoulder. "Go get some rest."

Kaz went downstairs to the front entrance of Central. Nearing the door, he halted.

The last person he expected to see was sitting there. Damien had been nodding off, head back, but now turned sleepy green eyes up at Kaz. When their eyes met, Damien sat up, as if given a jolt of electricity. "Kaz." He stood and took a step toward Kaz then stopped, like a frightened deer presented suddenly with the presence of a human being in its habitat.

Kaz's heartbeat rose. "Hey, Damien." He too took a step forward then stopped. The sight of Damien was like an elixir for his fired-up nerves, yet all the stuff hanging in the air between them prevented him from doing what he wanted. Rushing over and grabbing the man up in an embrace. "I thought you'd left." He raked one hand through his short hair. "I figured Eric gave you a ride home."

Damien shook his head. "Eric left."

"Left? Where the hell did he go?"

Damien still hung back in his spot, a sense of wariness emanating from him. "Well, for the moment, back to his friend's place. Because you asked him to stick around. But

when all this is over, he's leaving town. He has a friend with a small farm in New York State. He's known her since he was twelve. He's always been happy there. Hopefully he'll stay."

Kaz let this revelation sift through his consciousness, which still crackled with the energy of the arrest. The high-octane weekend was making it difficult to know exactly what was real and what was fantasy. "Oh. Okay."

"Truthfully, I think Eric's been in love with her for a while now. He's just so mixed up he hasn't realized it yet."

Still a bit dazed, Kaz watched Damien, waiting for his brain to tell him whether Damien was particularly broken up about this development. That would definitely determine his own course with Damien. In the seconds that followed, however, it didn't become clear.

"So, Kaz, what happened?"

Kaz blinked. Was this exhaustion overtaking him or just his emotions rushing him and then beating the crap out of him? "I...I..." Then he realized what Damien meant. "Oh, you mean the case?"

"Of course."

Kaz sighed and shoved his fingers through his hair again. "Egin did it. Levitz saw him, took the murder weapon from him and tossed it into Eric's car."

"Wow."

Kaz grinned. "I had a little extra help in this case. The whole thing with Eric kind of gave the entire situation a shove. That doesn't usually happen."

Damien stared at him a moment. "Oh. I see. Well, some good came of our association then."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Damien's face fell. He released a sharp breath. "I'm sorry. That's just me getting snippy because I'm tired and want to know what's going on with...you...and me. But you're busy now."

Kaz sighed. "I'm not busy, actually. I'm off-duty." He glanced at his watch. Nearly one in the morning. "Well, for the next four hours, at least. And I kind of wondered the same thing about you."

Damien's expression brightened a bit. "I think you have the wrong idea about me and Eric. Or at least about how I feel."

Kaz's heart gave a small flip. "You two seemed...close."

"We *are* close. He's been a dear friend to me when I needed one so badly. I felt safe enough with him to make an attempt at having a normal love life. But that doesn't mean he and I are each other's...destiny." Damien said the last word in a suggestive way and Kaz felt a small jolt through his middle. After all, Damien had waited here all this time for him to finish this case. How easily he could have left, with or without Eric, but he hadn't.

Kaz cleared his throat, a movement without which he'd be unable to speak at all. "Are you saying I'm your destiny?" The question popped out before he could think about it.

Damien lowered his gaze and his cheeks got that charming blush in them. "I think so," he said softly.

Like pressure let out of a valve, Kaz grinned. Maybe this was what it felt like to have the sky open up and pour good fortune down on a guy. "Well, that's good to hear."

Damien smiled, that dazzling curve of his lips that also reached into his green eyes. "I guess you can give me a ride home."

Kaz's heart flipped over. "I guess so. Plenty of cabs running at this hour."

* * * * *

Kaz paid the cab driver and got out, closing the door behind Damien. That damn lump was back in his throat and his stomach felt pulled tight, like thick elastic, making it difficult to eat. He'd never quite experienced anything like it before and could only chalk it up to falling in love. It was a high in itself and he felt as if he didn't need food at all. He needed only Damien.

On the sidewalk in front of Damien's house, Kaz turned to him. Damien stood there, also looking up at Kaz. Kaz grinned though his stomach now flopped around like a landed fish. "Why do I feel like a teenager out on a date?" he asked softly.

Damien looked up, seemingly shy, but he didn't speak.

The light from the street lamp cast Damien's face in shadows but gave enough illumination to see his expression. Which rocked Kaz to his toes. That protective feeling Damien gave him now surged again. In spite of Damien's inner strength, something about him was so damn...vulnerable. Why it bothered him in this moment he wasn't sure. All he knew was he didn't want to see Damien hurt again.

"Kaz, is something the matter?"

Damien sounded worried and the question made Kaz suddenly understand what was bothering him. "Damien, I don't mean any offense by this question, but...well...are you sure that Eric is really going where he said he's going?" There, that's what it was. If Eric lied to Damien again, Kaz felt he'd hunt the guy down and rough him up to his own satisfaction. Damien had been hurt enough.

A silence followed in which Kaz sensed the other man's surprise, but then Damien stood up straighter, staring at him. "Why, Detective, you're protecting me, aren't you?"

Kaz grinned. "Well, yeah. I don't want to see you hurt again."

Damien's hand landed on his arm. "Thank you."

A thrill tingled up Kaz's arm where Damien's fingers rested. He was about to lean forward and kiss Damien when Damien spoke again.

"I already thought of that. Eric promised me he'd really go to Mimi's, said he'd call me when he gets there and said he'd put Mimi on the phone to verify. He also promised that when I called him in the future, I could call Mimi at home and he'd be there." He looked down. "I hope Eric finds happiness there," he added softly.

There was sadness in the tone, a tinge that made a curl of jealousy wind its way through Kaz's middle. "You feel rejected, don't you?"

Damien's gaze whipped to his. "No...I-I mean, I'm sorry I wasn't able to help him." He shrugged. "It was nothing personal, I guess. It would explain a lot." His fingers tightened on Kaz's arm. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to go there. It's stupid. Seeing him just brought up all these old feelings. I don't mean romantic feelings for him, I swear. Just all the emotions, the inadequacy, the sadness I always felt." He looked at Kaz again. "You asked before why you felt like a teenager on a date?"

"Yeah." Kaz stared at him, captured by Damien's beauty but also alert. Conversations with Damien never went the way they would with anyone else. He was incredibly interesting. Intelligent. *Alive*.

"I think it was because you were tuned in to how I was feeling. I was seventeen when Eric and I met each other. I was back in that place. And...this is no offense to Eric, but back then, if I'd met a guy like you, I'd have thought you completely out of my reach. A dream I could never have."

Kaz reached out and cupped Damien's cheek. His fingertips slipped into Damien's hair while his thumb caressed the man's perfectly sculpted cheekbone. "That's how I felt about you, seeing you up there, dancing," he said. "Like you were some unreachable god. Yet here you are, one of the most human people I've ever met." It sounded like a strange thing to say but felt true. And Damien's response made him glad he'd said it.

"So are you, Kaz." He leaned closer.

Damien's breath caressed Kaz's lips. Kaz's nerve endings, already fired up, crackled as if jolted with electricity. Maybe it wasn't possible he could know Damien was the one after so short a time, but that was how it felt.

He slipped his other arm around Damien and pulled the slimmer man against him, close enough so their chests pressed together. He swore he could feel Damien's heart beating. He splayed his hand against Damien's upper back. Damien's sleek muscles answered his touch, even through Damien's clothing. He nuzzled Damien's cheek, holding back enough not to seem like a hungry beast. He wanted to savor Damien, make him feel so appreciated he'd never feel used or inadequate again. "You are a wanted man, Damien," he said softly against Damien's skin.

Damien let out a breath. The fingers of one hand slipped into Kaz's hair. "I'm wanted by the cops?" he said, humor in his voice.

Kaz nipped delicately at Damien's jaw. "By one cop."

Damien laughed softly. "In that case, I'd like to turn myself in as soon as possible." He took Kaz's hand and led him up the front walk.

Kaz followed. His raging hard-on made movement difficult, but the promise of relief motivated him.

As soon as Damien got the door open and they'd slipped out of their shoes, Kaz tugged him inside. He closed the door and pulled Damien over to the sofa.

"Kaz, don't you want to go upst—"

Kaz's lips over his cut off the question. Eyes closed, he cradled Damien's back in both hands, drinking him in through their kiss. The warm, moist cave of Damien's mouth softened almost immediately. Damien sighed and sagged against him, his hands on either side of Kaz's waist, under his jacket.

Damien tasted so damn good. His lips, his tongue, the light scrape of stubble whenever their chins rubbed together. Kaz allowed himself to ease Damien's jacket off, down his arms to the floor so he could rub his hands over the man's sleek back muscles. Even through Damien's shirt, his skin was warm, smooth, delicious. Everything good.

Damien's hands slid up Kaz's front. The rub of Damien's fingertips over both nipples at once sent another jolt through him, a sensation as emotional as it was physical. It happened again. And again, deep within the heat between them, in every slide of Damien's hands over his chest, in each surge of their tongues together. Rightness. Completeness. Kaz now remembered Reynolds telling him that about when he met his wife Lucy. He'd just known she was for him. Kaz had been skeptical then.

He wasn't now.

Damien pulled from their kiss, panting. His hands scrabbled at Kaz's belt. "We don't have to go upstairs. You're right. It's just as comfortable here." His voice was a fevered whisper, accompanying the frantic way he pulled Kaz's belt open then the button and fly of his jeans. Damien's fingers brushed the head of Kaz's cock on the way down and Kaz pulled back from grabbing Damien and throwing him down underneath him like a caveman. Instead, he pulled off his jacket, gun holster and t-shirt.

Just as Damien got Kaz's pants and briefs down, he was dropping to his knees.

Before Kaz could grasp Damien's arms and lay him down, Damien's hands closed over Kaz's hips and moist warmth invaded his cock.

Kaz sucked in a breath, his head tilting back. Damien's mouth was like a perfect glove, hot, wet, swallowing the length of his cock until his brain felt like it would melt. He rested one hand on Damien's head, careful not to grab his hair and pull or to pump his hips too hard. Damien's hands slid to Kaz's ass cheeks and squeezed. Damien's sucking got faster, slicker as his mouth wet the hard shaft in hungry strokes.

"Damien," he said. Damien's sucking had weakened him so his voice was a mere hoarse whisper. He managed to pull back enough so his cock slid from between Damien's lips. He needed to be inside Damien. As soon as possible.

Damien looked up at him, eyes large and wild, his lips glistening.

Before Damien could ask the question in his eyes, Kaz lifted him and laid him on his back. He knelt down and undid Damien's pants. "Get these off, please."

Damien obeyed, quickly stripping off his shirt then slipping the pants down along with the bikinis he seemed to favor. He got the clothing off from around his ankles and tossed it all aside. His face was tilted upward and he reached out, anticipating the glorious moment when their naked bodies would meet.

Kaz lowered himself down then stopped, hovering a few inches above Damien. Their eyes met. Kaz's heart flipped over. No words could describe what passed between them. Something deep. Something he'd never believed existed, but knew without a doubt was there, between them.

He lowered himself the rest of the way down, covering Damien. Their cocks rubbed together, sending more jolts, the sensation as emotional now as it was physical. Then their chests, this time naked, muscles rubbing together, the softness of Damien's chest hair teasing Kaz's nipples.

Then their lips. Damien accepted his kiss in that sweet surrendering way he had. But now Kaz tasted so much more in the slide of their lips together. Kaz felt Damien giving everything in the hot yet sweet dance of his tongue against Kaz's, in the way his fingers clutched at Kaz's back, the way one leg hooked around Kaz's hip, the other leg crushed into the sofa cushions.

Kaz smoothed back Damien's hair as he kissed him. He nipped and sucked playfully at Damien's lips while rubbing their cocks together in tiny, teasing strokes. An invisible place inside him, the one that knew deep things about himself, about life, felt Damien's joyful realization of what he'd wanted from the poetry and literature he'd been studying. No longer words on paper, Damien was finding the passion that created such beauty.

That understanding made Kaz want to give Damien all the pleasure he possibly could. He pulled away from their kiss, still looking down into Damien's face, still giving small thrusts of his hips. "This all right, Damien?" he whispered, forcing his mind to concentrate. He wanted to make it last.

Damien smiled and answered with a squeeze on Kaz's ass cheek. It seemed to be one of Damien's playful ways of communicating.

Kaz grinned. "I'll take that as a yes." He slid his hand from Damien's hair and teased light circles over Damien's chest.

Damien pulled in a small breath. His eyelids fluttered and his fingers tightened on Kaz's ass. "That's nice," he breathed.

The appreciative words inspired Kaz. He slowed the stroking and lingered over Damien's right nipple, which he circled in tiny rubs. It tightened immediately and Damien panted, arching his chest. "Wow, I like that."

"Good, 'cause I'm going to give you all you can stand." Kaz rubbed his cock against Damien's, just enough to keep them both hard and then continued his teasing trail over his lover's chest. He raked several fingertips through Damien's soft chest hair to the other nipple, giving it the same, teasing, rubbing attention. Instead of words, Kaz felt Damien's cock surge against his and Damien stretched his free leg wider open.

Kaz understood the invitation. It jolted him straight down into his balls. Well, he was happy to oblige. "Damien, I don't have any slippery stuff down here."

Damien's lips widened into a devilish grin. His green eyes, though glazed over now with need, also sparkled. "Don't worry. I do. While you were out earlier today, I put some within reach. See that box?" He pointed to the coffee table. On top of it was an attractive wicker box, the kind of thing that looked imported from the Orient. "Open it. What we need is in there."

Kaz reached over, lifted the lid and reached in. His fingers closed around a small foil packet. He grinned. "Perfect." He ripped it open and rolled the condom on.

"There's more." Damien handed him a small tube. He flipped open the cap.

"You do it, Damien." He took Damien's hand, palm up, and squeezed a generous dollop onto Damien's fingers then tossed the tube aside. He leaned over, giving Damien access to his cock.

Damien's mischievous grin remained. "Okay, Detective. Whatever you say." He reached down and palmed Kaz's cock.

Kaz pulled in a breath. Pleasure radiated the entire length, down into his balls with each slide of Damien's slick hand.

In careful circles Damien coated the entire hard length and the head before reaching down and smoothing the rest over his own hole. Then he lay back again. His smile faded and that sweet look infused his eyes again. The look made it so clear how important this was to him. "I'm ready, Kaz."

Kaz's heart fluttered. He settled between Damien's legs again and smoothed the other man's hair back. He dipped down for a kiss, rubbing their lips together in a way he hoped showed Damien the emotions swirling inside him. Some things were too big for words, it seemed. Like making love to Damien.

Reaching down, he pushed a finger gently inside Damien's ass. Damien hitched a small breath and Kaz paused, but the dusky look on Damien's flushed face gave no sign of anything but enjoyment. He pushed in farther and made circles, stretching him open.

"Ohhh, that's good." Damien's head tilted back and his hands rested on Kaz's hips.

That and the feeling of Damien's heel resting on his ass now were so erotic, Kaz's thoughts whipped away. He withdrew his finger and pushed the head of his oiled cock into Damien's hole. "Ready, Damien?"

"Yes!"

Kaz gave a small push. Then another. Tiny nudges that penetrated the ring of muscle.

Damien let out a panting breath with each push and his hands pulled on Kaz's hips, silently begging Kaz to fill him.

Kaz pushed harder. Then again. Pleasure shimmered up his cock, made a fire in his balls and stomach. Damien's body relaxed suddenly around Kaz's cock. He slid again

and their bodies met. Kaz dipped down again and claimed Damien's mouth in a hot, wild kiss.

Slowly, with a will of its own, his body moved against Damien's. He pulled back, sliding out just enough then thrust in again. Then again. Each slide stretched Damien's ass a bit more and Damien's body began its rhythm against his.

Kaz lifted from their kiss, staring down into Damien's eyes. Damien was gazing back up at him, his lips parted, eyes glazed but still affectionate. The feelings seemed to pass back and forth between them like a ball of heat within their bodies.

A ripple of sheer bliss passed through Kaz. He couldn't tell if it was in his physical body or something made of emotions, but it felt as if he were melting into Damien yet still apart from him. Their bodies seemed to be giving and taking from each other at the same time, their breathing syncopated.

Kaz thrust faster. His sheer instincts, now connected to the man underneath him, seemed to know exactly what to do. Kaz could feel Damien's cock sandwiched between their torsos, getting rubbed in the most perfect way each time their bodies slid together.

If such a thing as magic existed? This was *it*.

The pressure was building inside. He wasn't going to last much longer. He slowed a bit, drawing it out, trying to make it last, at least until Damien came.

But Damien wouldn't let him. He clutched Kaz's ass cheeks with both hands and pulled him close, squeezing his ass muscles around Kaz's cock. That pulled a sharp breath from Kaz. His resolve melted and he could only brace himself as best he could on the sofa cushions and ride Damien harder, the way his lover seemed to crave.

Damien threw his head back. "Yes! Yes!" His voice was a fevered chant. He thrust his hips against Kaz's. One heated rub followed the next and Damien cried out. His cum splashed between them while his fingers dug into Kaz's butt cheeks.

Wow. Sweat poured over Kaz's body while Damien's cum coated his chest. Damien was panting but his hands loosened their clutching hold a bit. Damien lay back,

smiling, his body wilted open. He looked completely satiated, like a well-fed cat. "Don't stop, Kaz," he whispered, and squeezed his ass muscles.

Kaz lost his mind. He loved seeing Damien's cum spurt out and coat his perfect skin. Drops of it clung in Damien's chest hairs. That did it. Several more hard thrusts and he came. Wave after wave plundered his lower body. Damien was squeezing him too, as if milking him to the bone.

Then he collapsed on top of him and Damien's arms closed around him.

Damien sighed. One of his hands slipped into Kaz's damp hair, caressing, then moved down his neck, to his back. "Thank you, Kaz."

Kaz turned his head and pressed a kiss into Damien's cheek. The heavy scent of sex permeated the air around them. He wouldn't have it any other way. "You don't need to thank me, Damien. I'm the lucky one."

"I wasn't thanking you just for...the sex." Damien sounded shy again. "I'm grateful to feel...safe. Because you want me to feel that way. I sense it."

Kaz lifted up onto one hand and peered into Damien's face. "Yes, I do."

Damien grinned. "Good. Because I have a bunch of fantasies I'm hoping you'll help me live out."

Kaz stared at him. His heart beat a bit fast now and not just from the sex. "I'd like that. I just hope it doesn't involve any other guys."

Damien frowned. "Of course not. I'm all yours, Detective. Just handcuffs. You are a cop, after all. I want to make the most of it."

Kaz lifted his eyebrows and nodded. From the first moment he'd seen Damien up on that stage, he knew he'd do anything for the guy. Well, except for sharing Damien with anyone else. Apparently, though, he didn't have to worry about that.

"Oh and it involves whipped cream and substances made of chocolate." Damien was grinning now.

This was going to be an interesting relationship. "I'll tell you what, tomorrow when I get off-duty, I'll bring over a pair of handcuffs." He reached over and fished his pager from his pants pocket and set it on the table then put his arms around Damien who sank on top of him. "Unfortunately this thing might go off again in a few hours."

"Okay." Damien kissed his cheek.

"Wait, Damien, I mean it. You saw how this past day was. *Lots* of my days are like that. Are you going to want to deal with that?" Kaz's heart sped up.

Damien smiled and kissed him again. "I don't know, Detective. It's a bit soon to tell. Why don't you ask me again in, say, twenty years?"

Kaz raised his eyebrows. "Twenty years? And where will you be all that time?"

Damien settled into his arms and brushed a hand across Kaz's chest. "I don't know. You'll have to keep a close eye on me to find out."

About the Author

Award-winning, multi-published author of erotic romance, Sedonia Guillone spends her days writing deliciously naughty romances—when she's not cuddling with the man she loves or watching kung fu and samurai films and eating chocolate.

Sedonia welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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