



Reincarnation

CHRISTIANE FRANCE

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...“Anything in mind for later?” Reno asked after the waiter had taken their orders and departed. “Another bar or a club maybe?”

“Sure, whatever.” Lee knew Reno was respecting his stated wish to take their time, and he appreciated the other man’s sensitivity. He’d never cared for the mindless, get-it-anywhere-you-can, mechanical, another-notch-on-the-bedpost type of sex that some people thought gay men liked. He’d known guys who actually preferred it that way, but it wasn’t for him. He liked his loving to have a little emotion and a lot of magic and that was the real reason why he never closed his eyes and jumped. If it meant losing out the odd time, it was no big deal.

But no way do I intend to lose out this time.

Lee gave a small sigh of satisfaction that he’d finally met someone who also liked to stop and smell the flowers. Except his lifetime habit of being careful was becoming more difficult to remember with each passing second. He could so easily have taken up Reno’s offer back at the bar to see if a room was available. The thought of Reno’s hands touching and caressing his ass, then his dick...

He reined in his thoughts and gazed at his new friend through half-closed eyes, taking in his short, dark hair, and the sexy trace of five o’clock shadow. The dude had good looks to spare—dark, intelligent eyes that held more than a hint of heat, high cheekbones and a wide mouth with sensuous lips Lee just knew could take him to paradise and beyond. Instinct told him their feelings had been mutual—right from the moment he’d caught sight of Reno standing by the bar with that come-and-get-me look in his eyes. The silent message was sent and received the instant their gazes locked, making the actual words unnecessary...

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REINCARNATION
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For Roy and The Boys.

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After spending the day in the air-conditioned comfort of his office at the Neapolitan Hotel, Lee Stanger stepped into the blazing heat of early-evening Las Vegas and mentally cursed the fact his car had chosen what he guessed to be one of the hottest days in the year to give him trouble. Whether it was plain bad luck or divine retribution for some forgotten misdeed, he had no idea. He'd figured it was nothing more than a small glitch in the fuel line. But then the mechanic had shaken his head like a doctor delivering bad news, said it took time to fix fuel line problems and he wouldn't have the vehicle ready until sometime tomorrow soonest. And no, sorry, they couldn't help him with a loaner because they were fresh out.

Lee thought about grabbing a cab rather than walk, only to

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change his mind when he saw the long lineup outside the main entrance and realized he'd have a fifteen-minute wait, minimum. Taking off his tie, he shoved it in the pocket of his pants as he crossed the street. Hot was an understatement. Even this late in the day, the temperature was well over a hundred degrees and the occasional blast of cold air from the open doors of some of the casinos didn't offer much relief. It was also the start of the weekend, and the sidewalks, as well as every restaurant, bar and other business establishment, were jammed with tourists. As Lee neared the end of the block, he hesitated, tempted to forget his plans for the evening and head home to his apartment, where he could take a long dip in the pool, and then later, call out for pizza or Chinese.

However, after a couple of unusually stressful days dealing with two of the most obnoxious, demanding jerks he'd met since moving to Vegas, he needed to kick back and forget about business for a few hours. He didn't like losing out on a deal, and if he went home, instead of relaxing, he knew he'd sit around and beat himself up, trying to figure out where he'd gone wrong, instead of accepting the fact that, no matter how hard he tried, he would never win them all.

With his shirt already sticking to his back, and his mouth full of dust from the non-stop construction that was as much Vegas as the slot machines, he stepped through the next open casino door he came to for a moment's respite from the heat. In comparison to the cut and thrust of business New York style, Lee's new job as a project manager for the renovation division of the Trenton Corporation was the job of his dreams. But no job was perfect, and he knew the law of averages decreed that every once in a while, people like the Winkevski brothers were bound to come along—

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clients who seemed hell bent from the word go on driving him crazy by changing their minds every two minutes.

First, they'd wanted to buy the small downtown hotel in "as is" condition and take care of the renovations themselves. Then they'd taken another look, figured the kind of image they wanted to project required expert attention, so could Trenton do it with their personal designer's input?

By noon today, they'd decided it would be best if they left Trenton to do the renovations the way Trenton had planned prior to their offer to buy the place "as is". But before Lee could rewrite the contract for about the tenth time, the younger brother had called little more than an hour later to say they were no longer interested in buying the hotel because they'd found a better deal elsewhere. The man had then just hung up. No goodbye, no thanks for Lee's efforts in trying to please them, and not even one single word of apology for having wasted Lee's time.

Shoving the Winkevski brothers and everything to do with his job out of his mind, Lee took a bill from his wallet and sat down at the first twenty-five-cent machine he came to. Inserting his money in the appropriate slot, he pushed the "max" button, then waited while the reels spun and eventually came to a stop with a single cherry on the pay line. His prize was four credits, so he continued hitting the button, smiling to himself as the machine went through the usual performance of a few small hits and a whole lot of heart-stopping near misses.

He was down to his last three credits and had just hit the button for the final time when another guy strolled along the row and sat down at the next machine. Catching a fast glimpse of gelled hair, sequined tee, ripped jeans, black nail polish and exaggerated eye and face makeup, Lee cringed inwardly...until he remembered this

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particular casino had recently begun featuring celebrity lookalike dealers at the poker tables.

“Any luck?” The stranger accompanied his words with a raised eyebrow, a little provocative lip-licking, and the kind of deliberately appraising look that would, in Lee’s opinion, have been more at home around a bus station or a public toilet than a world-famous casino on the Vegas Strip.

Lee gave him a non-committal shrug. He had no idea who the dude was supposed to represent, but he had the whole “promiscuous gay boy on the prowl” act down letter perfect. Then again, maybe that’s exactly who he was—an enterprising gay boy using the situation to hook up. This, after all, was Vegas. The greatest show on earth when it came to smoke and mirrors, and Lee had been in Vegas long enough to have given up trying to figure out what was real and what was merely illusion.

Returning his attention to the machine, Lee watched the reels spin, then gradually slow, but as he started to leave, they settled down to reveal a row of three identical bars and a prize of twenty credits. Hoping the fact he’d won all his money back was a good omen for the evening ahead, he cashed out and made for the exit.

Flexing his shoulders to loosen the muscles, he continued along the Strip until he came to the intersection of Flamingo where he turned left. A couple of blocks later, he turned right and then left again. The street he was on now was quiet, with a twenty-four hour market on one corner and a vacant lot on the other. According to the directions he’d been given, the place he was looking for was supposed to be somewhere around the middle of the next block.

During the short time he’d lived in Vegas, Lee had checked out all the gay bars along Paradise Road in the area known as the Fruit Loop, as well as a few others located in various places around the

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town, but he still hadn't found what he was looking for. He wanted somewhere he could feel comfortable—the kind of low-key place he'd known back in New York that had a semi-regular clientele. Somewhere he could either relax and find a little company if he was in the mood, or be left alone to enjoy a quiet drink if he wasn't.

A blackjack dealer he'd become friendly with at the Neapolitan had suggested Lee check out Tarly's Saloon Bar. He'd said it was just a tiny hole-in-the-wall kind of place, with none of the touristy feeling of the bars in the Loop, or the phony glitz and glamour of the new one just opened on the Strip. The customers were mostly regulars—there was occasionally the odd straight guy but it was mostly gay men who lived or worked in the area. And, since the owner doubled as the bartender, Lee had been told he could count on a relatively quiet and friendly atmosphere.

From the description, Lee had expected to find a rundown shop front in the middle of an equally rundown strip mall. Instead, the address he'd been given turned out to be a small adobe brick building that had recently been repainted in a soft, sandy-beige, if the strong smell of paint was anything to go by. The black entrance door was banded with rustic iron strips and fitted with a grilled peephole, and looked strong enough to withstand an invading army. To one side of the door, above a black outline drawing of a row of Saguaro cacti was the word TARLY'S, in hot pink neon letters.

A cautionary "Wet Paint" sign was affixed to the wall, and Lee checked to make sure the door was dry before he pushed it open and went in. It was bigger than he'd expected, but it was cool, relatively quiet and dimly lighted. Everything about the place gave Lee the comfortable, relaxed feeling of a neighborhood bar he'd

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once gone to in his hometown. That feeling was intensified by the smells of chili, popcorn and draft beer with country music playing softly in the background.

He glanced around the immediate area. Several men were sitting at the dark, polished wood bar with its old-fashioned brass foot rail, behind which the bartender was busy washing glasses, and most of the half-dozen or so tables were occupied. Some of the customers were engaged in conversation, while others concentrated on their drinks. The only person who even glanced in Lee's direction as he sat on one of the barstools was a tall, more than averagely handsome, dark-haired guy about his own age, standing a few feet away.

As their eyes met, the room and its occupants disappeared, and Lee felt the familiar rush of instant and mutual interest that never failed to excite him. Need and want flooded his mind, and he ran his tongue over suddenly dry lips. But then some idiot turned up the music and as the noise intruded into his consciousness, the moment faded as if it had never happened in the first place.

The dude moved restlessly, shot Lee a casual smile and said, "Looks like you could use a cold one, bro."

Lee sucked in a breath. That wasn't all he could use. The guy gave *physical need* a whole new meaning. Dressed in well-fitting designer jeans and a super fancy and clearly expensive western shirt, the other man was a couple of inches taller than Lee, and his perfectly honed body gave testament to the benefits of regular exercise. Holding an almost empty beer glass in his left hand, the thumb of his right hand was hooked in the belt loop of his jeans.

"You can say that again. It's damn hot out there." Another lookalike, Lee wondered, or was this the Rhinestone Cowboy in person?

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Returning the smile, Lee signaled the bartender. The stranger had an aura of relaxed friendliness about him rather than the pushy promiscuity a lot of gay men exhibited, still he was clearly on the prowl—whether for business or merely a little company, Lee couldn't quite decide. There was something else about him, though, and Lee knew it was more than the brief flash of chemistry that had given him an instant hard-on the moment their gazes locked. Something familiar he couldn't quite put a finger on...like they'd known one another in a past life if he believed in that kind of shit. The obvious answer was he'd seen him somewhere around town. Vegas wasn't that big, so maybe he had. Except he'd only been living here for a few months, and anything that recent, he would be able to remember.

If he could just put a name to the face...but he couldn't, and that was weird. He'd always been good with names. He rubbed his eyes. The lighting in the bar wasn't the greatest, so there was a chance he could be confusing the guy with someone else, although he hadn't a clue as to who it might be. Either that or the Winkevskis had him so stressed out his mind had started playing tricks. He gave the man another quick glance. It wasn't so much the guy's face as it was an overall impression. Something about him was so familiar Lee knew damn well they'd crossed paths at some point in the past. It could have been while he was living in New York, or perhaps even before that.

"This is the desert, so it's hot like this for a good part of the year," the man said.

"Yeah. So, I've heard."

Just then, the bartender came over—a mountain of flesh dressed in leather pants and a leather vest, with a shaved head and a surprisingly cherubic smile for his customers. "And what can I

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get for you fellas?”

After ordering a light beer for himself, Lee turned to the stranger. “Can I get you something?”

“Another draft would be good. Thanks.”

Leaving his spot at the end of the bar, the man sat down on an adjacent stool. Lee got a faint whiff of his fragrance, smells that stirred both his blood and his imagination—an intoxicating mixture of male sweat, the musky scent of sex, and what he recognized as a not-your-average-run-of-the-mill aftershave that he’d noticed once before on someone and liked.

“Haven’t seen you in here before. You in Vegas on vacation?” the stranger asked.

“No. I live here now.” The scent reminded Lee of violets and spring rain, and he tried to remember the first time he’d smelled it. He knew it was way back in the past, so long ago he’d forgotten all about it until now...probably back in the days when he’d been into spending most of every paycheck on trendy clothes and the latest in men’s toiletries. He vaguely recalled trying to describe the scent to a clerk in a local department store and after a little thought on the clerk’s part, being told it was both expensive and exclusive and available only in high-class men’s boutiques in the bigger cities such as New York and L.A.

“You work here at one of the casinos?”

“The company I worked for in New York has an office down here,” Lee replied.

“And you felt like a change of scenery?”

“Something like that,” Lee admitted. “Two bad winters in a row, and all I could think about was finding someplace warm. So, when I heard about a position opening up in the Vegas office, I decided to apply.” It wasn’t the real reason he’d left New York, but

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he wasn't about to tell a stranger his longtime lover had dumped him in favor of a newer, younger model. He'd been hurt, but not devastated. Whatever they'd once had together had faded over time, and in many ways the break-up had been more of a relief than anything else. "How about you?"

"The usual story. I came for what was supposed to be a few days of vacation, met a guy who offered me a job, and ended up by staying. I've been living here now for a little over a year."

"You like it?"

"Love it."

Their drinks arrived, and Lee paid for them before picking up his glass. The dry, desert air had made him thirsty and he took a long swallow. Putting his glass down on the bar, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and said, "My name's Lee. What's yours?"

The man hesitated for a second before saying, "Reno."

Lee smiled. Everyone he'd met since coming to Vegas was from somewhere else, so he figured this guy was no different. "That's your name, or is that the last town you were in before you came to Vegas?"

"It's my name, I swear." Reno laughed, clearly appreciating the sly humor in Lee's remark, but as he lifted the glass to his wide, sexy mouth, another surge of the same sexual attraction Lee had experienced for the man earlier caught him unawares.

He hadn't felt this kind of instant, pulse-racing, heart-pounding connection to anyone in a very long time. *Not since*— If he was completely honest, he couldn't remember the last time it had happened; at least, not a time when he'd experienced feelings this strong.

He knew, without having to ask, this was the kind of place

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where a quickie was as much in demand as another beer, but he warned himself to back off and just take it easy. Reno might be every bit as safe and friendly as he appeared. On the other hand, Vegas was full of charming but less-than-sterling characters looking to make a fast buck, and the last thing Lee wanted or needed was to rush into anything he might regret. He wasn't that desperate for relief.

"So...do you work in one of the casinos?" Lee asked.

"Actually, I'm currently working as a fashion consultant for the menswear shop in the Neapolitan."

"Very nice," Lee murmured. *Mystery solved!* He passed by that particular store every day on his way to work, so he knew the kind of place it was—one that dealt with high-end merchandise and undoubtedly had testers for all the more exclusive men's products, including the cologne Reno was currently wearing. "The people I work for have their offices in the Neapolitan, so I've seen the store. I haven't had a chance to check it out, though."

"Maybe you should. We have our annual summer sale starting this weekend. Drop by and see if there's anything that catches your eye."

"I'll keep it in mind." Even as a small child, Lee had always been heavily *in* to clothes, and the reason he'd never gone into the men's store at the Neapolitan was because practically every last thing they put in their windows screamed out for his attention—all the latest designer fashions with price tags that didn't exactly fit his budget. Still, if he could find something on sale, he might consider giving himself an early birthday present.

"Just don't leave it too long, though. The real bargains go fast."

"Don't worry, I won't." Lee pushed back the lock of hair that had taken to falling down over his forehead and made a mental

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note to get a haircut. Thinking about clothes reminded him that most of the things he'd worn in New York were completely unsuitable for the more casual lifestyle of the southwest and Vegas in particular. He needed to buy a couple of lighter weight suits for work—something like his first designer suit—the charcoal gray summer-weight wool his mom had bought him his last year in college.

Lee smiled in remembrance. An outfit to impress potential employers when he went on job interviews had been her excuse for the extravagance. He'd felt like a million bucks in that outfit, and whenever he'd put it on, he'd strutted around town like he owned the whole damn world.

Reno put down his glass. "Excuse me a minute. I'll be right back."

As Reno left, presumably for the washroom, Lee took another long sip of his beer. The last time he'd worn the charcoal suit was shortly before he began working for Trenton. He'd been spending a few days at home, and one night, he'd decided to check out a new gay bar that had recently opened on the outskirts of town in a flourish of media publicity. All kinds of talk and wild threats had been thrown around for weeks before the actual opening, making it clear not all the local residents were happy with a gay bar in their conservative neck of the woods. Most of the older set, people in his parents' age group, warned there would be trouble sooner or later. Lee had figured it was just talk. This was the twenty-first century and nowadays people were more accepting. In fact, everything had been fine that Friday night until the club closed around two in the morning, and he and the rest of the customers had all left...and walked straight into their absolute worst nightmare.

Lee closed his eyes momentarily and bit down so hard on his

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bottom lip he tasted blood. Even now, all these years later, the memory still had the power to make him sweat. Halfway between the bar and the parking lot in the next block where most of them had left their vehicles, they'd found themselves face-to-face with a gang of homophobes or vigilantes, or maybe they'd just been a bunch of narrow-minded citizens looking to cause trouble. Whoever they were, they'd appeared out of nowhere, screaming insults—calling them pedophiles and perverts, and wielding baseball bats.

Lee, along with the rest of the bar patrons, hadn't stopped to argue. They'd taken off in all directions like a bunch of renegade rockets on the Fourth of July. After the first awful, mind-numbing shock of the attack, Lee had been positive the men intended to kill or maim anyone they could get their hands on.

He'd still had a weight problem back then, but that night, fear had lent him wings, and he'd raced across the street with at least two of the attackers in hot pursuit, breathing down his neck and grabbing at his clothes. He'd been hit hard on one side of his head, he never figured out if it was a fist or one of the wicked-looking bats the men had all been carrying, but the blow had been powerful enough to make him trip and fall down. Once he was on the ground, they were on him like a pack of hungry dogs, viciously punching and kicking every inch of his body, to the point where he thought it was game over for sure. He'd ripped his pants and hurt his knee when he fell. He'd also banged his head on something, probably the edge of the curb, because he'd blacked out for a minute. He'd tried to get up and fight back, but then a voice had yelled, "Cops," someone had grabbed his arm, he'd panicked, and then...

A shudder ran through his body. Whatever happened after his

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rescuer arrived until he woke up in a strange bed sometime the following day was still fragmented and indistinct in his mind—a collection of blurred memories that still had the power to make him go from feeling icy cold to screaming hot in less than a heartbeat. He vaguely recalled leaving where he'd spent the night and the guy whose house it was driving him home. He also remembered his mom fussing over his injuries and his ruined clothes and calling the doctor who'd said, in addition to an impressive array of scrapes and bruises, Lee had suffered a mild concussion.

Despite the doctor's advice to the contrary, Lee had deliberately and steadfastly refused to go to the hospital for tests, or attempted to recall the exact details of what happened that night. And he didn't want to start doing it now. In fact, he'd done everything in his power to erase the terrifying incident from his mind and pretend it never happened. It had taken a while before he quit waking up in a sweat, positive it was happening all over again, but eventually he'd succeeded. The only time he thought about it now was if something stupid like thinking about his first designer suit triggered memories...memories he was always quick to suppress before they took hold.

At the time, there had been some talk of going to the cops by a couple of other guys who'd been injured, but with no independent witnesses to verify an attack had actually taken place rather than a drunken brawl amongst the club-goers themselves, there had been no point.

Lee reached again for his drink, but before his hand could make contact with the glass, everything around him disappeared and his mind filled with a series of vivid mental pictures of himself and someone who looked vaguely like a younger version of

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Reno...two male bodies hot, sweaty, and partially naked, locked together in a tangle of sheets in a room he didn't recognize. The pictures were unexpected, unsettling, all fuzzy and out of focus, and he had no idea where they'd come from, or even why. It was like a roll of bad film unwinding before his eyes, yet he had a gut feeling this wasn't his mind playing tricks or projecting possibilities for the future. This was something that had actually happened.

But where had it happened? When? And who the hell was the other guy in the bed?

"Hey, you feeling okay?" Reno asked. "You looked kind of pale and shaky there for a minute. The heat down here getting to you, maybe?"

"Or I drank my beer too fast." Lee pushed his fingers through his hair. He felt so damn shaky and off balance, he hadn't even noticed Reno was back. He was also drenched in sweat from head to foot, but he wasn't about to tell Reno it was the result of bad memories and had absolutely nothing to do with the weather. Needing to get both himself and his thoughts back on track, he shrugged and reached again for his drink. "While you were gone, I was thinking..."

Reno shot him an inquiring glance. "What about?"

"I may be totally off base here, but I have this weird feeling we may have met somewhere before."

* * *

"You think?" Lee was good looking and sexy with the kind of hard-muscled body that spurred Reno's imagination and made his mouth water. He'd wanted the dude from the instant he walked

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through the door. Nevertheless, the confident feeling he'd had a moment ago about the two of them hooking up now vanished in a surge of panic—the first Reno had felt in a very long time. He didn't want to try to figure out if they had met before, he simply wanted to cut and run. However, if he gave in to panic even once...

He took a deep breath, forced himself to put mind over matter and covered up his panicky feelings with an off-hand shrug. "If we have, I don't remember. Sorry."

Reno hesitated, trying to decide if he should play it safe, make some excuse and just leave while he still had the chance. "We both work over at the Neapolitan, so perhaps you noticed me somewhere there," he added, not sure why he'd let his guard down enough to admit where he worked to a total stranger. He never ever revealed a thing about himself other than his name to anyone he met casually like this, and even then only if it became necessary.

"No. It wasn't there, and I don't believe it was anything recent. Wherever it was, I have the feeling it happened a while ago. But I'm not sure." Lee frowned. "I'm probably confusing you with someone else."

Reno started to relax a little. If they'd met somewhere before now, he couldn't remember the occasion...too many faces and too many places. And he hadn't used his real name in so long he'd almost forgotten what it was. Even if anyone was still looking for him—and no matter what people said, he was pretty sure they never gave up—he was older, more mature, plus he'd changed his image completely. He'd lost all that baby fat and worked out on a regular basis, making the chances of recognition from old photos less than zero. Provided, of course, he continued to remember his lines and stay with the script.

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"I guess anything's possible," Reno conceded. "When I was a kid, my dad's job kept us moving around like pieces on a chessboard. I probably met thousands of people, but we never got to stay anywhere for long, so they're all pretty much a blur."

"Your dad was in the military?"

"No. Itinerant construction worker best describes it, I guess. We just went wherever there was work," Reno said, keeping to the script, but still unable to stop wondering what his dad would be doing if he were still alive. Would he have continued running his own small ad agency back in Merritburg, or would he have sold out to one of the big guys by now?

Lee picked up his glass and drank some beer. "I had more than enough trouble getting my head around leaving New York and moving out here, I can't imagine being constantly on the move like that all the time. Did you like it?"

"It was okay. I liked the seeing new places and meeting new people. Must've been the gypsy in my soul. But then I got here to Vegas, and I liked it enough to want to stay for a while. You traveled any?"

"Not much. When I was a kid, I visited England one time with my parents, and I went to France for a couple of weeks with a group of kids from high school."

"Otherwise, you just stayed home?"

"Not quite. I attended college in New York. After that, I got offered a job in Manhattan and I was there until coming here. I've thought about going to a few exotic places...Hawaii, Fiji, Australia. Who knows? Maybe I'll even get around to doing it one of these days."

"And maybe just dreaming about faraway places will be enough." Reno grinned, feeling slightly better about Lee as he

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finished his beer in one long swallow. He'd never been to New York, England, or France, so it wasn't too likely they'd met before today—unless they'd met somewhere as kids. He was tempted to ask where Lee was from originally. In addition to sounding overly curious, however, there was no point. If they'd met way back then, that was *before*, and this was *after*. Anyway, Lee had to be confusing him with someone else for the simple reason Reno didn't need a mirror to know he looked like a completely different person from the one he'd been *before*.

Although... He narrowed his eyes and stared hard at Lee's profile for a moment before looking away. Yes, he was attracted to Lee, and yes, he wanted to hook up with the dude. Nevertheless, he warned himself to take it easy for the simple reason he, too, had that vague but unsettling feeling of *déjà vu*. There could be something to it—some connection to the past he'd forgotten...but more likely not. It never took much for his highly attuned sense of self-preservation to kick in and start looking for trouble where none existed. It wouldn't be the first time something like this had happened, and he doubted it would be the last.

Anyway, thinking back to the past made him feel depressed and miserable. Right now, he had other, more immediate and pleasurable things on his mind...such as the way his cock was pressing against the zipper of his jeans, and what might be the best way of finding out whether or not Lee was interested in helping him do something about it.

"Fancy another beer?" Reno inquired.

Lee nodded his agreement. "Sure. Why not?"

As Reno signaled the bartender for refills, he wondered if one of the rooms in back was free. Except there was something about Lee...something beyond the surface attraction that gave Reno the

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feeling that, with this guy he'd want a whole lot more than just a quickie in one of the back rooms. In fact, it would be great if he could invite Lee back to his place rather than rent a cheap room or find a dark corner somewhere. Lee seemed like a decent guy, but all it would take was one innocent remark, such as a thoughtless mention as to where his new friend Reno lived within the hearing of the wrong people and it would be game over.

Or would it?

Again, someone had turned up the music so loud that conversation was temporarily impossible, but it gave Reno an opportunity to slam the brakes on his racing thoughts. It was way past time he stopped scaring himself and freaking out over every little thing. His past was so long ago and far away it felt more like something that had happened in a dream, or to someone else. If the wrong people, whoever they were, did find him, he'd never be able to outwit them, and trying to convince himself he could was a complete waste of time. So was keeping himself in this constant state of red alert. All he'd accomplished by doing that was to develop an acute case of paranoia.

The one thing he knew for sure and had known since the very start—in the event his luck ran out and the past did catch up with him, any hope he had of avoiding his fate would be for naught. It would be game over before he knew what hit him. There would be no warning, no feeling of danger, nothing. Just a nameless shadow that appeared out of nowhere, did what it came for, and disappeared faster than a puff of smoke in a high wind.

And those being hard facts rather than fuzzy conjecture, Reno knew it was high time he gave himself a break and learned to lighten up. Okay, not so much he would feel comfortable telling the whole world where he kept his razor and his spare pair of jeans,

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but enough to stop continually peeking around corners and give himself the luxury of relaxing.

Thankfully, someone had the good sense to return the volume of the music to a more acceptable level. Lee said a muttered, "Thank God," and Reno shifted his position on the stool to ease the ache in his groin. Yes, he desperately wanted relief, but relief was never more than temporary, and it could wait. Just for once, instead of a quick fuck in a back room with a man he wouldn't remember for longer than it took him to zip up his pants and leave, he wanted to take his time. Maybe get to know the guy a little, and give himself a chance to savor the moment.

He picked up the fresh beer the bartender had set before him and took a quick sip. "Any plans for tonight?" he asked Lee.

Lee frowned and shook his head, giving Reno the impression he wasn't sure if he was being propositioned or merely being asked a casual question. "Not really. I felt like having a couple of drinks, and I wanted to see what this place was like."

"Hard week?"

Lee laughed. "You could say that. You?"

"They're all hard, bro. Trying to please people is never easy. I could tell you stories about some of my celebrity clients that would make you weep."

"And I could tell you a few about some of the head cases I get to deal with." Lee chuckled and took a slug of his fresh brew. "I had a couple of real winners this week." He picked up a plastic-covered menu listing various snacks. "Any idea what the food's like here?"

Reno shrugged. "As good as any other bar, I guess. I've had the burgers and the fries, and they're passable. Why? You hungry?"

"Starving. Apart from a cup of cold coffee, I've had nothing all

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day.” Lee put the menu down. “You feel like joining me?”

Reno hesitated for a brief second, but then, remembering his resolution to quit worrying about things over which he had no control and start enjoying life, he grinned, and said, “Sure, I’d like that. But...” He hesitated, knowing what he wanted to say, but caution had become a difficult habit to break. “To be honest, I’d rather have a nice juicy steak than frozen fries and a pre-cooked, warmed-over burger. What d’ya say?”

Lee frowned. “You mean leave here and find a decent restaurant that serves real food?”

Reno wanted to kick himself, hard. He should have known better than to hope for even one second. Classy guys like Lee usually came to bars like this looking to hook up—a short term distraction with no strings, not a dinner companion, and definitely not the start of a beautiful friendship or the hope of a lifetime commitment. “Unless...” He hesitated. He disliked being this direct, but sometimes life didn’t offer multiple choices. “Unless, you’re just here looking for sex.”

“I’m not.”

“Okay. I just thought I should mention they have rooms in back. And if you’re interested, I can find out if one’s free.”

“No, thanks.” Lee gave him a wry grin. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but the only thing I’m interested in right now is a couple more beers and something to eat.”

Reno wasn’t sure whether to take what Lee said as an outright no or a possible maybe. Sex was the number one reason most gay men went to bars. It was his main reason, too, if he was honest. Still, he supposed there was always someone who felt the need to be different. “You mean you’re an exception to the popular belief that all gay men think with their dicks?”

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Lee's laugh made his dark eyes sparkle and revealed a dimple in his left cheek. "What I am, is a gay man who refuses to behave the way a lot of straight people think we do."

"In other words, you don't grab the first opportunity that comes your way?"

"Nope. And perhaps not the second or the third, or even the twenty-third. I see nothing wrong with being careful. Especially in a town like Vegas where the whole world's in a party mood."

Lee snagged Reno's gaze and held on tight, and once again Reno got the distinct and disturbing notion the two of them *really* had met before. This time the feeling was even stronger, which was crazy when he knew there was absolutely no way they'd met anytime anywhere before the here and now. Unless it had happened way back in his old life, the life he'd shoved right out of his mind and deleted along with all of its memories because it had nothing to do with who and what he was now.

Nevertheless, whether he wanted to believe it or not, there was something so familiar about the barely restrained passion in Lee's penetrating, dark-eyed gaze, and the wealth of complicated feelings Lee aroused in him. It went further than wanting to hold him, to love him, and the scary but increasingly certain knowledge they'd been together before. And it had gone way beyond casual sex. There had been some kind of deep emotional investment, too—but clearly whatever it was had been so brief he'd either buried it along with the rest of his old life, or perhaps he'd just been too young to appreciate its importance until now.

"Of course, if that's all *you're* looking for..." Lee continued.

Reno shrugged. "I tend to go with the flow and let whatever happens happen, or not."

"Great. This is the one night in the week I get to have a few

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drinks and relax without having to worry about making it into work tomorrow.” Lee smiled as he reached out and touched Reno’s hand, sending a shockwave racing through Reno’s body that made him catch his breath and confirmed what he already knew—he’d wait for as long he had to wait. Forever, if need be.

“I do have to work tomorrow,” Reno admitted, “but I don’t need to be there until around nine-thirty, ten at the very latest.” He took another sip of his beer. “Is this how you like to spend your Friday nights, hanging out in bars and getting a buzz on?”

“And end the night with the bartender pouring me into a cab?” Lee chuckled and shook his head. “No way. After working all week, I just want a chance to unwind and kick back for a while.”

“Sounds pretty much what I like to do myself,” Reno said. “Have a few drinks, relax and look around to see what’s happening.”

“You got it. Add in a little music and good conversation, if they’re available. And later, if things take an interesting turn in the right direction, then hey, that’s a bonus to my mind.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Reno surprised himself by saying. It also sounded like Lee was giving him a definite *maybe*. “I haven’t had a night out like that in a while.”

If he told the truth, he hadn’t had a real night out in years—not since the good, old days when he’d had a regular life and regular friends, and Friday night had been the best night of the whole damn week. Same as Lee, he much preferred the slow and easy route rather than the quickies he made do with nowadays in the belief they were his safest bet. For him to find someone who was on his own personal wavelength here in a fast-paced town like Vegas, a place where instant gratification was the norm, was barely believable, like a dream come true. He felt a quick surge of energy,

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and a sudden interest in reviving what had morphed into becoming his less-than-exciting existence.

He didn't *have* to live like a monk or a leper. He could have some fun once in a while, provided he didn't get too overly comfortable with anyone. All he had to do was remember his lines and try to behave like any other average guy enjoying a night out. If his lucky streak quit on him and it all blew up in his face, then it blew up. Anything was better than continually holding his breath and sneaking around in the shadows.

"Any place special you like to eat?" Reno asked.

One of the best steak houses in town was also one of the closest to where they were at that moment—Jilly-Jo's over at the Neapolitan and, at Lee's suggestion, that's where they decided to go.

* * *

"The last time I ate here, I had the stuffed mushrooms," Lee said after the waiter showed them to a booth and handed them both menus.

"How were they?"

"They were—" Lee stopped speaking abruptly and concentrated on a small white scar on Reno's right forefinger. The slightly jagged mark was about an inch long and stood out in sharp relief against the other man's deeply tanned skin. The urge to reach out and touch it was almost overwhelming. He'd seen it before...touched it before. He even knew—

Reno put down his copy of the menu. "You were saying?"

"Uhh?"

"The mushrooms?"

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“Oh, right. I was just remembering how great they were. I think I’ll have them again. Plus an eight-ounce filet and a salad.”

“Sounds good.” Reno frowned. “I’ll have the rib eye, but I can’t decide whether to go with the fries or a baked potato. Which are you having?”

“Neither for me.” Lee sighed and patted his trim waistline. “I can’t. If I don’t watch my carbs and work out regularly, I’ll be back where I was a year ago, looking like one of those ads warning about the dangers of heart problems and all the other hazards of overeating.”

“I used to have a real bad weight problem myself when I was younger,” Reno said. “But I guess it was just puppy fat. Once I worked it off, it never came back.”

“Lucky you.” Lee put down the menu and pushed it aside. Oddly enough, in the weird flashback he’d gotten earlier, the Reno lookalike had been quite a bit heavier than the man sitting across from him now. Whether it had some connection to what had occurred almost eight years ago outside that club, or if it was a scrambled, distorted memory of something else, he still hadn’t been able to figure out. He’d also had a few wild adventures with friends during the time he was at college, hard-drinking weekends that were more than a little hazy, so anything was possible.

Whatever the answer, he was reasonably sure it didn’t relate to anything that had happened since he’d moved here to Las Vegas. He hadn’t been here long enough to forget anything important. On the other hand, he wasn’t about to risk digging up long-buried memories on the off chance he might be able to work it all out.

“Anything in mind for later?” Reno asked after the waiter had taken their orders and departed. “Another bar or a club maybe?”

“Sure, whatever.” Lee knew Reno was respecting his stated

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wish to take their time, and he appreciated the other man's sensitivity. He'd never cared for the mindless, get-it-anywhere-you-can, mechanical, another-notch-on-the-bedpost type of sex that some people thought gay men liked. He'd known guys who actually preferred it that way, but it wasn't for him. He liked his loving to have a little emotion and a lot of magic and that was the real reason why he never closed his eyes and jumped. If it meant losing out the odd time, it was no big deal.

But no way do I intend to lose out this time.

Lee gave a small sigh of satisfaction that he'd finally met someone who also liked to stop and smell the flowers. Except his lifetime habit of being careful was becoming more difficult to remember with each passing second. He could so easily have taken up Reno's offer back at the bar to see if a room was available. The thought of Reno's hands touching and caressing his ass, then his dick...

He reined in his thoughts and gazed at his new friend through half-closed eyes, taking in his short, dark hair, and the sexy trace of five o'clock shadow. The dude had good looks to spare—dark, intelligent eyes that held more than a hint of heat, high cheekbones and a wide mouth with sensuous lips Lee just knew could take him to paradise and beyond. Instinct told him their feelings had been mutual—right from the moment he'd caught sight of Reno standing by the bar with that come-and-get-me look in his eyes. The silent message was sent and received the instant their gazes locked, making the actual words unnecessary.

Already, Lee could imagine Reno undressing him, and could feel the touch of Reno's mouth and tongue, and the slide of his beautiful, long-fingered hands moving leisurely over his body, upping the tension while Reno concentrated on giving him the kind

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of total satisfaction he craved.

Lee swallowed a sigh. *Yeah, man.* And he wanted to give back every bit as good as what he got. He wanted Reno in a way he hadn't wanted any other man for a very long time. Not since—

They'd stayed under the shower for what had felt like hours, the hot water and the violet-scented soap soothing his battered body, while the man's clever hands kneaded and massaged away the knots and the pain with the kind of tenderness and caring and—

The waiter came back, put the bottle of wine they'd ordered on the table along with a basket of bread and managed to derail Lee's thoughts in the process. After pouring them each a glass of wine, the man turned away, and Lee tried to pick up the thread, but it was useless. Whatever track his mind had been on had disappeared with the waiter.

He took a piece of the bread and put it on his plate. The brief memory flashes were starting to bother him for the simple reason they made no sense. He didn't know if they were scrambled, disjointed fragments resurfacing from that long-ago attack in his hometown, prompted by the trip down memory lane. The doctors had told him that often happened when the victim buried a traumatic incident rather than face it head on. Or did the memories have to do with someone from his past who'd borne more than a passing resemblance to the man sitting across from him? While no one came to mind, Lee couldn't swear a Reno lookalike hadn't crossed his path at some point. Annoying as it was, this wasn't the first time Lee had seen someone he thought he recognized. Sometimes the answer came within a minute or so, and sometimes it never did.

Instead of obsessing, Lee knew he ought to just push it out of

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his mind and forget about it. He *wanted* to forget about it. If he and Reno had met before, so what? If he'd imagined it, so what, too? It made not one iota of difference to anything either way.

Except what started as a small annoyance had now become as irritating and frustrating as one of those impossible jigsaw puzzles where the pieces were pretty much all the same shape and color. He wanted to see the whole picture, no matter what it turned out to be, but each time he attempted to put a few of the pieces together, they refused to fit. Maybe what he needed to do was stop trying to force things and allow the memory to resurface by itself...or not.

Reno poured each of them a little more of the wine. "The reason I mentioned a club is because one of my clients gave me these." He put down the bottle, extracted what appeared to be a pair of tickets from his shirt pocket and tossed them on the table. "Passes to tonight's opening at the Pomegranate Experience. It's a brand new gay club. The client and his partner are the owners."

Grateful for a moment's respite from his thoughts, Lee picked up one of the passes. "I've seen this place. Except I had no idea what it was. It's not far from where I live...the next block, in fact."

"What does it look like? Big, small, what?"

"Until a few days ago, there wasn't anything to see because of all the heavy construction equipment. Now, it looks..." Lee hesitated, trying to find the right words. "It looks...interesting."

"As in classy or sleazy?"

"Definitely not sleazy." Lee gave a soft chuckle. "At least not on the outside. No flashing lights or neon signs. It's a new, one-storey building, dark exterior, no windows, and very discreet—just the name in brushed steel letters. From the outside, it could be anything—offices, a high-class restaurant, or even a private club."

"The word my client used was *exclusive*, which I took to mean

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they won't be serving draft and chili dogs."

"And they won't allow just anyone in?"

"He didn't say, but I suspect that's the plan. Everyone there tonight will be an invited guest. You wanna go?"

"Sure, why not? Sounds like fun. Although if it's *exclusive*, it's probably one of those kink clubs where you get to indulge all your fetishes and experience the joys of BDSM."

Reno's dark eyes widened slightly. "You go in for that kind of thing?"

Lee laughed. "Hell, no. I don't do pain or weird, and I don't like it rough either. Straight up and down man, that's me. You?"

"No way." Reno gave a shiver of what Lee interpreted as distaste as he picked up his wineglass and took a sip. "One of the guys I work with is always talking about stuff like that. I don't know if it's just talk or if he's really into all that master and slave submission shit, but if it's anything like what he says, I'll pass. Anyway, we don't have to worry about things like that tonight. From what Manny said, it'll be the same as any other opening night party—free drinks and the official tour."

While the new club sounded interesting, by the time they were finished with dinner, the need to be alone with Reno so he could touch and be touched was starting to crowd Lee's thoughts to the exclusion of everything else. Under cover of the table, he pressed his hand hard against his aching cock, while he tried to imagine the two of them together...in the shower, in his bed. Except he couldn't decide whether to suggest renting a room somewhere, invite Reno back to his place, or stretch out the anticipation a little while longer by going to the club opening.

Reno, it seemed, was on the same wavelength. "I'm not big on parties or hanging out with the names," he said as they left the

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restaurant. “But from the way Manny was talking, I suspect exclusive also means that after tonight you have to be an approved, paid-up member to get in. So, if we don’t check it out now, we may never get another chance. We don’t need to stay long.”

* * *

Since Lee’s car was unavailable, and Reno admitted to not owning one, they took a cab over to the Pomegranate, where the doorman looked like the twin of the black-leather-clad bartender at the place they’d met earlier in the evening. The only difference being this guy was tricked out in a deep pinkish-purple uniform, which Lee recognized as approximately the color of pomegranates, complete with a peaked cap, silver braid and silver buttons.

“Good evening, gentleman,” the man greeted them. After taking the passes Reno handed to him, he opened the black glass door for them to enter. “Enjoy your time with us.”

Inside the club, everything from a bar that ran the full length of the room, to the stools, chairs, tables, the walls, and even the carpeting was an explosion of black, white, and silver with touches of deep pink and purple. Lee looked around. The room was already half full, with more guests coming through the main door in a steady stream, and there was enough light for Lee to recognize quite a few celebrity faces. Dress was casual but clearly expensive designer labels. Some of the men were standing around in small groups, while others were sitting at either the bar or the tables. To his right was a dance floor with at least a dozen or more couples enjoying the seductive beat of an old Motown classic. The overall atmosphere of the club came across as friendly, and Lee liked the music.

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“Quite the place, huh?” Reno observed.

Everything about the club, especially the black-and-white color scheme reminded Lee of that bar in Merritburg. The one where he’d gone that awful night. The same night he’d—

Once again, the picture died and his mind went blank. He closed his eyes. A moment later, he opened them again. “Shit!” he murmured, feeling vaguely light-headed and off balance. What in hell was happening to him? Was he going crazy, or was that one night from his past, the one he’d driven from his mind and sworn never to think of again, determined to keep coming back to haunt him?

The doctors had told him repeatedly that suppressing memories of a traumatic incident was never a good idea. Chances were better than good that one day the memories would find their way out of wherever he thought he had them safely locked away and do their best to drive him crazy. They’d prescribed counseling and some form of mild hypnotherapy so he could recall exactly what happened and deal with it. However, the absolute last thing he’d wanted to do back then was remember. He’d figured remembering would make things worse not better, so he’d said thanks, but no thanks, and decided his way of dealing with it was better.

However, Lee was fast coming to the conclusion the doctors had been right, and he’d been wrong. Whether he wanted to or not, it was time to quit fighting what was clearly the inevitable and deal with the bad memories head on. Lee knew it would mean recalling every last detail of what happened that night. He also knew things were never as bad or as scary as a person’s mind made them out to be. Once he had the complete picture instead of the few disjointed bits and pieces that had resurfaced to this point, perhaps he would be able to put it all behind him and move on.

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“You sure you’re okay?” Reno asked, frowning. “You look a little...umm, shaky again.”

“I’m fine.” Lee forced a smile and made an encompassing gesture with his hand. “Just blown away by the décor.”

“You like?”

“Yeah, I like it very much. Very fifties. Very in. And it’s given me an idea.”

“You’re an interior designer?”

“Not exactly.” Realizing he’d said more than he’d intended, Lee sucked in a quick breath. The idea the place gave him had nothing to do with decorating and everything to do with recalling events he’d thought he could keep buried, but since he didn’t want to share that with Reno, he forced his mind to concentrate on the here and the now. Digging up any long-buried memories would have to wait until later when he was able to relax and let his mind run free.

“The company I work for buys up failing business operations—mostly small stuff like boutiques, bars, restaurants, even small hotels and motels, and gives them a complete retrofit. These days, image is everything. So a big part of my job as a project manager is to work with our design team and the guys who do the actual hands-on stuff to create a new look aimed at attracting a buyer, and ultimately the buyers’ customers.”

“Sounds like an interesting job.”

“It is,” Lee admitted. “Except for the odd client who wants to start changing things around, but can’t decide if he wants his people to do the work, or if he wants us do it.”

“And then ends up deciding it’s not for him after all?” Reno gave him a wry grin. “I get clients like that all the time. They want a totally new image, and they have a picture of it firmly embedded

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in their mind. Of course, what they envision is either positively Stone Age or completely unsuitable, and turning them on to what they really need is close to impossible.”

A number of blond-haired, bare-chested young men in black pants and a pinkish-purple bow tie were moving around the room with trays of drinks. One of them came over to Lee and Reno with a silver tray containing two martini glasses filled with a pale pink liquid. “A drink, gentlemen?” he inquired in a soft lisping voice.

Although the waiter looked to be about sixteen, Lee recognized the hard, been-there-done-that look in his eyes and realized he was almost certainly in his early to mid-twenties. “What is this?” Lee asked as he took one of the drinks.

“Pomegranate martini, sir. It’s vodka with a splash of pomegranate juice. Shaken, not stirred.”

“No beer?” Reno asked as he picked up the second glass.

The waiter favored him with fluttering, obviously false eyelashes and what passed for a smile. “Not tonight, sir. Tomorrow, I understand we’ll have a collection of superior European beers and ales available. But we do have soft drinks if you prefer. And if you’re interested in becoming a member, let me know and I’ll send someone over who will give you the tour.”

As the waiter moved on to the next guest, Lee took a sip of his martini. If they stayed long enough for a second drink, he’d make his a cola. He’d had vodka martinis before. They might look and taste like lemonade, but they had a nasty habit of leaving him feeling as if he’d been kicked by a mule.

“Hey, let’s grab this before someone else does,” Reno said, putting his drink down on a tiny round table at the edge of the dance floor, and sitting down in one of the padded chairs.

“Exclusive in a place likes this usually translates to high

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membership fees. Any idea what they'll be like?" Lee wondered aloud.

"Want me to ask Manny? He's just over there," Reno replied, pointing in the direction of a tall, skeletally thin, dark-haired man wearing black jeans and a black western shirt, who was talking to one of the other guests.

"No, thanks. It's not my scene."

"Mine either, if I'm honest."

Just then, Manny caught sight of Reno and waved, but then he and the guest took off in the opposite direction.

Reno sighed and shook his head. "God! I told him not to buy that outfit. Between his anorexic figure and pale complexion, I knew he'd wind up looking like a death camp survivor. But would he listen?"

The lights dimmed and the music changed to something soft and mellow. Without saying another word, Reno reached for Lee's hand and urged him onto the dance floor.

Reno was taller than Lee, and as they put their arms around one another and began moving to the music, Lee gave a small sigh of pleasure and laid his head against Reno's chest, loving his male scent mixed with the addictive and delicious fragrance of the violet aftershave. It felt so good to be slow dancing like this...something he hadn't done in ages, not even once since he'd left New York.

He wondered for a moment if he'd misinterpreted the feeling of having met Reno before. Everyone was supposed to have a soul mate, or a second half somewhere, and maybe Reno was his.

"What are you thinking?" Reno asked softly, his voice little more than a warm breath that tickled Lee's ear and made him tighten his hold.

"Right this minute?" Lee's breath caught in his throat as Reno

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cupped his ass cheeks and maneuvered his body so their cocks were pressing together. “You can’t guess?”

Reno chuckled. “Yes, but I want you to tell me.”

“Sure about that?”

“Very sure.”

Lee looked up and as their eyes met, the ache in his dick became a physical, breath-stealing pain. He wanted Reno as much as he suspected Reno wanted him, but he wanted to spin out the moment until the wanting edged up a few more notches and became outright need—until it was all he could think of, the most important thing he’d ever wanted. “I’m thinking a lot of things. I know what we both want, and I think we’ll be good together.”

Reno groaned as Lee moved a hand between their bodies and stroked Reno’s aroused cock through the fabric of his jeans.

“But for what I have in mind, I’m also thinking we’re wearing way too many clothes.”

“You want to leave?”

“Soon, okay? I’d like to finish my drink first and have maybe one more dance.”

“Sure. Whatever.” Reno bent his head and brushed his mouth against Lee’s.

The rasp of Reno’s whiskers felt sexy as hell as they grazed his face and set his nerve endings on fire. But the touch of his mouth was even better. His lips felt cool and slightly damp, and his tongue hard and hot as he used the tip to gain entry.

Although a little tentative to start, their first kiss was everything Lee had hoped for...deep and incredibly sexy, the kind of kiss that engaged every nerve and every sense he possessed and he wished it could last forever. But, to Lee’s disappointment, the kiss ended much too fast. The tempo of the music suddenly

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changed to something more upbeat, and as the lights brightened, along with a few of the other couples, they broke apart and returned to their table.

“Damn,” Reno muttered as he picked up his glass. “Just as things start to get interesting, something always comes along to spoil it all.”

Lee shrugged. “Story of my life. But there’s a cure for that.”

“Right. As in don’t get started.”

Lee didn’t much care for interruptions, and the all-too-brief kiss had left him feeling cheated and needy, desperately wanting to move things up to the next level. He’d half-expected the close embrace to trigger another memory flash, but it hadn’t, and he didn’t want to tempt Fate by wondering why. “No. As in let’s adjourn to some place where we get to control the lights and the music?”

“You have somewhere in mind?”

Lee took a small sip of his drink. It tasted warm and any kick it might have possessed was long gone. He put the glass back on the table. He thought about asking the waiter for a cola, but what he really wanted was a frosty cold brew. “My place is less than a five-minute walk from here. That’s if you’re interested.”

Reno frowned. “You wouldn’t rather go to a hotel?”

After living in New York, Lee was as cautious as the next guy about getting too friendly too fast with people he’d just met. “Why bother doing that when my place is closer? Anyway, it’s not like we’re total strangers. I still think we’ve met somewhere before.”

Reno frowned. “And I think you must be confusing me with someone else. I’ve never been to New York or any of those other places you mentioned.” Lee pushed his chair back and stood up, and Reno followed suit. “If I were you, bro, I’d just let it go. If

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we've met before, surely one of us would have remembered by now."

"I guess." Lee knew Reno was probably right. Even so, it would be nice to know the basis for his feeling of *déjà vu*. The feeling and the flashbacks might well be connected to that long ago night when he'd been attacked. They could also relate to something else—some small incident he'd either completely forgotten or no longer remembered. He'd been under a lot of stress lately. Moving from New York to Vegas and settling into a new job and a new way of life had been a huge upheaval. And the past few days dealing with the Winkevski brothers and their constant flipping back and forth had been anything but stress free. So, rather than long-buried memories trying to resurface, it could be his mind's way of telling him to relax.

* * *

Telling Lee to *just let it go* was one thing; convincing himself do the same wasn't quite so easy. While Reno was certain Lee posed no threat to his safety, as he followed Lee out of the club and onto the sidewalk, he, too, still couldn't lose the feeling the two of them had crossed paths at some point in the past. At one time, Reno had been quite the mover and shaker. He'd gone out clubbing seven nights out of seven, met a lot of people, and generally lived life as if it were his last day on earth. Even so, if he really thought about it, he knew he could probably figure it out. But, for a whole raft of reasons, trips down memory lane were a bad idea.

His current life began the day he woke up, with what he'd been told was most likely nothing more than short-term memory loss, in

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a private rehab facility in San Francisco, where he'd learned to walk again after being injured in what he'd also been told was a drive-by shooting. His name was Reno Jackson, he'd been born in Willitts, a small town in Northern California, and his mom had died giving him life. His father, who was now dead—at least that part was true—had been an itinerant construction worker. Reno had grown up all over the west coast, wherever his dad had been able to find work, and he'd never traveled farther east than Denver.

And Reno could prove every last detail because after leaving rehab, not only had he lived and worked in and around the Willitts area for over a year, he'd checked and double-checked all the appropriate agencies and records and personally made damn sure it was one hundred and one percent bullet proof. As added insurance, he'd also done everything within his power to make sure his memory loss was permanent. It felt a whole lot safer that way.

When they came to the next block, Lee pointed to the second of two almost identical-looking apartment buildings. "This is where I live if you'd like to come up. If you'd rather go somewhere else, that's fine with me."

"If you're quite sure."

Lee pushed his fingers through his hair in a gesture of what Reno took to be either frustration or impatience. "What's not to be sure about?"

"I could be anything or anyone for all you know. I could be looking for a bit of rough trade and who would know if you got hurt?"

"Okay, so you could be anything. Everything from a serial killer to a burglar or whatever." Lee laughed and punched Reno lightly on the arm. "If you are, be warned. There are security cameras everywhere, and I don't have a lot that's worth stealing."

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He raised his eyebrows inquiringly. “You don’t know anything about me either. Maybe I’m the one who’s looking for a little rough trade.”

Reno hesitated. Although Lee didn’t look the type, he knew looks couldn’t always be relied on. “You said earlier you don’t go for the rough stuff. That you like it plain and simple.”

“So did you. So...are we on? I’m willing to take a chance if you are.”

Reno grinned. “Do you have any cold beer?”

“At least a dozen cans. Maybe more.”

Reno gestured for Lee to lead the way. “In that case, what are we waiting for?”

* * *

Lee was proud of his new home. After years of sharing cramped, over-priced accommodations in New York, it was sheer heaven to have a place of his own finally. A two-bedroom, spacious, airy apartment he’d been able to decorate to suit his own personal taste and where only one lock was needed on the door instead of three or four plus a chain and a couple of heavy-duty bolts.

After switching on a couple of the lamps, he watched as Reno glanced around the cream-painted living room. First, at the two navy sofas and one easy chair, the dark oak coffee table and wall unit, then the Impressionist prints on the walls and, finally, the expensive and gorgeous off-white, patterned Chinese rug—the one thing Lee had brought with him from his New York apartment because he couldn’t stand to leave it behind.

Reno turned toward him. The smoldering heat in his dark eyes

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made Lee catch his breath and he looked away. It had been a long time since New York, and what little action he'd found here hadn't amounted to more than a few casual dates. He'd thought something good might come of his friendship with the blackjack dealer, but it had turned out to be just a casual one-nighter while the dealer and his regular partner were on the outs.

Now though... While he wasn't usually the aggressor, his mouth was dry and his dick ached for release, and if Reno didn't hurry up and do something fast... "I'll go get us that beer," he said.

Reno held up a hand. "No, hold on a second."

Lee frowned. "I thought you wanted a beer."

"I did. I do. I..." Reno grinned and took a step toward him. "The beer can wait. Come here, babe."

As Reno's strong fingers closed around his hand, urging him forward, Lee's pulse rate shot up and he almost forgot to breathe. This was what he wanted, what he'd been waiting for all evening, but now the moment was here...

Reno wrapped his arms around him, holding him close. "You're shaking. You scared? Or has it been a long time?"

"Neither. I think the anticipation is getting to me. Being here with you feels so damn good and so right. It's...I don't know."

"As if the two of us meeting in Tarly's was meant to be?"

"I guess." Reno's hands slid down Lee's back, molding their bodies together. Lee filled his lungs with Reno's scent and the intriguing smell of his damn aftershave, and gave a sigh of contentment. "I feel like I've known you forever."

Reno's hands stilled. "So, maybe we knew one another in a past life."

"You don't believe in that reincarnation shit, do you?"

"Never really thought about it."

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Lee hesitated. "What about Fate? Do you believe in that?"

"I believe whatever's meant to be will be." Taking Lee's hand in his, Reno pressed it briefly against the impressive size of his cock before unbuttoning Lee's shirt and pulling it free from his pants. "Anyway, I thought we came up here to make out, not talk."

After taking off his own shirt and jeans, Reno undid the button at the waistband of Lee's pants, lowered the zip, and pushed them down, along with his shorts, until they pooled around his ankles.

"This is how I like it," Reno murmured, the look in his half-closed eyes hot and sexy as he anchored his hands on Lee's hips and drew him forward until their rampant dicks pressed together, and they were touching all the way up from belly to chest. "Skin to skin with nothing in between to interfere," he murmured as Lee's arms encircled his body.

* * *

Reno tightened his grip on Lee's hips as he touched his tongue to Lee's skin and breathed in his scent, a provocative mixture of raw male overlaid with a faint aroma of what was either a woodsy soap or cologne, along with the remnants of the vodka martini. The ache in his groin screamed for attention, but he warned himself not to go rushing things, otherwise he was liable to burn out before he even got started...and no way did he want that to happen. He knew he was asking himself to do the impossible; he also knew it would be worth the effort. If he could just delay things for a couple of minutes, long enough to get his desire under control.

He'd almost forgotten the added thrill holding back gave to making love. The tempting and teasing that upped the tension and made it all so much more worthwhile. For years, his sexual needs

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had been restricted to quickies with strangers in back alleys, dark doorways, or convenient small rooms like those at Tarly's Bar—needs that, for his own protection and peace of mind, he'd learned to deal with expeditiously and unemotionally, rather than linger over or enjoy. But there was something about Lee that made him want to linger—something special that drew him like a magnet. Maybe it was the weird notion they'd met before that gave him this feeling of coming home, and that being here together like this was right to the point of being preordained. Or was it Lee's cautious half-smile? The one that said, *I want to but I'm not quite sure*. The same smile that was causing serious havoc with Reno's libido and was totally responsible for breaking through the protective layer of ice Reno had built around his heart.

He skimmed his tongue around the edges of Lee's mouth, loving the way Lee growled deep in his throat and snuggled his body even closer.

* * *

Lee held his breath and tried to blank his mind. He was so close to the edge, he knew if he didn't watch himself he was liable to lose control and spoil it all like an inexperienced teenager on his first date. If this was nothing more than a quick, therapeutic fuck with a nameless, faceless hook up, it wouldn't matter. But Reno was special; tonight was special. This was one time Lee intended to grab on to the moment and make it last.

He felt Reno's fingers slide down his crack and press against his hole. Then Reno's tongue invaded his mouth, teasing, exploring, and upping the tension yet another notch. He forced a hand between their bodies and grasped Reno's shaft, feeling the

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dampness of pre-cum at the tip as he stroked its hard, velvety length and imagined taking it into his mouth.

Reno suddenly pulled free and gave a soft chuckle as he took a small step back. "I think I'm about ready for that beer now. You?"

Lee laughed as he stepped out of his pants and dropped them on a chair. "Kitchen's thataway," he said, pointing to his right. "Beer's in the fridge, so just help yourself. And, while you're doing that..." He smiled and ran his tongue over his dry lips. "I'm going to grab a quick shower, if that's okay with you."

He'd give Reno sixty seconds absolute max. Lee started counting slowly backwards...fifty-nine, fifty-eight, fifty-seven...

By the time he reached twenty, Lee had adjusted the temperature of the water to the way he liked it and picked up a bottle of shower gel, then the shower door slid open and Reno stepped in.

"What kept you?" Lee asked.

"Couldn't decide whether I wanted light beer or regular," Reno replied. Reno's dark eyes were half-closed, and they looked hot, smoky, and sexy as hell as he took the gel from Lee's unresisting grasp. Putting the bottle back on the caddy, Reno wrapped his arms around Lee. For a moment, they just stood there, holding one another, and Lee closed his eyes, sucking in a breath as he felt the evidence of Reno's need pressing against his thigh. Reno smelled of sweat and sex and beer mixed in with the remnants of that god-awful pink martini. Then Reno's hands were gliding down his back to stroke and knead his ass, while his lips brushed Lee's mouth in a light, seductive assault that made Lee grow hard and shiver with excitement at the thought of what was to come. The magic lips inched farther down his neck, stopping to explore the little hollow just below Lee's right shoulder, then capturing one of Lee's

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nipples and laving it with his tongue.

As Reno straightened and he felt the tip of Reno's tongue trace the outline of his mouth, Lee reached between them and wrapped a hand around Reno's aroused shaft. He ran the pad of his thumb over the tip, smiling inwardly as Reno gave a soft groan of pleasure. Reno's cock was exactly the way he liked them, long, thick and hard as steel, and already he could imagine how it would feel when Reno parted his ass cheeks and... Or maybe it would be him parting Reno's. He was pretty well endowed himself, at least he'd never received any complaints.

Lee swallowed hard, loving the feeling as Reno's tongue plundered his mouth, and they began the slippery, sliding game of hide and go seek. As Reno continued to kiss him, he ran a finger slowly down Lee's crack. But instead of just pressing it against his hole the way he had a moment ago, he pushed inside.

When Reno added a second finger, suddenly Lee was in another shower in another place. There was a faint scent of rain washed violets and there were blue tiles on the walls...no, the tiles were a pale aquamarine. And the shower curtain was white with tiny gold seahorses and pink shells. He hurt all over, especially his head, but the man he was with was so gentle, so caring, as he stroked and caressed his body...and—

The image vanished as quickly as it had appeared, and Lee was back in his own shower, complete with its sliding glass doors and white tile. His head felt fine, and so did the rest of his body—no aches or pains, other of course than the delicious ache in his dick. Reno was still kissing him, and finger-fucking him, and he was awash in a sea of sensation he wanted to last forever.

He slipped a hand between Reno's legs and caressed his balls, feeling the shiver than ran through Reno's lean body as he gave

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them a quick squeeze.

“Where do you keep your condoms?” Reno whispered in Lee’s ear.

“There should be some in that plastic container on the counter. There’s lube there, too.”

Once the condoms were in place, Reno reached for the bottle of lube, and Lee felt a quick thrill of anticipation.

“Who gets to go first?” Reno asked hoarsely.

“You’re the guest,” Lee said as he killed the spray and turned his back to Reno.

Bending forward, Lee placed his hands flat against the tiles. He sucked in a breath as he felt Reno open his ass cheeks and slip an exploratory lube-covered finger into his hole. First one finger, then two...then a quick withdrawal, a squirt of cool lube, and—

Lee groaned with pleasure as he felt Reno’s loaded cock slide into place as easily and smoothly if they’d done it together a thousand times before. Reno withdrew, and Lee released the air from his lungs, loving the way his nerve endings thrilled to Reno’s touch. His breath hitched slightly as Reno began to move in and out and, at the same time, reached around his body to take possession of Lee’s shaft.

Once again everything around Lee disappeared, and he was in a bed in an unfamiliar room. A room with flowered wallpaper and big, old-fashioned furniture. His head still ached, but again his lover was so considerate. At first, he stroked Lee gently, but as he increased the rhythm of his thrusts, his fingers moved faster, and suddenly Lee was back home in familiar territory. It was Reno making love to him, not some nameless, faceless ghost lover from somewhere in his past.

Lee wanted to tell Reno to move it down a notch, to let him

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catch his breath and try to figure out what the fuck was happening. But from the way he was slamming into him, Lee knew Reno was past listening, just intent on sending them both higher and higher. Finally, the dam burst in a series of explosions that left Lee feeling boneless and shaky, but somehow Reno managed to keep going until he'd milked them both dry.

Reno continued to hold him, kissing his neck and his shoulders, as Lee came down from what, at least for him, had been one incredible high.

"You okay?" Reno asked.

"I guess. You?"

"Never better."

Lee tried for a smile that failed. He wasn't sure if he'd been hit with some kind of emotional overload and blacked out a couple of times and those weird, unfamiliar rooms were the result or what. He wanted to say something more. He wanted to tell Reno what had just happened between them was the greatest, but he felt shaky and unsure. Needing to do something, he turned around and, holding Reno close, he gave him a lingering kiss on the mouth. A kiss Lee hoped would tell Reno what he wasn't yet able to put into words.

As Lee released Reno and stepped out of the shower, he picked up the bottle of beer Reno had left on the counter and took a quick swig before handing it to Reno. "You hungry?"

"A bit."

Lee grabbed the bottle back and finished what was left. "Well, I'm starving. There's frozen pizza we can stick in the microwave. Or we can call out for something."

"Pizza sounds fine to me," Reno said. "Any idea what I did with my pants?"

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Lee grinned. “No, but try the living room. I think that’s where I left mine.”

After they’d warmed up the pizza and eaten that, along with a bag of tortilla chips and a jar of cheese dip, Lee opened a couple of fresh beers, set them on the coffee table, and turned on the TV to check the weather. “Damn! Even hotter tomorrow, by the sound of things.”

Reno shook his head. “What were you expecting? Snow?”

“A guy can but hope.” Lee stretched out on the sofa with his head in Reno’s lap. “You ever get snow here?”

“You want the real thing, you have to go north to Tahoe. But sometimes, if the temperature drops far enough, and it does on occasion, we’ll get a few flakes. Doesn’t last, though.”

A movie replaced the weather forecast—a romantic chick flick that had been a box office hit a couple of years ago. Lee had seen it twice, but loved it enough to sit through it a third time. “You seen this?”

“No, but I’ve heard it’s pretty good.”

“It is. I think it won an Oscar for something. Best supporting actress, if I recall correctly.”

Reno’s fingers moved into his hair, down his neck to his shoulders and back up. Lee found the repetitive motion soothing and relaxing and his eyes soon slid shut. For a moment, he continued to listen to the dialogue between the star-crossed lovers until that, too, faded into nothingness. The next thing he knew Reno was nudging him awake.

“Hey! Movie’s over. Time for bed.”

Lee sat up and rubbed his eyes. “You mean you’re leaving?”

Reno smiled and shook his head. “Not unless you want me to.”

“No. Absolutely not, no way. In fact...” Lee reached for

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Reno's hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "I'm thinking my bed would be one helluva lot more comfortable than this sofa."

* * *

While Lee went to the bathroom to brush his teeth, Reno took his clothes, hung them over the back of the room's only chair, and stretched out on the bed. Maybe it was time for him to get a place like this. Somewhere in a nice neighborhood where he would actually enjoy living rather than the ratty furnished accommodations he currently called home.

He closed his eyes, trying to envision what he'd like his place to look like. He liked clean lines and primary colors, so maybe he should go with a black-and-white theme like Manny's club. Lee had said the look was very *in*, and he could imagine black leather furniture with jewel-toned cushions and some kind of area rug.

Reno felt the mattress depress slightly as Lee joined him and settled on his stomach between Reno's upraised knees.

"You're looking very thoughtful," Lee observed. "Something I can help you with?"

"Maybe. After seeing this place, I realize it's high time I found somewhere new to live."

"You don't like where you are?"

"What's to like? Crappy furnished room in a bad area. The only good thing is that I have it on a weekly basis. I should've looked for something else the moment I decided to stay."

"You want a two-bedroom setup like this?"

"One bedroom would be enough. I'll have to buy furniture, of course. I'm no decorator, so I'm thinking I should stick with something very basic like black and white."

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“Then make it look real classy by adding a few touches of color. But stay away from anything too bright. A deep beige rug with a few accents of gold and copper might work.”

“Sounds good.”

“I can help if you want.”

“Thanks. I’d like that.”

Reno shivered, feeling the first whisper of arousal as Lee began licking his lower belly. After dipping into his navel, he moved lower, swirling his tongue around the root of his shaft until it began to lengthen and grow. When Reno was fully aroused, Lee started to lower his head, but Reno held him back. “Bad idea,” he muttered. “We don’t know one another anywhere near well enough for that. I think I’m okay. In fact, I’m sure I am. Still, there’s always that outside chance.”

“Better to be safe than sorry. I agree.” Lee reached into the drawer of the nightstand, pulled out a handful of condoms and tossed one to Reno. Once he’d donned the protection, Lee settled back between Reno’s legs and took him into his mouth. Again, he tried to go slowly. But again, need and excitement got the better of them both, and Reno took over, fucking Lee’s mouth and shouting encouragement until he suddenly stilled and fell backward, laughing and groaning, and asking Lee what took him so long.

“Jeez, man, any faster than that, and you wouldn’t even have needed me. You could’ve done it all by yourself. In fact, I think you just did. Now, if you can just quit laughing and hook your legs over my shoulders, maybe I can get myself a little loving in here.”

Reno felt a rush of cool as Lee pushed the tip of the lube tube into his anus and pressed. Then Lee’s fingers were there, rimming his hole until the outer muscle relaxed. After parting his ass cheeks, Lee inserted the head of his cock and began caressing

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Reno's balls as he pushed slowly forward until he was all the way in.

"Feel good?" he asked as he leaned forward and touched Reno's mouth with his tongue.

Caught up in what Lee guessed to be a storm of sensory overload, Reno gripped Lee's ass with his hands. "Feels great. You?"

"Terrific. But this time, we're definitely taking our time. So no trying to rush me. Okay?" Lee withdrew slightly, but as he pushed back in, he slid his tongue into Reno's mouth to initiate a game of hide and seek. True to his promise, Lee kept his thrusts to just the barest minimum for the longest time, but then his control slipped and he was slamming into Reno like a runaway freight train, until, finally, they both ran out of steam.

* * *

Lee awoke to the delicious reality of Reno's warm lips against his cheek, a pleasantly sore body, and his head full of memories of their night together. Just the thought of what they'd gotten up to was making him hard.

"Ready for round two?" he murmured, moving his head in the hope of making contact with Reno's mouth.

"Sorry, babe, I gotta go, otherwise I'll be late for work," Reno said.

As Lee opened his eyes, Reno straightened and backed away from the bed. With Reno already dressed and ready to leave, Lee knew there was no point in trying to persuade him to stay.

"Last night was great," Lee said quietly.

"Yeah, for me, too." Reno grinned as he came back, crouched

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down and brushed his mouth against Lee's. "If you have nothing better to do, why don't you drop by the store later? I'll be there all day." He hesitated, his dark eyes unreadable and his expression vaguely uncertain. "That's if you want to, of course. You don't have to."

Lee captured Reno's gaze and smiled. "Don't worry, I definitely want to."

"See you later then."

The feeling Lee had met Reno somewhere before continued to linger. It wasn't quite as strong as it had seemed last night, but it was still there at the back of his mind, niggling away like a problem that wouldn't go away until he found a solution. Especially after those weird moments he'd had while he and Reno were making out in the shower.

The snick of the front door closing signaled Reno's departure, and Lee turned over onto his back. Raising his knees, he absently stroked his shaft as he stared up at the ceiling.

If they'd met way back before the attack, or after he'd gone to live and work in New York, Lee was reasonably certain he would have remembered the occasion by now. Since he hadn't, he had to assume it had taken place at some point between the two. Sometime during those foggy few weeks when he'd taken too many pills, drunk too much booze and wandered around in a daze. The one time in his life he'd ignored all the risks, and lived and loved indiscriminately without caring about possible consequences. His only thought was to do whatever it took to stop the nightmares and blank out the horror of pursuit by those baseball bat-wielding crazies. Despite his best efforts, the actual attack, which he'd wanted most to forget, was the part he still remembered in perfect detail, while most of what happened

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immediately after was still pretty much a blur.

If he could force his mind back to the moment when he felt his arm being grabbed and he'd panicked, then move forward from there, just maybe he'd remember where Reno fit in. It could have been a casual meeting in a bar somewhere, or he could have been one of the nameless, faceless guys Lee had fucked in the hope he could erase all thought of what had almost happened. Maybe they'd crossed paths at the market, or exchanged a word in a bar, a restaurant at the mall, or...

Lee closed his eyes. Now that he really thought about it, the guy who'd grabbed him and yelled at him to run the night of the attack had looked a bit like Reno. But no way could it have been him. According to Reno, he'd never been farther east than Denver, and Lee had never been west until he'd moved to Vegas.

In fact, it was something of a miracle he remembered anything about the guy who'd got him away from those freaks. Paralyzed by fear, plus the shock of the sudden attack, Lee's mind had been slow to work and his feet even slower to move. As a result, he'd been half dragged and half carried to a vehicle parked somewhere nearby and then shoved inside. He hadn't cared who'd saved him; he'd just been grateful someone had had the presence of mind to get him out of there before he got kicked and beaten to death or worse.

He remembered the engine had caught on the first try, and the driver had hit the gas...they'd gone through a red light, barely missing a bus. Horns blared, people shouted, and the driver skidded around the next corner on what felt like two wheels. They hadn't gone far, just a few blocks. The driver had stopped, helped Lee out, and they'd gone into an apartment building where the guy said he lived.

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Once they were inside his apartment, the other man hadn't bothered to put on a light. He'd just locked and bolted the door. Then the two of them had hung onto one another in the dark hallway, shaking with relief, crying, laughing, and everything else that went along with extreme fear and delayed shock. How long they'd stayed there, hugging like that, Lee had no idea, but from what he recalled, his rescuer hadn't fared much better than he had himself. The guy's clothes were a mess and there had been blood everywhere. Yes, for sure he had looked something like Reno—a younger version, of course, but he'd been about the same height and the same build, although if memory served, a whole lot heavier than Reno was now.

After the initial shock receded and they'd managed to calm down, the other guy poured each of them a double shot of whisky and they'd gone into his bathroom to clean up. Lee vaguely recalled his rescuer taking care of the injuries to his head before he helped him to undress. And then how he'd soaped his body and held him upright under the hot spray in the hope it might help soothe away the aches and pains, the same way he would have done if Lee had been a distraught child rather than a traumatized adult.

For some reason, the one thing he remembered best about that dreadful night, over and above the fear, the pain, the shock, and everything else, was the almost overpowering scent of violets. He'd figured it was either the soap or a room freshener, but as he stepped out of the shower, he'd noticed an open and almost empty bottle of aftershave on the counter...*agua di* something or other in fancy black copperplate on a cream-colored label. He still remembered that bottle, the writing and the picture of violets as clearly as if he had them in front of him now. He gave a soft groan,

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wishing he knew why his mind would hang onto something so stupid and insignificant as the details on a label when a lot of the really important stuff that happened that night was still pretty much a confused blur.

He sighed, opened his eyes and pushed back the covers. He'd never met Reno before last night, just someone who'd looked a bit like him. A terrific guy he now remembered had introduced himself as Roger, who'd saved Lee from being badly injured, and perhaps even killed.

Reversing his position, he buried his face in the pillow. Five minutes after he and Roger got out of that hot shower, Lee remembered he'd started to shake again with what he'd thought was a bad case of the chills, but Roger had assured him was almost certainly a reaction to the attack. Lee had wanted to call a cab and go home. Instead, Roger had taken him to bed and held him, rubbing his back, and talking quietly about nothing much until the shaking stopped.

They'd had sex. It hadn't been the result of mutual attraction or love at first sight, just a strong and compelling need to assure them both they were still alive and relatively unharmed. Nothing more or less than a quick, therapeutic fuck that was over in a matter of minutes. The next morning, Roger had driven Lee home to his mom's house. He'd said he and his dad had to be out of town on business for most of the following week, but as soon as they got back he'd call and—

Roger never called. And there was no telling what might have happened if he had. A quick drink and a few minutes spent congratulating themselves on a lucky escape would probably have been the extent of it.

Telling himself that was then, this was now, and wasting his

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time on might-have-beens wouldn't change one damn thing, Lee grabbed a bottle of body wash, turned on the shower and stepped in. Once he was dressed, he'd fix himself some breakfast, check with the garage to find out if his car was ready and then, provided his bank balance was healthy enough to take a hit, he'd go check out that sale at Reno's store. *And maybe tonight...*

He knew there was a chance last night had been a one-off. Things and people often looked different in the bright light of day. But he liked Reno a lot and since he suspected the feeling was mutual, this was one chance Lee was willing to take.

* * *

The garage told Lee his car wouldn't be ready for pick up until after lunch, so he took a taxi over to the men's boutique in the Neapolitan Hotel. Since Reno was busy with a customer when he arrived, Lee browsed through a few of the items on the sale rack. Smiling to himself, he felt his nerves tighten with anticipation while he waited for Reno to go through the time-honored salesman's patter of telling the guy it had been a pleasure to be of service and to be sure and come back and see him the next time he was in Vegas.

Finally, the customer disappeared out the door, and Reno came over to Lee and punched him lightly on the arm. "Yes, sir, is there something I can do for you? A new business suit, perhaps? Or are you looking for something casual? We've just received a shipment of lightweight linen jeans by that new L.A. designer who's such a big hit with all the celebrities. Perfect for Vegas weather at this time of year."

There was something so innately sexy about the professional sales pitch, combined with the knowing grin and the heat he could see in Reno's dark eyes, Lee immediately felt dry-mouthed and

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weak at the knees. He wanted Reno, and he wanted him now. He wasn't in the mood for games. "Why don't you just lock the damn door and put out the lights? I assume you have a fitting room somewhere in back."

Reno's grin widened as he ran the back of his hand down Lee's chest, stopping a scant inch above Lee's quickly hardening cock. "Well, sir, I'd love to oblige, but as you can see, I'm the only one here at the moment. Of course, if you'd care to wait for a few minutes until one of our other sales' associates returns from his break..."

Suddenly, the wanting and the needing were so acute Lee's chest tightened to the point he could hardly breathe. "And what happens then?"

"Then we can go to one of the fitting rooms where I'll take your measurements. And after that, I'll see what we have in your size."

"You're my size, Reno. You're all—"

Just then two smartly dressed guys came into the store—one in his mid-twenties, the other who looked to be pushing fifty. "We're baaack," the younger man announced.

"Perfect timing," Reno said. "My customer here needs some help. He's having a little trouble finding the proper fit." Reaching out, Reno snatched a few items off the nearest rack with one hand and then used the other to shepherd Lee to the back of the store. "If you'll just come with me, sir, I'll double-check your measurements," he added in a loud voice. "I'm sure we must have something in your size."

Instead of tiny cubicles fitted with half-doors like those found in a lot of stores, Lee was relieved to see the half-dozen or so fitting rooms here were all a decent size with full doors. They even

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boasted chairs and a small table complete with pins, chalk, tape measure and whatever else might be needed to ensure complete customer satisfaction. Lee followed Reno inside the last cubicle at the end of the row, smiling as he closed and locked the door.

"Alone at last," he murmured.

Dropping the clothes he'd brought with him on the nearest chair, Reno slipped an arm around Lee's waist and pushed him back against the wall. "I've been thinking about you, me and last night non-stop the whole morning," he whispered against Lee's lips. "And wondering if you'd show up, or if it was just a one-night stand. I even thought about taking an emergency break and coming back to your place with the excuse I'd left something behind."

"If you had, I wouldn't have let you get away a second time." Reno smelled of sex and coffee, and Lee's hands were shaking with the need for closer contact. He unsnapped Reno's jeans and slid the zipper down. "How much time do we have?"

"Five minutes, give or a take a few seconds."

"Just enough time for a quickie," Lee murmured as began to caress Reno's shaft, loving the way it quickly hardened and pushed eagerly against his hand. The time constraint and the risk of being interrupted made Lee's heart beat faster and added excitement to the moment. His fingers tangled in the hair around the root before moving up the hot, silky length to catch a dribble of pre-cum at the tip. Reno's tongue found its way into his mouth, and Lee's tongue moved to greet it, while his fingers moved faster.

Then it was Lee's turn for a little loving. Without breaking the kiss, Reno opened Lee's pants and Reno's cool hand took possession of his cock, squeezing and caressing. Lee wanted to hold back and make the moment last for a while, but this wasn't the kind of relaxed, easy lovemaking they'd enjoyed last night.

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This was raw, unbridled sex, a now or never super quickie. Reno's movements were insistent and urgent, bordering on rough, and exactly what Lee needed. He was up and over the top within seconds. Reno was right behind him.

"Wow!" Lee breathed as Reno grabbed a handful of tissues from a box on the table and pushed them into his hand. "What was that? The four-minute mile in ten seconds?"

"Sorry about that. But mixing business with pleasure makes me nervous."

"It gave me a real buzz," Lee admitted. "But then I've always fantasized about doing it in a public place, or maybe having someone walk in on me."

Reno laughed and shook his head. "Not me, bro. I like this job, and I want to keep it. At least for now."

Once they'd cleaned themselves up, Reno gave the cubicle a quick spritz of air freshener and scooped up the armful of garments he'd dropped on the chair. As he opened the door and Lee preceded him out, he said, "If you could call back next week, sir? By then, I'll have had a chance to check with our suppliers and see if I can find what you have in mind."

"Where do you usually eat lunch?" Lee whispered as Reno walked him to the main door.

"No place special. Meet me inside the side door at Bill's Saloon about thirty minutes from now, and we can decide then."

"Perfect." Lee grinned. "See you next week," he added loud enough for anyone who might be listening to overhear.

* * *

Lee was already there waiting, when Reno got to Bill's. Reno

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only had half an hour for lunch so, rather than waste time looking elsewhere, they decided to have a sandwich and coffee in the Victorian Room.

“Well, you’ll be glad to know I figured out the mystery,” Lee said after he’d finished his food and pushed his plate to one side.

Reno frowned. “What mystery was that?”

“The one where I thought we’d met some place before, but you were convinced it must’ve been a look alike.”

“And?” Reno took a bite of his sandwich and washed it down with a mouthful of coffee. After Lee fell asleep last night, he’d gone back over every step of his new life, just in case. “What did you figure out?”

“That you were right. It was someone from way back who looked a bit like you. I probably wouldn’t have remembered except—” Lee paused and chewed on his bottom lip. “I’m originally from a small town in Ohio. Merritburg. I don’t suppose you’ve heard of it, but one night about eight years ago—”

Merritburg? Eight years ago? Shit! Reno’s fingers tightened around the handle of his coffee mug as his mind pictured the one place he’d done his best never to think of again—the place where he’d been born and raised and, as far as he knew, his grandparents still lived.

He forced himself to listen to the rest of what Lee was saying...something about being attacked by a pack of homophobes outside a gay club, and how he’d been rescued by a passerby, and... *Of course!* Now he remembered. He’d been in that club himself that night, and Lee was right, there had been trouble when the place closed. He vaguely recalled grabbing some guy who was getting the hell whacked out of him by a bunch of men high on drugs or their ideals or whatever, shoving him in his truck, and

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taking him home where they'd spent the next couple of hours licking their wounds and shaking in their boots. If the guy had mentioned his name, Reno didn't remember. But if what Lee was saying was true, and there was no reason for Reno to think he wasn't, then the guy had been Lee...which would account for his own feelings of *déjà vu*.

He'd heard about strange coincidences, but this had to be the mother of them all. Out of all the people and all the things that had happened, that they should meet again now was beyond crazy. Still, in view of what had happened less than a week later, it was hardly surprising he'd forgotten about it.

"Unfortunately, I never got to thank him properly," Lee continued, "because a few days after that, Roger and his dad were both killed."

"Killed?" Reno murmured, focusing his attention on the remains of his lunch and denying his mind the chance to wander. Provided he stuck to the script and kept reminding himself Lee's story had nothing to do with him, he'd be fine. "That's too bad. What happened?"

"I'm not really sure, and the cops were pretty closed-mouth, but it sounded like one of those being in the wrong place at the wrong time scenarios. According to the news, they were in Cleveland on business and somehow became the innocent victims of an underworld shoot out. The father died at the scene, and Roger a day or two later."

"Did they catch the villains?"

"Before he died, Roger gave the cops enough info to arrest the guy who he said was the shooter. I heard later it was a local gang leader the cops had been after for a while."

"Was he convicted?"

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“After the trial, my mom sent me a clipping from our local paper. Seems the man they arrested was eventually convicted and given life with no chance of parole.”

“Really?” Reno managed to transfer the last mouthful of his sandwich from the plate to his mouth without a pause and without his hand shaking. “I thought the kind of lowlifes who pull stunts like that usually get away with it. Glad to hear there’s the odd exception.” Reno filled his lungs with air and then allowed it to escape gradually. He’d spent the past eight years worrying about something like this happening, and now it had, he realized it wasn’t such a big deal after all. Between the work of a clever plastic surgeon, the changes wrought by time, and a whole new life, any real similarity between the man who’d saved Lee’s ass and the man Reno was now were no more than slim at best, little more than an illusion. The guy Lee remembered was dead, and Reno Jackson was exactly who he said he was.

Even so, he knew it never hurt to make sure by testing the waters. “You think I’m the double of this Roger guy?”

Lee gave him a considering look. “I guess vaguely reminiscent best describes it. Roger was a lot heavier than you, his nose was different, and...it all happened a long time ago. I don’t even remember exactly what he looked like. I think it was just one of those first, overall impression things when I walked into the bar and saw you standing there. Something about you reminded me of Roger, and don’t ask me what because I have no idea. Maybe it was your friendly smile, or maybe it’s that Roger used the same aftershave as you.”

Damn! Reno gave himself a silent reprimand, plus a reminder to use something different. He’d been told a dozen times to be careful about the small stuff since that was what so often tripped

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people up.

“I know for sure it’s the same one. It has a very distinctive scent. In fact, I even remember seeing the bottle in Roger’s bathroom. There was a picture of violets on the label.”

“Sounds like one of the new ones we have at the store. It came in a few days ago, and I snagged a sample to try it out. Not sure I’m that crazy about it, though. You?”

Lee smiled as he reached for Reno’s hand under the table and gave it a quick squeeze. “To be honest, I love it. I’ve always thought it smelled really sexy.”

“No kidding.” Lee’s gaze was so trusting and his feelings so obvious, Reno felt a small twinge of conscience. But confiding in Lee wasn’t an option. He’d known when he entered the Program, his safety depended on forgetting all about his old life and believing in who he was now. “So...in that case, how do you feel about coming to L.A. with me next weekend? I have a few days off, and one of my customers has a beach condo at Rock Bay we can borrow. We can swim, laze on the sand, and check out a few of the local bars and restaurants. Sound like a plan?”

“Sounds perfect. I’ll need to check with my boss, but it shouldn’t be a problem.” Lee hesitated, shooting Reno one of his cautious smiles. “Any plans for tonight?”

Reno relaxed against the upholstered back of the booth. “You have something in mind?”

“I have a new recipe for chicken Alfredo I want to try. That’s if you’re up for it.”

“Sounds good to me. What time?”

“What time do you finish work?”

“About five.”

“If my car’s ready, I’ll pick you up. If not, I’ll let you know so

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you can grab a cab.”

After Reno left, Lee signaled the waiter for a refill on his coffee and took out his pen. Using a paper napkin, he made a list of the various items he would need for tonight’s dinner. Should he buy a bottle of wine to go with it, or would Reno be okay with the beer he already had? And what about next weekend? Should he go through the last couple of boxes he still hadn’t unpacked on the off-chance of finding his old swimming trunks, or should he splurge on a new pair?

After deciding on a new pair, Lee shoved the list into the back pocket of his pants and reached for his coffee. He could hardly wait for next weekend. Finding someone he really liked and who seemed to like him back was huge in Lee’s book. Of course, he’d have to ask his boss, Dani, for a few days off, but he didn’t foresee any problem there. He’d done quite a bit of overtime lately, and she wasn’t the type to give her employees a hard time.

Lee had never been to L.A. and the thought of going there with Reno for a romantic weekend...hanging out on the beach, and walking along the edge of the Pacific Ocean. Maybe they’d get to check out Rodeo Drive, and do a little celebrity watching. Then when they’d had enough of that, they’d go back to the condo and make love before driving up the coast and finding a quiet spot for dinner. His head full of plans, Lee finished his coffee and put the cup back in its saucer. He hadn’t been this happy in he couldn’t remember when.

CHRISTIANE FRANCE

Christiane truly believes that love makes the world go round, so she likes stories with both happy and bittersweet endings. Christiane has been writing romance for the past twenty years and lives near Niagara Falls with her husband and The Boys—two black and white Persian cats.

* * *

**Don't miss *On The Run*,
the sequel to *Reincarnation*,
available soon at AmberAllure.com!**

While he and Lee are in California, Reno keeps seeing a man who appears to be watching him. When the men return to Vegas, Reno sees the same stranger again. Positive his past life has finally caught up with him, Reno decides he has no choice but to go on the run...

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