



Strangers *in the* Night

Christiane France



Strangers In The Night
by Christiane France

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STRANGERS IN THE NIGHT

By

CHRISTIANE FRANCE

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STRANGERS IN THE NIGHT

Blaine Tyler stared moodily into the glass of beer the barman had just pushed across the counter and told himself not to go looking for trouble. For a whole fifty seconds he stuck to his guns—until temptation proved too great, and he snuck another quick glance at the stranger he'd noticed earlier, sitting at the far end of the bar.

The dude was alone, and so was he ... and one brief encounter wouldn't commit him to anything. The warmth of another's man touch, a quick fuck in the dark to chase the demons away, and perhaps he'd get a decent night's sleep for a change.

Just then, the man, who Blaine figured to be around his own age of thirty-five, turned in his direction, and an unnerving and unexpected shiver of awareness slid down Blaine's back, sending his heartbeat into overdrive. Before eye contact could be established, he looked away, fast. The man was good-looking, sexy, and the best thing he'd seen in a long time. Even so, Blaine knew it was much too soon for him to even consider getting involved with someone new.

For a brief moment, he pressed his hand hard against his aroused and aching prick. Yes, he felt lonely. And yes, he hadn't had sex in so long it was all he could think about. But no way would he resort to pick-ups and one-night stands. Brief liaisons with strangers could be dangerous for a whole number of reasons besides the obvious health risks. Anyway,

he was still in mourning, for God's sake. Colin had only been dead for a little over six months.

Abandoning his untouched drink, he signaled the barman, paid his tab, and made for the door before the longing for close human contact got the better of him, and he did something terminally stupid.

He wouldn't even have noticed the guy if he hadn't reminded him a little of Colin—same long legs, same nicely sculpted body that spoke of regular exercise, the same signature white T-shirt Colin always wore, and the same deep tan. Just enough details to catch his attention and revive a few painful memories. But that's where any similarity between the two ended.

Colin Jeffries had been the rough-and ready type, content to wear whatever clothing came to hand and wash his hair with dish soap if nothing else was available. The guy at the bar looked to be the complete opposite. Wearing what Blaine recognized as an expensive designer T-shirt and a pair of fashionable khaki cotton pants, the man screamed class with a capital C. His professionally styled, sun-streaked blond hair was longer and lighter than Colin's, and his high cheekbones, deep-set eyes and hint of five o'clock shadow were about as far from Colin's youthful, all-American surfer-boy looks as he could get. For one thing, he was older than Colin had been. And the hands were completely different, too. Colin had had short, stubby fingers and bitten-to-the-quick nails. The man in the bar had well-kept hands—long fingers and nicely manicured nails ... the kind of hands Blaine could imagine

sliding over his skin, seeking out his most sensitive spots, touching him, stroking him.

Between the broad shoulders, well-muscled arms and the way he held himself, the guy exuded confidence and sophistication, with a tiny touch of arrogance Blaine found beyond exciting. The ache in his shaft doubled as he wondered what kind of lover the man would be. If, like Colin, he was the rough, masterful, let's-fuck-until-we-drop kind of lover. If he—

He stopped himself mid-thought. He shouldn't even be here. And he wouldn't be, except this had been his and Colin's place, and by coming here ... it was a little like wrapping himself up in one of Colin's old shirts and trying to pretend Colin was in the other room. His eyes burned with tears, and he fisted them dry. He needed to go. Get out of here now, before he attracted the kind of trouble he neither needed nor wanted.

Leaving the bar, he started along the street with the intention of returning home. Except there was nothing for him there either, other than empty rooms and even more lousy, hurtful memories. He felt like shit, desperate for the kind of sexual release he'd had with Colin. And now Colin was just one of the memories. He supposed he could solve the problem by going home and getting himself off, but that kind of schoolboy trick only provided temporary relief. It did not give him the kind of deep down satisfaction he so desperately needed and wanted.

His chest hurt, his eyes were burning, and as the wetness began trickling down his face, he left the brightly lighted

sidewalk and headed down the steps to the anonymity of the dark beach several feet below.

If Colin were still alive, they'd be together right now. They'd have followed their usual Friday night routine—dinner at Bobby Joe's, a few drinks and maybe a couple of dances at The Joint, the only gay bar in town and the one he'd just left, and when the bar closed, back to the house for a night of uninterrupted loving and planning how they wanted to spend the weekend.

But Colin wasn't alive. Colin was nothing more than a series of remembered moments and images that ran through his mind non-stop.

Along with the gut-wrenching knowledge Colin's death had been his fault.

If he hadn't started that stupid argument right before Colin left for work, Colin wouldn't have lost his temper and taken off. And he wouldn't have jumped in his car and run a red light, straight into the path of an eighteen-wheeler.

Now, Blaine could barely remember what the argument had been about—except it was something small, like another round in the ongoing battle to get Colin to pick up his clothes or clean up after himself, or stop being so fucking selfish. And, like always, Colin had lost it and stormed out of the house in a temper.

Brushing the tears from his face with the back of his hand, he started to run along the dark beach as fast as he could go. When he reached his normal top speed, he pushed himself to go even faster. His heart pumping full throttle, he increased the pace a few more notches until he was slamming one foot

down on the hard-packed sand, then the other, over and over, as if the faster he went and the harder his feet hit the sand, the quicker he could get through the pain and the hurt and feel whole again.

He stepped the pace up a little more, widening his stride until his feet barely touched the ground and it felt almost like flying. A few more steps and he'd reach the scattering of rocks at the far end. If the rocks were higher, he could climb to the top of the tallest one and throw himself off. That way everything, including himself and his miserable life, would be history. Except, maybe, for a couple of lines in the middle of Monday's paper:

WEALTHY BUSINESSMAN COMMITS SUICIDE

FOLLOWING DEPRESSION OVER DEATH OF LOVER

He closed his eyes and kept running. But before he reached the rocks, his legs let him down, and he ran out of steam. He dropped, face forward, down onto the sand, his breath coming in huge, uneven gasps.

Maybe, if he went back and got his car and drove up the coast—even if he had to drive all the way to Canada, he'd find a spot where the cliffs were really high. He'd just close his eyes and jump and the rocks below would do the rest—a guaranteed way to put an end to his pain.

Yes! But he needed to do it now, before he lost his nerve.

Except no way could he do it right now. He couldn't even fucking move as much as a single fucking muscle.

The sand was cold and wet, and he felt the chill seeping into his bones. He knew he should at least make some attempt to get up, but he didn't have the energy. He'd stay

here in the dark and do his best not to think, not to feel. If he stayed here long enough, the tide would save him the trouble of finding any cliffs. The salty waves would wash over him and then, when it was good and ready, the sea would take him down to a watery grave.

How long he lay there, Blaine had no idea. It could have been an hour; it could have been a great deal longer. All he knew for sure was the tide hadn't come in, and his bones ached from contact with the wet sand. Moving cautiously, he managed to push himself up into a sitting position, surprised to realize he actually felt a bit better. The tightness in his chest had disappeared, and his breathing was back to normal.

He just wished he could say the same for his thoughts. What in hell had gotten into him tonight?

Sure, he'd been going through a bad patch since Colin's death, but that was no excuse to think about ending his life. He wasn't the suicidal type. And he wasn't the type to give up when the going got rough. He did whatever was necessary to fix the problem and get back on track.

And he could fix this. All he had to do was make the effort.

But he needed to do something now, before his present state of mind became a stranglehold he couldn't escape from, one that could ruin his life. Maybe he should see a counselor, or a shrink, or whatever was necessary to get it through his head he was allowing his feelings of guilt about Colin's death to overshadow the fact Colin hadn't given a shit about him.

And he knew damn well that's what he'd been doing. It was more than six months since Colin's accident, yet instead of admitting he'd been used and letting go, he kept on

wallowing in guilt, and balling like a kid over a beautiful memory that had never existed beyond the boundaries of his own mind.

With a sigh, he got to his feet, brushed the sand from his clothes, and began slowly retracing his footsteps along the beach. He needed to quit all the self-deception shit and face facts. He'd been in love with an illusion. Colin hadn't loved him. Colin had used him. And if Colin hadn't seriously ticked him off that morning, he would almost certainly still be alive.

Okay, maybe Colin was partly to blame for what had happened. He should have known better than to drive when he was that angry. But Blaine knew the major portion of the blame rested firmly on his own shoulders. He'd known all about Colin's unreasonable temper, and the way he reacted to the merest hint of criticism. He'd also known Colin was about to leave for work, but instead of waiting until later when they could sit down and maybe talk sensibly, he'd gone ahead anyway.

But all the could haves, should haves, and would haves wouldn't change what had happened. Colin had now been dead for over six months. And Blaine knew it was way past time for him to let it all go.

He had to accept the fact Colin had been a pro who'd gone through the motions. He'd made all the right moves, and he'd said all the right words, and sucked Blaine in like soda through a straw. As the older, more experienced man, Blaine knew he should have seen what was happening. And later, after the initial honeymoon stage of their relationship wore off, when he began to suspect Colin was playing him, he

should have ended things. Instead, he'd taken the easy way out and convinced himself he was being paranoid—until shortly before Colin's death, when suspicion became the kind of hard fact even he couldn't ignore.

A conversation overheard between Colin and a mutual friend had left him in no doubt as to his late partner's real feelings. If Blaine hadn't had money, a nice home, and a better-than-average lifestyle, Colin would have moved on long ago. He liked living large and not having to worry where his next dollar came from, and life with Blaine suited him just fine for now. Once something better came along, to use Colin's own words, he'd be gone so fast it would make poor old Blaine's head spin.

Blaine had heard every nasty, self-serving, cruel detail firsthand, yet he still hadn't had the guts to call an end to things and kick Colin's butt out the door. If he had, maybe things would have turned out a whole lot better for them both.

He sighed for all the things that might have been. What in hell had happened to the savvy, confident businessman he'd been a year ago? The man who'd built up a small chain of upscale fitness clubs in New York—the man who, along with his hand-picked team of employees, had designed personal exercise and fitness programs for their older clients that were not only successful, they'd had a waiting list.

Truth was, he no longer recognized himself.

After deciding he needed a change from the pressures of staying at the top of the heap and selling out to the competition, he'd been offered the chance to invest in what

had sounded like an up-and-coming manufacturer of fitness equipment in California. On paper, the offer had sounded more than promising, and he'd caught the first available flight to check it out. When he arrived in Los Angeles and discovered the company was an under-capitalized operation, attempting to manufacture and distribute what he considered to be sub-standard equipment likely to bring the company more lawsuits than profits, he hadn't been able to say no fast enough.

And that was when he made his first real mistake.

Instead of heading straight back to the joys of New York in winter, he'd decided to stay on a few extra days to enjoy the sunshine and see if any other opportunities presented themselves. In less than a week, he'd fallen under the spell of the California lifestyle and bought a beachfront condo everyone, from the real estate salesman to his own personal financial adviser, assured him was a great investment. The price had been a bargain because the owner wanted a quick sale, so all Blaine had to do was put the property in the hands of a leasing agent, sit back, and in a few years sell for a huge profit.

Except things hadn't quite worked out that way. Once the legalities were completed and the condo was his, staying there himself for a couple of weeks had seemed like a great idea—a little down time to rest and relax while he decided if he wanted to stay with what he knew in the exercise and fitness field, or if he wanted to do something else.

But with time on his hands and nothing to do except hang out and enjoy it, he'd gone a little crazy. This was California

and Phantom Beach was a happening place, so why shouldn't he let loose and have some fun for a change? At first, swinging with the in-crowd had been fun. He'd enjoyed the freedom from the daily grind. A bit like being a kid let loose in the toy store. But somewhere between the fun and games, the partying, the one-night stands and a couple of casual affairs, he'd made the biggest mistake of all by falling hard for a stranger he met on the beach one night.

He knew better than to take chances with complete strangers; he knew about the risks and the dangers. He'd spent his whole adult life being careful when it came to personal relationships. Yet with Colin, he'd just jumped in without looking. He'd been so damn infatuated with his youthful attitude and his blond surfer looks from the word go, so desperate to get Colin into his bed and feel his hands on him, the man could have been a mass murderer for all he'd known or even cared.

He hesitated, turning to look out over the smooth, dark sea, then down at the tiny wavelets lapping lazily against the shoreline. The lights of an ocean-going yacht were visible in the near distance, and the shouts of the crew as they prepared to drop anchor sounded clearly over the water. The scene was peaceful and calming, and he knew hitting bottom the way he just had was a good thing. Maybe even a lifesaver.

He'd had it with the parties, the constant search for the next fad, the latest fashion, or the newest high. He'd had it with the whole cardboard-cutout lifestyle. He couldn't do it any more; didn't want to do it any more.

It was time to move on. Time to re-invent the old Blaine Tyler and decide what he wanted out of life. Start up a new business, or at least find an interim job. With something to focus on, he'd have a reason to get out of bed in the morning, and the rest would be a snap. He had a degree in business management, job experience in various different fields, and over five years building up a small string of fitness clubs. He had money to start another business, or invest in someone else's if the right opportunity came along.

He'd read something in the local paper about construction starting on a couple of new resort hotels a little farther up the coast. The hotel business sounded pretty far removed from what he'd been doing to this point, but tomorrow he'd check and find out if the word resort was being used loosely to throw up a couple of economy-priced motels near the beach. Or if it was the real deal, complete with all the amenities. If nothing else, investigating available business opportunities might get him to start living again instead of merely existing, like one of his sister's pampered pet cats.

He liked California, but if he couldn't find anything in the Phantom Beach area, he'd look further afield. Perhaps go back east for a while. He hadn't seen his sister since he left New York, and since he'd sublet his own place, crashing with her and the cats for a few days would beat staying at some boring hotel.

As he reached the steps leading up to the street, a shadow detached itself from the shadows. "Wanna party, man?"

The shadow turned out to be an attractive, pouty-lipped teenage boy wearing a pale blue muscle shirt and tight denim

cut-offs. Blaine recognized him as one of the latest crop of enterprising young men who did their best to cover the cost of next semester's tuition by spending their nights hanging out along the beach, or infiltrating some of the better parties and playing it either gay or straight, depending on demand. He shook his head and started up the steps. "No, thanks."

The boy ran his tongue slowly along his upper lip and wiggled his hips in a way Blaine found more sad than suggestive. "Aw, come on, man. I can give you a good time."

I'm sure you can. And If I'd met you on my way down to the beach instead of on my way back up, I might just have said yes.

Ignoring the boy, Blaine crossed the street mid-block by slipping through the traffic. When he reached the other side, he decided to go back to the bar and have the drink he'd never gotten around to earlier. Just the one drink and then home. No hanging around, no exchanging glances, and no giving into temptation no matter how great.

For a Friday night, the bar wasn't that busy, there were plenty of empty seats, but the moment Blaine sat down on one of the barstools, another man sat down beside him. "Buy you a drink, bro?"

Blaine turned toward the voice and found he was looking at yet another of the handsome strangers who showed up nightly in the bars and clubs near the beach, looking to make a connection. This time it was a guy who Blaine figured was in his mid-forties, casually dressed in designer jeans and an open shirt with a thick gold chain nestling against the sprinkling of hair on his broad chest. He looked like a male

model for something rugged like mountain climbing or big game hunting—short, black hair, dark brown eyes, handsome as sin and loaded with the kind of animal magnetism anyone, himself included, would have to be dead not to appreciate.

Temptation looking for a place to hang its hat is how Colin would have described the dude, but Blaine wasn't interested in doing anything except getting his old life back. "No, thanks. I'm fine."

The man snuggled his leg up close to Blaine's. "You meeting someone here?"

Blaine moved his leg away. But before he could think up a polite way of telling the guy to give him a break and go hit on someone else, the barman saved him the trouble by placing a glass of Blaine's favorite brew in front of him and saying, "Hey, man, thought you'd gone for the night."

"No. I just stepped out for a few minutes."

"Jay hasn't found a tenant for his condo yet, has he?"

"Not yet." Blaine took a long, refreshing pull of the cold beer and put the glass down. "Why? You know someone who's interested?"

"Yeah. Him." Blaine followed the man's glance to the far end of the bar. "He says he's looking for something temporary. You have the key, right?"

"Yeah. But it's at home."

"He strikes me as the responsible type, so maybe you should take him over there and show him around?"

"Sure. If that's what he wants."

"Okay. I'll go tell him."

Blaine had hoped the prospective tenant would be someone else. But he might have guessed it would be the same man he'd noticed earlier, the classy, sun-streaked blond who reminded him of Colin. If the slight resemblance had been all that caught his attention, it wouldn't have mattered. Trouble was it had been more than that. A whole helluva lot more, in fact. With that one half-glance his composure had suffered a real jolt. It was the first time he'd been attracted to anyone since losing Colin, and he'd been so damn scared of making the same dumb mistake, he'd taken off.

Still, that was then, this was now. If and when he met someone he wanted as more than a friend, he wouldn't be rushing into anything the way he had with Colin. He'd get to know the guy a bit first. Make sure there was more there than surface attraction.

"Excuse me? The barman tells me you have the key to a furnished condo that's available for rent. I just need something temporary. Around two months or so, three max."

Blaine looked up, and he could have sworn the room tilted or did something equally weird. And it wasn't one of the earth tremors the West Coast was famous for. He was pretty sure it had everything to do with the man who'd asked the question. The older dude who'd approached him a couple of minutes ago had vanished, and the blond from the other end of the bar was now sitting in his place. Trapped by the man's sexy, charismatic smile and penetrating gaze, Blaine felt disoriented and out of breath, like he'd been sucker-punched. His chest started to hurt again, he had a hard-on that came out of

nowhere, and for the second time in one night, he was having trouble with his breathing.

Just then, a noisy group burst through the door and shattered the moment. Blaine broke eye contact with the blond and reached for his drink, amazed to discover his hand didn't shake. "'S right, I do. You wanna see it?"

"Very much. And as soon as possible, if that's okay. When would be a good time?"

"Whenever. Right now, I guess, if you're in that much of a rush."

The smile increased enough to make Blaine sweat a little. "That's perfect. Right now was what I was hoping for."

It wasn't what Blaine had meant to say, and definitely not what he'd been hoping for. He'd have preferred another time, like the end of next month or even next year. Some time in the future when he'd had a chance to get himself and his life under control, and he could look at a sexy stranger without thinking about Colin, past mistakes, or going into meltdown like the heroine in a romance novel.

Of course, when they got to his place, he could always say he'd misplaced the damn key.

And look like a fool?

The guy gave him another mind-blowing smile. "I can wait while you finish your drink."

He felt himself start to weaken, just a tad, and he quickly slammed the lid down on the direction his thoughts were taking.

No! Absolutely, not. No way would he be falling for anything this guy might be offering. Not tonight, not sometime, not ever.

He took a bill from his wallet and waved it at the barman. "Sorry. You were saying?"

"Do you want to finish your drink before we leave?"

"Oh, right. Sure." Blaine grabbed his glass, finished the contents in one go, and wiped a trace of foam from his upper lip with the back of his hand. "By the way, I'm Blaine Tyler."

"Adrian Rossi."

The man's handshake was brief, dry, and businesslike. Blaine relaxed slightly and told himself he was over-reacting. The man wasn't interested in him, just in checking out Jay's condo. "Come on. It's only a few blocks from here."

Jay Newman was both a friend and neighbor and his condo was located across the hall from Blaine's. When Jay's company transferred him to Honolulu for an indefinite period of time, he'd given Blaine a key and said if Blaine heard of anyone interested in renting the place on a month-to-month basis, perhaps he'd be good enough to play tour guide. In the two weeks Jay had been gone, there had been a number of interested applicants, but none had been able to come up with the necessary proof of financial responsibility. However, Blaine had a feeling things were about to change.

"I'm with R&R Resorts," Adrian explained as they headed for Blaine's place to get the key. "We're building a new complex at Rock Bay, and I need somewhere temporary to live until construction is finished, and we're ready to open."

"You're a construction worker?" Blaine gave him a quick, sideways glance, wondering how he kept his hands in such good shape. Then, before he could stop himself, he tried imagining how those beautiful hands would feel touching his skin, stroking his cock, and, heaven forbid, parting his ass cheeks and exploring.

"No. You disappointed?" Adrian smiled, the kind of knowing smile that gave Blaine the impression the other man had just read his mind.

"No." Blaine felt hot, totally embarrassed at being caught out. "Just wondered is all."

"It's not just a hotel. It's a resort, complete with all the usual amenities. I'm in charge of leasing. It's my job to find tenants to fill all the empty spaces, such as the high-end boutiques, specialty restaurants, and everything else our guests demand. We're currently negotiating with a nearby golf club, so we'll be needing a pro shop, too."

* * * *

Once he'd taken a look at Jay's condo, Adrian said it was exactly what he wanted, and asked when he could move in.

Blaine closed and locked Jay's door. "As soon as Jay's lawyer confirms your bank references and your deposit check clears. The lawyer has an office here in town, so it won't take long. Come on over to my place, and I'll give you his card."

"Hey, this is nice," Adrian observed as he followed Blaine into his condo. "I really like your black-and-white theme."

"Me, too. Even though it's all the previous owner's choice. I bought the place furnished." Blaine still felt a bit uptight,

and very sexually aware of Adrian. His cock now ached worse than a tooth that had abscessed. But if the other man reciprocated his feelings, he showed no sign.

After Blaine gave him Jay's lawyer's card, Adrian seemed in no hurry to leave, so he decided to take a chance and offer him a drink. "Fancy a beer? Or I have wine if you prefer?"

"How about a soda instead? For the moment, I'm staying at a motel a mile or two north of here, and driving that narrow coast road after dark can be downright scary, even when you're one hundred percent sober."

Blaine laughed and checked the contents of his refrigerator. "Especially on Friday nights when some of the local kids decide to use it as their own private racetrack."

Taking their drinks with them, they went out on to the balcony, where they leaned on the rail and looked down to the beach four floors below.

"I assume you work here in town?" Adrian said.

"No. At the moment, I'm doing what the old movie stars used to refer to as resting between jobs."

"Anything on the horizon?"

Blaine shrugged. "Not really. I sold the company I owned back east, and thought I'd take a break for a while."

"I see. So ... you're just here on vacation?"

"Not exactly. I came to California a little over a year ago."

They sipped their drinks in silence for a few minutes, and then Adrian said, "That's a really long break."

Blaine sucked in a deep breath, waiting for the other shoe to fall. When Adrian said nothing more, he relaxed and let his breath out slowly. "Yeah, I keep telling myself that. But you

know how it goes. I want to find something else, and I will. I just keep putting it off until tomorrow."

"And tomorrow never comes?"

"Something along those lines." Unwilling to get into anything complicated in the way of explanations, Blaine finished his beer and headed for the kitchen. "I'll get us another drink."

He pulled two fresh drinks from the fridge and turned quickly to find Adrian standing right behind him, blocking the way.

"Why don't you tell me what really happened to make you drop out like this?" Adrian said quietly. "And please don't say nothing because it's clear to me something did. I can see it in your eyes and in your body language. I can even hear it in your voice."

Blaine's nerves tensed tighter than the strings of a finely tuned violin. He wanted to laugh off the other's man comment, but he didn't dare. He could feel the hard ball of emotion building inside him again, looking for a way to escape, and if he didn't watch out it would turn into yet another bout of useless and embarrassing tears. He tightened his grip on their drinks. "And what is it you think you can see and hear?"

"Pain. Deep down, gut-wrenching pain."

"Really?" Unable to meet Adrian's penetrating gaze, he hung on to his self-control by looking away. "I thought pain was part of life. Life's a bitch and then we die. Isn't that what the clever people say?"

"They also say pain is good for the soul. It's supposed to help build character, but I don't buy that either. You?"

Blaine shrugged. "Shit happens. What can I say? But it's nothing for you to worry about. And nothing I won't get over, given time."

"Have you talked to anyone?"

"You mean a professional, like a therapist or a shrink?"

"Not necessarily. Sometimes all you need to put things into perspective is to talk it over with a friend."

And give someone the laugh of a lifetime? No way! "No, I haven't talked to anyone. It's complicated. Anyway, like I said, I just need time."

"I see. Did you catch him cheating? Did he clean you out? Or did he just move on in search of something else?"

"He died. Traffic accident." Blaine sighed. He hadn't meant to say that, but maybe now the guy would back off and leave him alone.

"I'm sorry. I had no idea."

"No way that you could." His eyes burned. He'd probably never lose the guilt he felt for his part in the accident, even if he lived to be a hundred, but no way was he going to start blubbering again—not in front of a stranger. "Anyway, it happened about six months ago."

"And you've kept it bottled up inside you all this time?"

"It's not a secret. Everyone in town knows about it."

"I meant your feelings. I know how hard it is to lose someone you love. It doesn't matter whether they die or move on, it's still a hard thing to get through alone."

The guilty, vulnerable feelings of a moment ago gave way to a surge of white-hot anger that made Blaine's hands shake and his body tremble. "And even harder when you find out what you thought you had was one big, fucking illusion. That the guy you were so damn sure loved you as much as you loved him didn't give a single, solitary damn about you. He was just marking time until something else grabbed his eye. That really screws with your head."

"Like that, huh? You poor bastard."

Blaine forced a smile. "No one to blame but myself and my own bad judgment." He handed Adrian the can of soda and removed the cap from his beer. "And once I convince myself to quit feeling like a prize jerk, I'll be fine."

Hooking a foot around a leg of one of the chairs, he pulled it out and sat down at the kitchen table.

Adrian put his drink down and rested a hip against the counter. "If you want to talk about it, I'm a good listener."

"No point. It happened, it was my own fault, and now it's over. And I'm sure it's nothing you haven't heard before."

"If you won't talk, then at least try to relax and let it go."

Blaine took a sip of cold beer. "Easier said than done."

Adrian moved away from the counter and behind his chair, and Blaine tensed as he felt the other man's hands on his shoulders.

"For God's sake, man, you really do need to relax. Your muscles are so damn tight you're practically rigid. Take off your shirt and bend forward, then let yourself go loose. And before you start wondering, I'm a qualified massage therapist, so I know what I'm doing. I used to work in a

sports' injury clinic before the landlord decided to tear the building down."

"Why did he do that?"

"He figured he'd make more money turning it into a parking lot than he would by trying to fix everything that was either worn out, broken, outdated, or the fire department had listed as a fire hazard."

After a brief hesitation, Blaine took off his shirt and dropped it on the floor. Maybe a good massage was exactly what he needed. No one could think properly when they were tied up in knots the way he was. Leaning forward, he rested his folded arms on the kitchen table. "And did he pull it down?"

"The instant the last tenant left, the building disappeared, and the ground was paved over. All he has to do now is sit back and rake in the money."

Within a couple of seconds, Blaine knew taking off his shirt had been a mistake. And if he had any sense, he'd extricate himself now, before things got out of hand. But Adrian's clever fingers were like magic, untangling the knots, and relaxing the muscles. By the time he'd finished massaging his shoulders and back, Blaine felt boneless and content, and on the verge of drifting off to sleep.

"Feel better?" Adrian asked as he stepped away and picked up his drink.

Blaine flexed his shoulders. His muscles had loosened up, and he felt great, better than he had in months. Problem was, thanks to Adrian's magic hands and his own x-rated thoughts, he now had a major erection. "I feel good. Really good. I'd

forgotten what a professional massage can accomplish. All I need now is a hot shower, and—"

Adrian grinned and gave him an inquiring look. "Some really hot sex?"

Blaine's face was on fire. He wasn't sure if it was the result of drinking the two beers too fast, or if it was a reaction to Adrian's bluntness. He pressed the cold bottle against his left cheek. "I ... umm ... I..."

"You don't need to be embarrassed. From what you've said, it sounds to me like the guy was working you like a job, and you didn't even realize what was going on. Now you're scared of it happening again. Am I right?"

"Wouldn't you be scared?"

"I've had something similar happen to me. And yes, for a while I was scared of meeting someone and having the same thing happen again. But then I decided being robbed of my dignity was more than enough. I wouldn't allow what he did to me ruin my life."

"You think that's what I'm doing?"

"I know you are."

"And how do you know that?"

"I'm not made of ice, bro. I feel the chemistry between us just as strongly as you do, maybe even more because I'm not trying to deny it. I felt it the moment I first saw you at the bar, and so did you. Yet you wouldn't give me more than a fast half-glance. And the reason you wouldn't really look at me is because you're scared to admit you're human. Scared of getting involved again. Scared of getting kicked in the gut again. I knew you didn't really want to show me Jay's condo

tonight—you were afraid of what might happen, but you were caught in the middle with no way out. Am I right?"

Blaine didn't answer. Everything Adrian had said was one hundred percent correct. He was guilty of a whole lot of stuff. It was just too bad he didn't have whatever it took to admit it all out loud.

"We all make mistakes, errors in judgment, whatever you want to call them," Adrian continued. "And we all have to get over them the best way we know how. But don't cheat yourself by judging everyone on the basis of one bad experience."

"Do you practice what you preach?"

"I try to. It doesn't always work out, but at least I try."

Blaine tensed as Adrian moved in behind him again. Then he shivered with barely controlled excitement as Adrian's teeth and lips began to nip and nuzzle his neck. "I want you, and I know you want me. So why don't we forget everything but the here and the now? It doesn't have to be for more than this one time. Unless, of course, you want more."

Once again, Blaine knew everything Adrian said was right. The past was over, done. He needed to forgive and forget, then move on and start enjoying life again. However, he couldn't just snap his fingers and have things go back to the way they were before Colin. He needed time. He drank a little of his beer on the off chance it would give him the strength to resist Adrian's advances.

Except his sexual frustration was reaching an all time high, and his powers of resistance were about ten points below inadequate. He shifted position on the chair to ease the ache

in his groin. His cock was so hard, so loaded, he could barely think straight.

But then Adrian's hands moved slowly down over his chest and his belly until they reached the hard bump at the juncture of his thighs and paused. He could feel the heat of Adrian's hands through the thin denim of his jeans. If he moved as much as a millimeter, he'd come. He knew that for sure.

Yes, he wanted Adrian, and yes, he was scared shitless. He'd never been good at casual sex. Probably because he'd never been able to take what he wanted and just blow it off the way some guys could. He always had to get too damn involved. He closed his eyes and sucked in a breath, trying to summon the energy to push the other man away.

"Just breathe," Adrian murmured. "Just take a breath and let it go and forget everything else." His movements slow and unhurried, he unsnapped Blaine's jeans, slid down the zipper, and slipped a hand inside.

For Blaine, it was game over. He wasn't proud of the fact he'd allowed himself to be so easily seduced, but with Adrian's clever fingers caressing his shaft, it didn't seem to matter. He closed his eyes and leaned back. It felt so good to be touched like this again, to fill his nostrils with the sexy, masculine scent of another man. He wanted to reach for Adrian, complete what he'd started.

But after a few leisurely strokes and a mind-boggling hard squeeze that made Blaine catch his breath, Adrian removed his hand and closed Blaine's zipper. Stepping away, he picked up the can of soda and finished the contents.

It was like being deliberately doused with a bucket of cold water. And Blaine knew it had been deliberate because this was decision time. There would be no more persuading on Adrian's part. It was up to Blaine to take the next step. Hesitate too long and Adrian would leave and the chance to make that new start would be gone.

Pushing back his chair, Blaine got to his feet and looked directly at Adrian. Their gazes locked, and he smiled. When Adrian smiled back, he knew, with that one look, the first hurdle had been passed. He felt as breathless and exhilarated as if he'd run the whole long, fucking mile.

He cautioned himself to take it slow and easy. Reaching out, he grasped one of Adrian's hands. Now, all he had to do was forget the negatives and keep moving forward, one step at a time.

"Let's go into the other room and I'll put some music on. What do you like?"

"Preferably something slow and sexy."

Rather than waste time sorting through his extensive collection of CDs, Blaine turned on the radio. It was already tuned to an easy-listening FM station, and as the soft, romantic strains of an old Acker Bilk favorite filled the room, he knew he was heading in the right direction.

He was trying to move on. If he got kicked back a step or two, then he'd just have to try harder next time.

Adrian was a little heavier than Blaine and at least a couple of inches taller, and as Blaine wrapped his arms around him, he pressed his head on the other man's shoulder and gave himself up to the moment and the music.

This felt so good, so right. He actually felt happy for a change, and as Adrian's mouth found his, he gave a small sigh of contentment.

Their kiss was more than just a preliminary to what they both wanted. It was a slow dance aimed at learning about one another, a promise of things to come if that's what they decided, not a mere tangling of tongues. He knew Adrian was just as aroused as he was himself, and he could feel the tantalizing pressure of Adrian's erection against his belly.

As the song ended and another one began, this time a smoky Billy Holliday classic, Adrian pulled back and said, "Do you have any of that beer left?"

"I'll get us some." When Blaine came back with the beer, he found Adrian's clothes hanging over the back of one of the chairs, and he could hear water running in the bathroom.

He continued on down the hall and found the bathroom door wide open. Adrian was standing in the shower, his cock stiff and jutting out from his groin as he tested the temperature of the water. He smiled and held out a hand. "Why don't you join me?"

Blaine didn't wait for a second invitation. He put the beer down on the vanity and quickly pulled off his clothes.

Once he was inside the cubicle with the door closed, Adrian turned on the shower and adjusted the spray to gentle. Picking up the bottle of shower gel, he squeezed a little into his hands and worked it up into a lather. "Now, close your eyes."

The instant Blaine did as Adrian instructed, he felt the other man's hands begin soaping his body. His touch was firm

and insistent as it moved over Blaine's neck and shoulders, his back, and his buttocks, then his chest, his belly, his legs, and finally his prick.

Blaine had been on the verge of coming for so long, the ache in his groin was all he could think about. "Can I open my eyes now?"

"Not yet."

He felt Adrian slip a condom over his engorged penis, his touch so gentle, so caring, but he had to bite down hard on his bottom lip to stop himself from spoiling everything by coming too soon.

Then he felt something wrap around his dick that wasn't Adrian's hands—something soft and warm. His eyes flicked open to find the other man on his knees, sucking him into the hot, moist heaven of his mouth.

He tried to relax and enjoy the moment, but it was impossible. He felt the tightening, the incredible rush, the awful but fleeting certainty it wasn't going to happen, and then the magnificent, exhilarating feeling as he shot his load and, as everything went limp, the tension gradually faded. He felt so alive, so good, so ready to let the bad stuff go, but it seemed Adrian wasn't through. After disposing of the used condom, he replaced it with a fresh one and before Blaine knew it, Adrian had him ready to come again.

However, rather than let that happen, Adrian stopped what he was doing and looked up at Blaine and smiled. "Wanna hold the thought, while I grab that beer?"

A moment later, Adrian was back with the beer in one hand and a tube of lube gel, which Blaine had last seen on

the vanity, in the other. He offered the bottle to Blaine.
"Here, take a sip it'll give you some extra staying power."

Blaine laughed. "Oh, yeah?"

"Absolutely. A Frenchman once told me if you drink beer during sex you can keep going forever."

Blaine drank a little of the refreshing, cold beer. "And you know this for a fact?"

"No. But I'm thinking this is as good a time as any to find out."

Taking the bottle back from Blaine, he downed a couple of sips himself and put it on the shower caddy, next to the shampoo. Wrapping his arms around Blaine, he held him close and kissed him.

Adrian's tongue was hard, inquisitive and quite amazing. It was the kind of all-consuming kiss Blaine could feel from the top of his head to the soles of his feet, and he knew he'd never get enough of this man. When Adrian ended the kiss, Blaine shivered, feeling suddenly bereft, as if something important had been snatched away.

"You okay?" Adrian asked. "No second thoughts or whatever about this?"

"None. It feels good. It feels right."

"Yeah, man. I know what you mean." Adrian released him, and Blaine watched as he slipped a condom over his own erection and slathered on a little of the gel. Then, as Adrian turned him around and ran a finger down the crack of his ass, it took all his powers of concentration to hold back. It didn't matter he'd climaxed just a few minutes ago. He'd been so damn hungry for so long, he felt like exploding. He couldn't

wait to feel Adrian's big cock sliding in and out of his butt hole, although once that happened, he knew it wouldn't take much to push him over the edge again.

He was so fucking aroused, it wasn't going to take much of anything. Period. One look from Adrian's sexy eyes or a single touch would do it. Somehow, though, he managed to hold on while Adrian's fingers played with his nipples and his mouth found and teased erogenous zones in his neck and shoulders he hadn't even known were there. But it was touch and go when Adrian used his tongue to lick and nuzzle his waistline while he fondled his balls. His knees turned to water, and he held on tight to the shower rail for support.

"Here, have another sip of beer," Adrian urged, handing him the bottle.

Blaine took a quick sip and put the bottle back on the caddy, aware the moment's respite had been a good idea. Not only was Adrian a superb lover, he was an intuitive one, too. He'd gauged Blaine's powers of resistance to the last second and knew when to slow down so he could make the moment just right.

He felt Adrian part his butt cheeks and use some of the gel as lubrication, then he closed his eyes and rode the rush of feeling as Adrian inserted first one finger, then two into his anus. As Adrian's fingers picked up a rhythm, finding and teasing the sensitive spots, Blaine began to moan and rock against him. It felt good, but he wanted it all. And he wanted it now.

Just as he thought it would never happen, Adrian replaced his fingers with the head of his stiff cock and began pushing

forward, his movements gentle but insistent. Once he'd made it all the way in, Blaine shook with a mixture of excitement and arousal. It felt even better than he'd hoped or could even have imagined. He knew Adrian was as aroused as he was, as intent on achieving satisfaction, and he wanted that for both of them, too. However, Adrian wasn't finished surprising him. Instead of just concentrating on his own pleasure, he reached around Blaine's body and began to pleasure him again, too.

As Adrian gradually increased the speed of his strokes, Blaine braced himself by putting his hands flat against the wall. Adrian was as well-endowed as Blaine was, and he loved the tightness and the slippery feeling of the other man's rod sliding in and out of his hole while he stroked and squeezed Blaine's cock, moving them closer and closer to the ultimate moment they both craved.

When it came, his second orgasm was stronger and lasted much longer than the first, and best of all, he knew Adrian had come with him. As the other man collapsed against him, breathing hard, Blaine wondered if the beer had played any part in it.

Adrian reached again for the beer, took a long pull, and handed the bottle to Blaine. "We're really good together."

"You did all the work."

"You can make up for it next time."

Next time?

Blaine smiled, but he didn't say a word. He'd loved every last minute of what just happened between them, but he'd felt like this about his first time with Colin. Even so, he knew it was unfair for him to compare Adrian with Colin. Adrian was

caring, unselfish and giving ... everything Colin had never been. Nevertheless, he'd come a long way in a very short time. He needed time to think. Time to be sure.

After a hot shower, followed by a minute or so of ice-cold spray, they dried themselves off and returned to the living room.

As Adrian picked up his watch and checked the time, he grimaced and reached for his clothes. "Sorry to cut and run. But it's getting late, and I have a busy day tomorrow. First appointment is scheduled for seven."

"No problem. I understand." Although a little disappointed the evening couldn't last longer, or even stretch to the whole night, Blaine knew, deep down, he was glad Adrian had to leave. He'd promised himself no more rushing into things with his eyes closed. And this way, especially if Adrian rented Jay's condo, they could take it slow and easy. Get to know one another and see where it took them.

As he walked Adrian to the door, he said, "Don't forget to call that lawyer tomorrow."

Adrian stopped walking and turned around. "Oh, right. The condo. I want it for sure, but..." He shot Blaine a tentative smile, then he came back, wrapped his arms around him and kissed him on the mouth, his tongue slipping between Blaine's lips for a slow dance that had Blaine's head reeling. For a moment, he thought Adrian intended to stay after all, but then he released him with a sigh, and said, "You busy tomorrow?"

"Nothing that can't wait, why?"

"I know it's a huge imposition and I have a nerve even asking. But I'm wondering if you could do me a favor?"

Blaine took a mental step back. Colin had always been asking for one favor or another. Could he borrow this or that, or would Blaine be a sweetheart and—"Depends on what it is."

"Calling anyone tomorrow could be a problem because I have back to back appointments the whole day. So, if I write down all my information plus my phone numbers, could you call him for me? I can pay cash, by credit card, check, whatever he wants. I'm financially solvent, I don't have a record, and I don't do drugs. In other words I have nothing to hide, so everything should be fine."

"Sure. No problem."

Adrian pulled a small notebook and pen from the back pocket of his pants and began jotting down information. "I hate living out of a suitcase, which is what I'm doing right now. So I'd like to move in asap, and this way, we can get the paperwork moving. Sound like a plan?"

"Sounds fine with me."

After he'd finished writing, Adrian tore the page out of the book and handed it to Blaine. "If I've missed anything, or the lawyer needs something more, maybe one of you can give me a call."

* * * *

The next morning when he awoke, Blaine actually felt good for a change. Instead of wanting to bury his head under the covers and catch another couple of hours, by seven o'clock

he'd run down the beach, all the way to the rocks, and was back home, drinking his first cup of coffee.

He knew there was a chance last night had been a one-time only thing. And if it was, he'd have to live with it. Even so, despite his promise to himself about instant attraction and one-night stands, he also realized what had happened between himself and Adrian had been much more than a casual fling. It hadn't been a cure-all and it hadn't been intended as such, but at least now he was beginning to feel like a man again instead of a washed-up loser.

A little after ten, when he figured the office would be open, he called Jay's attorney. He said he had someone who wanted to rent the condo and gave him everything Adrian had written on the piece of paper. For the person to contact in the event of an emergency, Adrian had written "Romeo or Rosa Rossi" with a street address and phone number in San Francisco, and Blaine wondered if they were his parents. And maybe the owners of R&R Resorts as well?

Late that afternoon, the attorney called Blaine back to say Mr. Rossi had been approved as a tenant, and a month-to-month lease had been prepared for his signature. However, when his secretary tried to call Mr. Rossi and make an appointment for him to attend at his office to sign the papers and pay the deposit, she couldn't get an answer on his cell phone and the message box was full. Did Blaine have some other way of contacting Mr. Rossi?

For an instant, Blaine's mind went blank. His newly found happiness disappeared like a puff of smoke, and he felt

himself start to panic. Not again! Please, dear God, this could not be happening to him again! Not after last night.

After mumbling something about seeing what he could do and calling back later, he disconnected and began to pace back and forth, his thoughts in chaos and his nerves in knots.

This was the same as what had happened the day he lost Colin. Before the cops showed up to tell him about the accident, he'd tried calling Colin a dozen times to apologize and say sorry for starting the argument, but Colin's phone had been turned off and all he kept getting was a voice saying the message box was full.

Blaine knew he was being ridiculous. He was over-reacting—panicking for no reason. He hadn't fought with Adrian. He barely even knew the man. There could be at least a dozen reasons why his phone was turned off. Adrian had had some beer, but nowhere near enough to put him over the limit. Anyway, what he'd drunk had been over the space of several hours.

On the other hand, if something had happened to Adrian, there was no way Blaine would know about it. Should he wait? Should he call the police? Maybe look up the number for this R&R Resorts?

He continued pacing until suddenly, out of the blue, he remembered what Adrian had said about back-to-back meetings all day. Of course! He should have realized that was the answer. Adrian was busy, so he'd shut off his cell and the messages had piled up. At least, he hoped it was the reason.

Throwing on a pair of shorts and a clean T-shirt and slipping his feet into his old running shoes, he left the condo

and drove the short distance north to Rock Bay. He had no trouble finding what he was looking for. The almost-finished buildings were clearly visible from the highway, and there were plenty of signs indicating where visitors should park. The visitor parking area was small and almost full, but after squeezing his vehicle into a spot he found at the far end, he followed the hand-lettered signs that eventually led him to the site office.

He took a deep breath and opened the door. Common sense told him Adrian was fine and pressure of work was the reason he hadn't picked up his messages. Nevertheless, he needed a little reassurance on both counts. "Is Adrian Rossi available?" he asked the middle-aged woman at the front desk.

"Sorry. Mr. Rossi is showing some prospective tenants around the complex," she informed him. "However, if you'd like to wait, he shouldn't be long. Is he expecting you?"

"No." He released his breath slowly. "I was ... I just need to speak to him for a minute, if that's okay."

The woman gave him a friendly smile. "Provided a minute's all you need, I'm sure it will be fine. The poor man has been rushed off his feet this whole, entire day. He didn't even have time for a bite of lunch. And he still has one more appointment before he's through for the day."

Blaine relaxed and returned the woman's smile. "Well, I promise what I need him for won't take long. Thirty seconds or so, max."

The woman pointed to a small table with a coffee machine and a package of plastic cups. "There's coffee over there, if you'd care to help yourself."

The words were barely out of her mouth when the door opened and Adrian came rushing in. He looked both harried and exhausted, but the moment he saw Blaine, he slowed down and his face relaxed into a welcoming smile as he came over and gave him a quick hug. "Hey, man. This is a nice surprise. Did you decide to come and check me out?"

Blaine returned his smile, relieved he didn't feel even slightly embarrassed at seeing Adrian again, or about being hugged in public. Remembering how good things had been between them last night made his smile burn even brighter. "Not exactly. The good news is you've been approved for the condo. The bad news is the attorney couldn't reach you because your cell was turned off. I said I'd see what I could do."

"I didn't give you the office number, too?"

"Just your cell."

"Sorry about that." Adrian slipped an arm around Blaine's shoulders and gave him another hug. "But thanks for coming up here. Did he happen to say when the paperwork would be ready?"

"From what he said, it's ready now. All you have to do is give him a call and let him know when you're available to go in and sign."

"Great." He pulled the lawyer's business card Blaine had given him from his back pocket and handed it to the woman

at the desk. "Marie, will you please call this guy and ask if he can see me at ... say five-thirty?"

She picked up the phone, dialed the number, and put it down again. "It's busy. I'll try again in a minute. What about the woman who's interested in opening a gift boutique here? I thought you were seeing her at five."

"I am. But it'll only take me five minutes. She made her offer conditional on getting the gift shop at Cool Harbor as well, and I'm not interested in leasing to her. Period. Not after seeing the cheap, over-priced crap she sells in her Huntington Beach location."

Marie chuckled. "And what will you do if she says she'll just settle for this one here?"

"Too bad and too late. I'll tell her I took her condition of both locations seriously, and I've rented the space to someone else."

"You are so mean." Marie chuckled, then nodded toward the open door and a tall, thin, gray-haired woman who was fast approaching. "Careful! I think that's her coming now."

Adrian grinned. "It's her. And she's fifteen minutes early."

Blaine waited in the office while Adrian went outside to speak to the would-be tenant. When he returned, in considerably less than the promised five minutes, Marie had talked to the lawyer and assured him Mr. Rossi would be at his office no later than five-thirty.

"So, how did she take it?" Marie asked.

"She was pissed, but gracious. Said the space we were offering was too small for what she had in mind, but she

thought it was more polite to tell me face to face than over the phone."

Marie hooted with laughter. "Well, the gal's got class. You've got to give her that."

"Yeah. And a whole boatload more than her merchandise does. Anyway, Marie, just so you know what's happening, I'm moving out of the motel and into a condo. You can still contact me via my cell. But if everything goes the way I hope it will, within the next day or two I'll be living in Phantom Beach. And"—he took Blaine's arm and urged him forward—"this is one of my new neighbors, Blaine Tyler. Since it's not even five o'clock yet, before I leave, I'm going to give him the special express tour."

"Whether he wants it or not?" Marie said with a laugh, as Adrian followed Blaine out the door.

In actual fact, the tour consisted of standing in the parking area, while Adrian pointed out the locations of the different facilities. He said most of the available space had now been leased, and his next job would be working with the various tenants and the subcontractors to do whatever was necessary to make the premises conform to the requirements of each individual business.

"And after you're finished here, then what?" Blaine knew the nature of Adrian's job made long-term relationships impractical, even impossible, but only time would tell if that was good thing or a bad one. "Will you be moving on to the next project?"

"When we're finished here, I'll be doing the exact same job at Cool Harbor. That was part of the deal, but—"

Whatever he was going to say was lost as Marie came out of the office, waved a hand to catch their attention, and tapped a finger against her wristwatch. "If you don't hurry, you'll miss your appointment."

Adrian checked the time by his own watch. "Damn! I didn't realize it was that late already." He hesitated, looking a tad uncertain. "Do you have any plans for this evening?"

"No. Why?"

"I don't suppose I'll be too long at the lawyer's office, so ... do you want to wait for me at the bar where we met last night? We can have a drink to celebrate the fact I have a new home—even if it'll only be temporary."

"Sure. Why not?"

* * * *

While he was waiting for Adrian to join him, Blaine thought back over the previous evening, reliving the moment when Adrian had taken the first step by reaching into his pants. As his dick reacted, his fingers tightened around his glass. Would tonight be a repeat performance? Or had last night been just a one-off?

By the time Adrian finally joined him, Blaine was just finishing a glass of iced tea. He wanted to relax and enjoy whatever the evening had to offer, be it just one drink with Adrian or more. Whatever happened, he didn't want to start raking back over the past, or get too precipitate about the future. For once in his life, he intended to simply sit back and take things as they came.

"Everything under control?" he asked as Adrian sat down on a neighboring stool and reached for his hand under cover of the bar overhang.

Adrian grinned. "Seems to be. I have a month-to-month lease that'll need to be renegotiated if I want to stay more than a year. And I can move in whenever I'm ready. Now I'm going to have a beer. After a day like today, I deserve it. What about you?"

"Beer sounds good." Blaine put his empty glass down on the bar, signaled the barman and gave him their order.

After the man returned with their drinks and they'd toasted Adrian becoming Blaine's new neighbor, their conversation moved on to generalities, touching on everything from the previous day's sports' scores, to the current state of the stock market, and, finally, the high price of gas, and a rumor about the students at the local high school threatening a one-day strike in support of a student they felt had been unfairly suspended.

Blaine enjoyed hanging out like this, having a friendly beer and talking about nothing in particular, especially with Adrian acting as if what happened last night had been nothing out of the ordinary. For Blaine it had been way out of the ordinary. It had been a lifesaver as far as he was concerned. But if there were a "next time," it wouldn't be because he felt he owed Adrian for helping him over a rough spot—it would come about naturally and be something they both wanted.

"So ... have you leased all the available space at this new hotel?" he asked more out of politeness than real curiosity.

"We're getting close. Just a couple of boutiques I'm waiting to hear back on. We're also still looking for people to operate the pro shop and the fitness center. Everyone we've heard from so far is either too inexperienced or doesn't have the necessary capital, so I just have to keep on looking and hope something will turn up. The whole aim of the resort is rejuvenation of the mind and body, so providing the best in sports and exercise is our number one concern.

"We'll have our own tennis courts, and we've already hired a couple of tennis pros. And I believe I mentioned we're working out an arrangement for our guests to play at one of the local golf courses. However, I can see the fitness center and the pro shop being a bit of a problem because we want whoever operates those facilities at Rock Bay to do the same thing for us at Cool Harbor. It doesn't matter if the two resorts have different boutiques and restaurants. We would prefer that they do. But when it comes to the real purpose of the resorts, we want both establishments to have certain things in common, so they can both offer the same basic facilities."

The moment he'd heard the magic words fitness center, Blaine's adrenaline had started pumping, and he wanted to ask a ton of questions. Was the hotel merely looking for someone to manage the fitness centers? Or were they looking for someone willing to equip and operate something along the lines of the top-of-the-line facilities he'd owned in New York? "Sounds to me like it can be difficult to find the right kind of tenant."

"It can be. Take that woman who wanted the gift shop as a prime example. R&R Resorts is four-star luxury all the way, with prices to match. So we want a gift shop to match our image. The kind of place that sells specialty or one-of-a-kind items, not paper fans and cutesy souvenirs or any of the other low-end, mass-market crap she deals in."

"In other words, you don't lease to just anyone."

Adrian swirled the remnants of his beer around in the glass. "We can't afford to. If a prospective tenant isn't able to provide the type of high quality goods and services our guests expect, then we keep looking until we find someone who can. R&R operates with the belief that anyone willing to pay the exorbitant prices we charge for a few days of rest and relaxation, not including the extras, is entitled to demand the best."

Blaine chuckled. "Exorbitant?"

"I've never heard one of our guests complain."

"What about a spa?"

"That, too." Adrian finished his beer and put down the glass, a dreamy expression on his face. "Spas are the main reason why R&R got out of the regular hotel business and started building resorts."

Blaine finished his own drink and beckoned the bartender. "Sorry, you've lost me."

Do you want another drink?"

"Better not." Adrian hesitated for a brief moment, then he took out his wallet and extracted a couple of bills. "At least not until I've eaten. I missed lunch. Let's find somewhere we can grab a bite, and I'll explain." He hesitated, grinned and

gave Blaine's hand a hard squeeze. "And after dinner, maybe we can go back to your place and listen to some more of that great music, or whatever."

Blaine especially loved the sound of *whatever*. He could hardly wait. But rather than Bobby Joe's which would always remind him of Colin, Blaine suggested a new steak and rib restaurant in the next block he'd heard was fast gaining a good reputation.

Once they were settled at a table and the waitress had taken their orders and brought them each a glass of the house red wine, Blaine said, "So, what's the big connection between spas and the company you work for?"

"R&R was started by my dad and his brother, Romeo. Dad died a couple of years ago, and left me his share. My parents separated when I was about ten and my mom got custody of me. I rarely saw my Dad, so it's not like I was brought up in the hotel business. I didn't have a clue about it, so I left it to my uncle to run things however he thought best.

"Then the building where I worked closed down, the owner of the clinic figured it was the perfect time to retire, and I was out of a job."

"So that's when you decided to learn the hotel business?"

"Not exactly." He grinned. "My uncle asked me if I had any plans. I said I was sick of working with overpaid sports' pros who all seemed to think a pulled muscle was a terminal illness. And that if I could do anything I wanted, I'd like to use my massage techniques differently and open a spa. The only way I could have done it was by selling my share of R&R, and since Uncle Romeo didn't have the money to buy me out

and no way would I sell to a stranger, we started to discuss ways around the problem."

Blaine's mind slid back to the massage Adrian had given him the night before. Maybe, with a little encouragement, Adrian would be willing to give him a full body massage, starting with his toes and finishing a little higher up, somewhere around his groin.

Just then, the waitress interrupted his thoughts by arriving with huge plates loaded with barbequed baby back ribs, baked potatoes, and salad. After making sure they had everything they needed, she told them to enjoy their food and took off to the next table.

"So, your uncle solved the problem by building a couple of resorts and making you the leasing manager?" Blaine said, unsure why Adrian would have gone along with such a weird solution.

Adrian ate a mouthful of salad and put down the fork. "No. We kicked the subject around for a while, and one day my uncle mentioned something about all the new, modern hotels having all kinds of fancy stuff like fitness centers and spas. That's when we came up with our great idea. The four hotels R&R owned at the time were old but fine, all in good repair and still showing a profit, but we knew the day would come when they'd need a total upgrade. So we decided to make that someone else's problem by selling them off and reinvesting the money in two top-of-the-line resorts to be built on property the company already owned at Rock Bay and Cool Harbor."

"And?" Blaine picked up a rib and savored the tender, succulent meat. He still didn't understand what all this had to do with making Adrian leasing manager.

"This way, Uncle Romeo will continue his old job, overseeing the running of the two new hotels, and I'll get to open the spas of my dreams in both locations. And while we're waiting for the construction people to finish, I'm keeping busy by taking care of leasing out the extra space. Which has turned out to be a good move because, as part owner, I have a vested interest in choosing the kind of people we'd like to have as tenants."

Blaine wanted to know more about the fitness centers, but in view of Adrian's involvement, he decided to put his questions on hold for now. Whether they were looking for an actual tenant or just a manager, he wasn't about to voice any interest until he'd had time to think about it from all angles.

"That was delicious," Adrian said as he pushed his plate to one side. "Are we having dessert?"

"Maybe some ice cream?"

Adrian picked up the card that had been left on the table, advertising the dessert special. "How about chocolate-raspberry mousse cake with whipped cream?"

Blaine laughed and shook his head. "Sounds more terminal to me than a pulled muscle. I think I'll play it safe and settle for a black coffee."

They'd paid the bill and were about to leave when Adrian's cell phone rang. He checked to see who was calling, said it was important, and after asking Blaine to excuse him, he went outside.

When Adrian came back a few minutes later, Blaine knew, by the absence of his normal smile, there was a problem. He said something urgent had arisen in connection with one of the specialty restaurants, and he had to go back to Rock Bay and meet with the prospective tenant's representative.

"It can't wait until tomorrow?" Blaine asked, disappointed the evening was about to end so fast.

"I wish it could. But this particular tenant is starting to become a name in the restaurant biz and, as a result, he's a bit of a prima donna. Getting him to open one of his restaurants at Rock Bay was a real coup for us ... what can I say?"

As they left the restaurant, Adrian squeezed Blaine's arm discreetly and said quietly, "I'm disappointed, too. I was really looking forward to us spending this evening together, and getting to know one another a little better. But, if I don't jump when this guy snaps his fingers, he's the kind who'll have his lawyer find a way to pull out of the lease, then sue us for wasting his time."

"Forget it. I understand. When are you planning to move into the condo?"

"I thought maybe the two of us could go to the motel after we ate, grab my stuff, and I could move in tonight. But I need to buy groceries and a few essentials as well, and I won't have time to do all that now. Anyway, gotta run. I'll see you sometime tomorrow."

* * * *

In actual fact, it was three days before Blaine saw Adrian again. When he returned home from his daily trip to the market to buy fresh fruit and vegetables, he found a note from Adrian pushed under his door. The note said the problem had turned out to be bigger than it had sounded over the phone, so now he had to fly up to San Francisco to talk to the man himself. He'd probably be gone overnight and he'd call Blaine when he got back.

Blaine dropped the note in the trash and put the fruit and vegetables he'd bought in the refrigerator. He'd been awake half the night thinking about Adrian, the time they'd spent together that first evening, and considering his options. He still hadn't come to any definite decisions, and the more time he had in which to do so would be a definite plus. As an experienced businessman, he had choices. He could open another business or find a job. And it didn't have to be in the fitness industry. Before owning his first club, he'd worked for a real estate giant, one of the big oil companies, and also a nationally advertised manufacturer of food products, so he wasn't locked into a single area of expertise.

He also had the option of doing something new and different, something he hadn't done before. He'd made a success of his first fitness club with no prior experience. Of course, making that first club pay off had been a combination of determination to succeed where someone else had failed, and financial necessity. A longtime friend had convinced him to go in on a rundown club he'd assured Blaine was loaded with potential. Blaine went in as a silent partner and put up the cash for the substantial down payment, while his friend

took on the actual running of the club. But, in less than a year, the club was in even worse financial shape than the day they'd bought it. The other guy admitted he was in over his head, signed over his share of the business to Blaine, gave him the keys, and took off. After a couple of unsuccessful attempts to sell, Blaine had the choice of either figuring a way to turn things around himself, or face losing one helluva lot of money.

Then, a chance remark from an older club member about the difficulties of keeping in shape once a person got past fifty, gave him the answer. He quit trying to compete with the other clubs and all their fancy programs and equipment, and concentrated on designing fitness programs aimed at the not so young. At the end of the second year, he'd had so much business he'd opened a second club. When he eventually gave in to pressure and sold his business to the competition, he'd had five clubs in fulltime operation and a sixth in the planning stage.

Determined to move ahead with putting his life back together, Blaine pushed Adrian and everything else to the back of his mind and spent the next two days figuring out a ballpark estimate for setting up two up new exercise facilities. When he was finished, he started checking the Internet for anything interesting in the way of business and partnership opportunities.

He scanned through the dozens of jobs and opportunities, but there was nothing he felt worth pursuing. Most of the partnership opportunities sounded risky as hell, and just thinking about what he'd experienced firsthand, trying to claw

his way up through the ranks in one of the multi-nationals gave him the shakes. No way would he do that again. He'd had his share of risky investment and corporate politics. He liked living in California, he enjoyed being his own boss, and he saw no reason why that had to change.

He also liked Adrian. A lot. And if things continued to go well between them, just maybe they had the start of something good. Against his better judgment, he allowed his mind to drift, remembering the sensation of Adrian's hot mouth sucking him off, and then the supreme moment when he began fucking him in the ass. It had never been that good with Colin, or with anyone else come to that.

As he felt himself start to harden, he unzipped his pants and took his dick in his hand. It wouldn't take much, just a few minutes, maybe less, and he could get his mind off Adrian and back on business. Instead, he removed his hand and closed his pants. He liked thinking about Adrian, and he liked being in this permanent state of semi-arousal, wondering exactly how it would go when Adrian returned and they could start satisfying each other's needs.

* * * *

When Adrian showed up at his door late in the evening of the third day, Blaine gave him a hug, invited him in and offered him a cold beer.

"How did your trip go?" he asked as they pulled out two kitchen chairs and sat down. "Did you work out the problem?"

"Yes, thank God! Originally, this guy wanted everything in the restaurant—the carpets, the walls, and the linens in a

combination of light and dark purple. Sounded totally weird to me, but that's what he wanted. And, naturally, he didn't like any of the color samples we supplied. So, after two days of staring at thousands of purple paint chips from light to dark and every shade in between, I gave up. I said, 'Why don't you go with black flooring and white walls and add in color with the furnishings?' I mean, even I know it's a basic decorating trick, but this guy thought it was the best idea he'd ever heard, and that I was a genius for suggesting it."

"When did you get back?"

"Just now. I drove here straight from the airport."

"So, you still haven't moved into the condo." He hesitated, steeling himself not to feel hurt if Adrian turned him down.

"Want to stay here tonight?"

Holding his gaze, Adrian reached for Blaine's hand, gripped it hard and then released it. "Sounds like a great idea."

Blaine went over to the refrigerator and opened the door.

"Did you get anything to eat on the plane?"

"Just the usual pretzels and peanuts."

"Meaning you're hungry. Me, too. I had a late lunch and completely forgot about dinner."

Blaine quickly put together his favorite chicken and orange salad with sunflower seed dressing, and sliced up the remaining half of a baguette. "Let's eat in the living room. It's more relaxing. What do you want to drink? Wine, beer, coffee? Or there's a bottle of rosé I just opened this afternoon. It goes well with chicken."

He wanted to forget about business and lure Adrian straight to the bedroom. His dick had been in agony since the

moment Adrian knocked on his door, and he desperately needed relief. But better he get his business proposal over with first. He waited until they'd finished eating, then he said, "From what you said the other day, I'm assuming you're still looking for someone to operate the fitness clubs at the two resorts."

"Why? You interested?"

"Depends whether you want someone to operate them independently, or if you're just looking for a manager."

"An independent operator if we can find one. You have experience?"

"Some." Blaine shrugged, then he laughed and told Adrian about the clubs he'd owned in New York. When he'd finished, he added, "Since these will be vacation resorts, you'll have guests of all ages. Catering to the younger ones is a given because they're all into health and fitness. But I guarantee you'll get more older people who'll stay longer if they know there are programs specifically tailored to their needs."

Adrian didn't say anything, but from his half-closed eyes and the way his forehead was furrowed in a frown, Blaine knew he was giving the idea some serious consideration.

"Well? What do you think?"

Adrian's eyes snapped wide open. Pulling his cell phone from his back pocket, he tapped in a number. "I think it's a great idea. But it's an important facility, so I'd like to have two minutes to run it by my uncle, if that's okay with you."

"Sure, go ahead."

Blaine cleaned up their supper dishes while Adrian talked to his uncle and was trying to decide whether to have another

glass of wine or a beer when Adrian came into the kitchen, grinning from ear to ear.

"So, what's the verdict?"

Adrian wrapped his arms around Blaine and gave him an exuberant, but sloppy, wet kiss on the mouth. "Anything that brings in the guests, Uncle Romeo is all for it. He loves your ideas. So you've got a one hundred percent yes. Subject to our lawyers checking you out the same way they do with all the other tenants. I hope you understand that?"

"No problem. It's business. Do whatever you feel necessary."

After splitting the balance of the wine between two glasses, Blaine handed one to Adrian. "Here's to our mutual success," he said, raising his glass.

"And may all our troubles be small ones?"

"Right. Let's stick to black-and-white and forget about purple."

They took their wine into the living room, where Blaine selected a couple of easy listening CDs and put them in the machine. Just being in the same room with Adrian felt good. As the first track started and someone began singing something about a new day and a new love, he sat down beside Adrian on the sofa, leaned back and closed his eyes.

He was content, relaxed, and as Adrian touched him and their mouths met, he knew this was what he wanted.

Adrian's tongue slid along Blaine's lips and invaded his mouth. Adrian needed a shave and a shower, but Blaine loved the feeling of his whisker-rough face against his, and he reveled in the sweaty, masculine smell of his body. He

wanted and needed Adrian in his life, and as his cock began to stiffen and grow, he knew he wasn't in the mood for anything slow or leisurely. He wanted it hot and hard, and he knew Adrian wanted it that way, too.

Slipping out from his partner's embrace, he went to the bathroom and grabbed a couple of condoms and the tube of lubricant. Back in the other room, he got Adrian to move off the sofa and onto the carpeted floor.

"Just relax and enjoy," he muttered as he quickly divested himself of his clothes and helped Adrian off with his.

Lying down beside him, he ran his hands lightly over Adrian's body, familiarizing himself with the smooth texture of his lover's skin, the hardness of his shoulder bones, the sprinkling of blond hair on his chest that stretched to just below his navel, the swell of flesh over his buttocks, and a tiny, puckered scar at his waistline. He pinched the flat nipples and laved them with his tongue until a soft moan of pleasure sent him off in search of other delights. His fingers and mouth traced intricate patterns down Adrian's body, licking, stroking, and biting until he reached the juncture of his thighs where he cupped Adrian's balls in his one hand and fondled his shaft with the other. Although desperate for relief himself, Blaine wanted to stretch the foreplay out just a little bit longer. He owed Adrian this.

Running a fingernail down the sensitive underside of Adrian's dick, he made sure his partner was fully aroused before sheathing them both with the condoms.

"Christ, man! Will you get to it?" Adrian groaned. "I'm dying here."

"Patience." Blaine chuckled, then, holding the other man's shaft firmly by the base as a deterrent to premature ejaculation, he swirled his tongue around the tip and began to suck him slowly into his mouth. But after a few seconds, Adrian disentangled himself and reversed their positions.

Hooking Blaine's legs over his shoulders, Adrian slathered lube on his own cock, then opened Blaine's butt cheeks and positioned the head against his hole. "I like this position much better," he said, pushing until Blaine felt the roughness of his partner's crotch hair against his skin. When he was all the way in, he bent forward and kissed Blaine on the mouth and began to squeeze Blaine's dick. "This feels so fucking good, I don't believe it," Adrian murmured against Blaine's mouth.

He withdrew slowly, then pushed back in hard, gradually increasing the speed of his strokes until he was slamming into Blaine full force. Caught up in a maelstrom of sound, scent, and pure male energy, Blaine held on tight to Adrian, savoring every last second until finally they both came within seconds of one other and roared their approval aloud. But then, as always, the glorious feeling of satisfaction started to fade, and as the storm blew itself out, they collapsed in one another's arms.

"Jeez. That's what I've been wanting for days," Adrian said, pushing himself up into a sitting position and stroking a hand over Blaine's chest, down his belly and coming to rest on Blaine's cock. After removing the used condom, he stood up and left the room. A moment later, he was back with fresh condoms and a cold beer.

"Where's mine?" Blaine inquired.

"I thought we could share," Adrian murmured with a soft laugh as he flipped off the cap, and made Blaine jump as he poured a little of the cold liquid down Blaine's chest and allowed it pool in his belly button before handing Blaine the bottle. "Hey, this tastes so good," he said as he bent over and began to slowly lick up the mess he'd made while he used his hands to stroke Blaine's cock and fondle his balls. "And you taste so good, too. I could keep doing this forever."

For Blaine it was the most exquisite agony he'd ever endured. The repetitive action of Adrian's tongue against his skin while his fingers sought out his most erogenous zones was beyond erotic. Within seconds, his dick was fully aroused and demanding attention. He was ready to shoot his load here and now, but he held his breath and squeezed his hands into fists, hoping he could stay the course but knowing it was one wish that would never be granted.

Unable to take any more, he pushed Adrian off, flipped him over onto his stomach, and then pulled him up so he was on his knees with his chest flat against the carpet. Opening Adrian's ass cheeks, he leisurely ran his tongue down his crack, then stabbed his tongue against the puckered bud until Adrian pleaded with him to stop.

"Hey man, no fair. You didn't let me finish."

Blaine laughed. "Too bad. You had your chance. Now it's mine." Moistening his forefinger with a little spit, he teased the bud open and slipped inside, exploring and stretching the muscle until it opened wide enough for him to insert a second finger. Then, as slowly as Adrian had licked his belly, he

pushed his fingers in and drew them out again. "You like that?"

"I love it," Adrian answered on a sigh. "But I'd like it a whole lot better if you'd give me that big cock of yours instead. I want to feel you inside me, riding me hard. The harder the better."

Blaine reached between Adrian's legs and grasped his cock. It was hot, it was hard, and it was just as desperate as he was himself.

"What happened to the lube we had earlier?"

"No idea. Use spit or your imagination, just hurry it up."

The last thing Blaine intended to do was hurry. He was going to do this slow and easy and savor every last moment.

"Hah. There it is," he said, spying the missing lubricant on the floor by the coffee table. Grabbing the tube, he removed the cap and inserted the mouth of the tube directly into Adrian's hole and squeezed. Once he figured there was enough in there for a long, leisurely ride, he put the cap back on and put the tube on the table.

"You gone to sleep back there?"

"Patience, man. The longer you have to anticipate, the better it is when you get there."

"That's bullshit."

"Oh, yeah? Well, consider this research."

"Research for what?" Adrian demanded in a cautious tone.

"How much better it will be when I finally allow you to come."

"Allow me?"

"Absolutely." Blaine chuckled softly as he slipped just the head of his dick into Adrian's ass. Then, as he started to push in a little, he wrapped a hand tightly around the root of Adrian's dick.

"God you're such a tease," Adrian groaned.

Blaine was dying to start pumping like hell and relieve them both. But he knew the joys of waiting, so he pulled back and then pushed in a little farther, keeping a firm grip on Adrian's prick, and his own movements to slow motion.

Adrian tried to push against him, urging him to move harder and faster, but Blaine wouldn't relent. Instead he closed his eyes, concentrating on pushing in a little, then withdrawing a little, knowing what it did to Adrian, and loving what it did to his own highly sensitized cock. Just the tiniest extra push and he'd be over the edge into nirvana. But he couldn't allow that to happen, not just yet.

"You're one cruel bastard. Anyone ever tell you that," Adrian said in a voice that sounded halfway between a strangled sob and a sigh of pleasure. "But please, don't stop. This feel fucking fantastic."

Truth was, Blaine loved it, too, but he couldn't keep it up for much longer. His dick ached and so did his balls. He started pushing deeper, pumping harder and faster. And at the last minute he released Adrian's cock, and they came together in one mind-shattering climax.

"Shit, where did you learn to do that?" Adrian asked as he tried to stand up, but flopped face down on the carpet instead. "That was nothing short of inspired."

"Yeah it was good," Blaine admitted as he stretched out beside Adrian. "Better than anything in a long time."

Blaine vaguely recalled Adrian pulling him to his feet and pushing him under the shower. And he had a hazy memory of getting into bed and feeling Adrian tuck in behind him and put an arm around his waist. After that...

* * * *

He opened one eye and closed it again. It was daylight, the sun was shining through the blinds, and the room was filled with the delicious smell of coffee and frying bacon. With an effort, he opened both eyes, stretched his arms and legs and checked the digital clock on the nightstand—seven-thirty. An hour-and-a-half later than the time he usually got up.

Just then, Adrian stuck his smiling face around the bedroom door. "Get your lazy ass out of bed, my man. Breakfast's ready, and the coffee's losing flavor with every passing second."

"Do I hafta?"

"Yup." Adrian came over and sat on the edge of the bed. Leaning over Blaine, he gave him a lingering kiss on the mouth and a quick feel under the covers.

Blaine tried to grab his hand and keep it on his awakening cock, but Adrian was too fast. Already he was off the bed and making for the door. "Playtime comes later. Right now, your breakfast is spoiling. So move that pretty ass, okay?"

"Be right there." Blaine closed his eyes and fell back against the pillows for one last, leisurely stretch before getting up to face the day.

Strangers In The Night
by Christiane France

"The eggs are getting cold."

"Coming."

"That's the second time you've said that. I thought you wanted to check out the space we've earmarked for the fitness center, so you can start making plans."

Blaine pushed back the covers and stepped out of bed.

He had a real good feeling this was one time when taking a chance had been the right thing to do.

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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 *Dirty Love*, by Lacey Savage,

available at AmberHeat.com!

Isabel Warren wouldn't dream of defying the morality statutes that forbid women over forty from ever making love again. As a medical practitioner, she understands the need for laws preventing "dirty love." The S.O.S. virus of 2030 left most of the male population infertile and turned human DNA into something resembling a microscopic jigsaw puzzle. The virus itself is undoubtedly dangerous, but older women are perhaps the most significant threat humanity has ever faced.

Yet knowing what's forbidden and keeping her feminine urges under lock and key are two different things. Especially when Isy's most recent assignment requires her to run intimate tests on Connor Flynn, a man sixteen years her junior, who seems determined to prove she's not the monster everyone else thinks she is. And if such delicious temptation wasn't bad enough, she's also got Trevor Jones to worry

about. It seems he, too, is willing to risk everything to be with her.

Two sexy men, and one woman who could destroy them both ... if they don't destroy her first...

* * * *

Don't miss *The Wolfe Proxy*, by T.D. KcKinney & Terry Wylis,

available at AmberAllure.com!

Ruthless CEO Quinton Wolfe sets off every alarm on sculptor Max Bowman's warning system. No way is that playboy getting near Max's sister, the newest shareholder in Wolfe's multinational corporation. No matter Quint's charming smile and sexy form, Max won't let his kid sister get taken in by that Lothario. Even if it means Max cuts a deal with Big Bad Wolfe himself.

And what a deal! Max becomes Quint's play toy. Good thing Max enjoys it. He'll just play the game until he can turn the tables on the CEO. Or that's the plan. But somehow, even knowing the CEO is a ruthless snake at the core, Max still lets Quint worm his way right into Max's heart.

Cutting Quint out of his life is the best thing Max can do. So why does it feel like Max might never be able to breathe again? It doesn't help that Quint's every bit as heartbroken and miserable. So maybe Max's view of Quint was skewed by the media. But can he separate the ruthless CEO from the gentle, caring man who loves him? And can he trust either one?

Strangers In The Night
by Christiane France

* * * *

Don't miss Dressed For Dying by Janet Quinn,

available at AmberQuill.com!

In 1892, reporter Sean Madigan is pitted against the New York police when he's assigned his first high-profile murder story, the slaying of the wealthy Marshal Haversham, clothing industry mogul and sweatshop owner. While Sean hunts for the killer in order to prove his worth to his newspaper editor, the madman goes on a violent spree, burning down Haversham's warehouses and sweatshops and killing young women who work within them. Each victim is found dressed in a fancy ball gown that was secretly made within the sweatshops themselves.

When Madigan's sweetheart, Bridget, becomes the killer's next target, Sean determines he will find the man and his connection to the ball gowns. But the murderer has other designs, and it soon becomes a race against time and the police to discover the fiend's identity before he silences Sean or Bridget ... permanently...

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