

Imperative 3: Saving You  
Belinda McBride

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### Imperative 3: Saving You

Belinda McBride

*In the future, we don't choose our mates; Nature chooses for us. Nature doesn't make mistakes. And if you don't pay attention to Nature's Imperative, you suffer.*

All he wanted was peace. Eternal peace.

After the death of his Imperative mate, Jason Anders threw himself into a lifestyle of sexual excess and self-punishment. Just when he thought he'd hit rock bottom, Jase was nearly killed in a brutal attack.

Nature listened to Jason's plea for peace, and gave him what he asked for. But Nature's version of peace wasn't exactly what Jase expected.

When Dr. Dove Sinclair stumbled into his life, Jase began to suspect that within her arms he might find the will to live. And when he looked into the haunting eyes of a mysterious masked man, Jason realized that Nature wasn't finished screwing with his life.

Sometimes Nature doesn't play fair. But at least she's willing to give Jason a second chance.

## The Biological Imperative

The Imperative is a mysterious biological phenomenon that has evolved within a small percentage of the human population. The Imperative triggers an individual to seek out their perfect partner, whether male or female. In some very rare cases, threesomes are formed. It is virtually impossible to deny the force of the Imperative.

Scientists believe that genetically matched partners are compelled to seek one another at prime sexual and emotional maturity.

The rest of the population believes that the Imperative is simply Mother Nature's way of fucking with their lives.

### Prologue

Jason Anders lay face down in the fine sand of the Harbor City beach. Home was less than a quarter-mile away. The elegant sailing yacht rocked gently at the harbor. But it might as well be miles distant.

Through eyes that were almost swollen shut, he could just glimpse the flag of the *Gaia* catching dawn's first rays. He tried to lift his head, but it was strangely heavy. Sand was caked in his mouth, up his nose and into the long slashes that were carved into his face. He remembered receiving those slashes. He didn't want to remember.

Oddly, he couldn't feel anything else, just the stinging in his eyes, the throbbing of his face, and the gritty feel of sand in his mouth.

With a monumental effort, he lifted his lids. This time he made out the dark shadows of the incoming tide. If he didn't bleed to death, he'd drown very soon. Would that be a good thing or a bad thing? He'd been chasing death for years, and Death had finally caught him.

Why was he so afraid?

Once again, his eyes slipped closed. He grew heavy and numb, and Jase knew that he was close, so very close to the end.

When he heard distant voices, he was almost disappointed.

\* \* \*

"So is this how you want it to be?"

He rolled to his side, pushing himself to a sitting position. The voice was familiar and welcome, yet filled him with a sense of awe, dread and painful joy. Jase wiped the sand away from his face, surprised that there was no blood on his hand. He glanced over at her as she settled to his side.

She was oddly luminescent, and her image wavered as his eyes filled with tears. He wanted to wrap her in his arms and never let her go. The Imperative flared to vivid, throbbing life inside him. Over the years, it had grown dull, like an ache deep inside. Now, once again it was sharp and bright.

“Miriam.”

Odd, he’d never before noticed how much his friend Marilyn looked like her. White blonde hair floated on the ocean breeze. Her dark brown eyes were expressive and compassionate. He’d never seen eyes like hers before. There was a whole world of life and love and passion in those eyes.

She reached out and stroked a long strand of hair from his brow. “You always kept it short before. I like this.” Her hand traveled down his smooth cheek, tracing his lips with her finger. “You look like something wild, something untamed.”

Her eyes slid past his face, looking behind him. “You’re a mess, you know.”

He followed her glance and saw himself on the sand, naked, beaten, and to all appearances, quite dead. He hoped Neil and Marilyn didn’t have to identify his body. His heart ached when he looked at that ruined shell of who he’d been.

“That isn’t what I mean.”

He turned and looked at her in confusion.

“Jase, *you* are a mess. Not the body, but the soul. You’ve taken the man I love and abused him terribly.”

Jase shook his head in denial. “I deserve... I should have saved you.”

“No, Jase, there was no saving me. Not that time.”

Images of pain and blood seared through his brain. The baby coming too soon, too far from shore to reach help in time. The sight of Miriam’s beautiful face going slack with death, even as he held her in his arms...

“I can’t live without you, Miriam, I can’t...” His throat was tight. The overwhelming joy that had been filling him mixed with fear. That fear clutched at his heart, froze the blood in his veins. “Please tell me you came for me, Miriam! Please!” He shifted, meaning to get on his knees and beg. “Please!”

She looked steadily at him, her dark eyes hot with emotion. “I’m sorry, Jase. I’d save you if I could.” She looked over her shoulder, as though listening to a voice in the distance. “Think of this as a crossing in time. Time is such a strange thing, Jase.” She cupped his face in her hand, leaning forward, pressing her lips to his. “I can’t save you this time, Jase. You owe it to me to save yourself. Fight!”

He tried to reach out and grasp her, to hold her, but she receded from his touch.

“Do you hear me, Jase? Fight!”

\* \* \*

“Fight, damn it!”

The voice wasn’t Miriam’s. It wasn’t soft or gentle, but rough and angry. “Fight, Jason!”

There was a slam to his chest, and in horror, Jase believed that the assault had started again, but through swollen eyelids, he saw figures, lights and frantic activity. A face swam into view, gray eyes behind huge black-framed glasses. A halo of vivid red surrounded her face.

“Do you hear me, Jason? I’m fighting for you. Can you fight for me?” She looked away, obviously not expecting an answer.

“Okay, his cardiac rhythm is steady. Nancy, get a surgical suite prepared. Call in Dr. Howe, we’ve got to stop this internal bleeding. Call in Dr. Ping for a consult on his face. And get me some coffee!”

She turned back to him, and somehow, Jase managed to open his eyes... or at least, one eye.

“Hey, you with me?” She reached up and stroked blood-matted hair back from his face. “I’ll get you through this, Jason Anders, I promise. Do you believe me?”

Jase spoke, or at least, he tried to speak. His lips moved, but he could see from the look on her face that she didn’t understand. She leaned closer and through the smell of blood and disinfectant, the fragrance of lavender tickled his nose, bracing and fresh, cutting right through the stench of his body.

“I can’t hear you, Jason.” She bent forward, strands of her hair brushing his cheek. Jase drew a breath, gathering his strength. He poured everything into those last two words.

“Save me.”

## Chapter One

Nervously, Dr. Dove Sinclair smoothed the front of her skirt, hoping she hadn’t picked up any stray stains between here and the clinic where she’d been observing a group therapy session. She was required to dress in a slightly more business-like manner here in the Mental Services division. In the ER, she could get by in scrubs. That suited her just fine. She and suits just didn’t get along.

Pulling in a deep breath, she knocked on Dr. Sakti Patel’s door, praying for a bit of serendipity as she entered the room. She did fine, until she noticed Dr. Malachai Drew at the window. That moment of distraction cost her dearly. The heel of her pump tripped her up and she barely caught herself on the door handle.

Dr. Patel was the head of Mental Services here at the hospital. Dr. Drew was the senior psychologist on staff. They were Imperative mated, and worked closely within the department.

“Dr. Sinclair, please take a seat.” Dr. Patel smiled warmly, and once Dove firmly anchored her butt in the chair, Dr. Drew took a seat beside her. In the ER, she took some good-natured ribbing over her tendency to crash into things. Here, they were just... kind. And cautious.

Their compassion made her even more uneasy, resulting in increased catastrophic occurrences. Between the clothing, the quiet atmosphere, and the elaborate kindness of the Mental Services staff, Dove had never felt so out of her element. She was a child of chaos, the middle child in a large family, and the only girl, to boot.

She pushed the glasses up her short nose and looked from one to the other, waiting for them to begin. Instead, the silence stretched until Dove began to fidget with her pen. Abruptly, she returned it to the pocket of her lab coat. She really didn't need to add an ink stain to her wardrobe.

“Is this about the lack of empathy thing again?” she blurted. Dove felt her cheeks go hot with mortification. That had been between her and her shift supervisor, and she didn't think it had gone onto her record.

“Lack of...?” Dr. Patel glanced questioningly over at her husband. He simply lifted a shoulder.

“No, this isn't a disciplinary meeting, Doctor. We simply want to see how your first week here in Mental Services has been. Also, it's time that we assign you a client.”

“A client?” She swallowed hard. Psych wasn't her field. She'd assumed her involvement would be of a scientific nature. “I don't have any background in counseling, Dr. Patel.”

Dr. Patel smiled gently. “Actually, you won't be involved in therapy, but you will be working one-on-one with a client. Perhaps Dr. Drew can tell you more?” She looked pointedly at the other psychologist.

“Dr. Sinclair, are you familiar with our Assisted Suicide program?”

Dove shook her head. Her heart plummeted to her stomach. She didn't think she wanted to know more.

“Primarily, it was designed for terminally ill patients with chronic pain or quality of life issues. It's a means of giving an otherwise powerless individual some control over their own life and death.” Dove nodded. She knew that much about the program already. “We also have a small group of individuals with other issues. These are the clients we rarely allow into the program -- physically healthy persons with insurmountable problems.”

Dr. Drew paused and looked over at Dr. Patel. There was a great deal of unspoken communication going on between these two. Imperative mates almost seemed to communicate on a psychic level. Dove's heart twisted just a little in envy. The Imperative had visited most of her brothers, but her gut told Dove that it had passed her by. She'd known that for years now. The Imperative wanted perfection, not tiny, clumsy women with defective vision and questionable social skills.

“We are very careful not to approve clients who are depressed or grieving. They must undergo a waiting period and extensive counseling to ensure that they are not in a temporary cycle. Your client was widowed almost nine years ago. He applied to the program five years ago. He has completed his required waiting period. He still wishes to move forward.”

“Why?” She looked from one to the other. “He’s healthy, he isn’t mentally ill. Why is his quality of life so poor?”

“Dove, this man lost his Imperative mate.”

“Oh.” Dove looked at Dr. Drew and then down at her own hands. “My mother was devastated when my father died, but the Imperative gradually faded. She lives a good life now.” But when it had first happened, her mother’s grief had been fearsome, all consuming. Her children had been very afraid for her.

“Sometimes, in a very small percentage of the population, the Imperative doesn’t release the mate who’s been left behind. The survivor is trapped with their separation anxiety and grief. Plus there are extenuating circumstances. He feels responsible for her death.” He shifted uncomfortably. “They were sailing. His wife was midway through her pregnancy and went into early labor. She bled out and died before assistance arrived.”

The skin on her arms pebbled. She swallowed the sympathy that pulled tears to her eyes. To endure almost a decade of the grief that her mother had suffered for only months? Frankly, his wish to die was understandable. Years of that would destroy the will to live. She slipped off her glasses and rubbed her eyes, looking up at a blurry Dr. Patel. “What am I to do with him?”

“Every member of the program has a mentor. You will accompany him to counseling sessions, though you won’t participate. You will also do home and safety checks. Dr. Drew will have a schedule created for you.”

He rose, glancing at the clock. “I have an appointment now, but please come to my office after lunch. I’ll go over the case in depth with you, Dr. Sinclair.”

She watched as he dropped a kiss on Dr. Patel’s forehead and left the office. As the door silently closed, Dove turned back to Dr. Patel. She was a classic beauty, at home in either business wear or in the elegant saris that she favored.

“Dove, as you know, Dr. Drew advocates for the patients. It’s his job to carry out the wishes of his clients. As the administrator of the program, I have a different job.” For a moment, Dr. Patel’s black eyes held an otherworldly light that slowly faded, giving Dove the chills. Her lightly accented voice was soft, but precise. “My job is to advocate for life. As a physician, and as a therapist, I must admit that this man is in desperate straits. However, I prefer to believe there is hope for him.”

Dr. Patel booted up the patient’s records and activated the screen in front of Dove. She quickly scanned the data, noting that the man’s name was missing. However, his story was familiar. Slowly, recognition began to crawl into her mind. She fought tears, blinking rapidly.

“He’s finished with life. However, I don’t think life is finished with him.”

“Dr. Patel, this man was one of my ER admits.”

The other woman sat back in her chair, looking speculatively at Dr. Sinclair. “And as an ER physician, what was your evaluation of his mental state?”

When a patient came to Dove in the ER, they were often stripped to the bare essentials. When life and

death were involved, other priorities slipped away.

“If he’d been truly suicidal, he wouldn’t have fought off his attackers. When I asked if he would fight to stay alive, he said yes.” Actually, with the very last of his strength, he’d asked her to save him. That moment was still too raw, too personal to share.

“At that time, did you believe that he was suicidal?”

“No. Disturbed, certainly, given the extensive prior damage to his body, but not willing to die without a fight.”

Dr. Patel leaned forward and looked steadily into Dove’s eyes. “Dove. What I am about to say remains between us. This is confidential.”

She nodded in agreement.

“What is your priority as a doctor? When a patient comes to you in the ER, what is your primary goal?”

“To save the patient’s life.”

“And that is your goal with this client. Whatever it takes.”

“But he’s chosen to die. He’s been accepted to the program.”

“And we don’t want him to graduate from the program.” She sat back, never breaking eye contact with Dove. “Mr. Anders had no therapy or counseling following the death of his wife. He rejected crisis counseling after the attack that nearly killed him. This man hasn’t given himself a chance to heal. He’s refused to cooperate with the police investigating the case. He’s only agreed to counseling because it’s required for the program.”

Dove sat up straighter in her chair, her brain going to work on the problem. Mentoring a psych client was out of her area of expertise. But saving a life? That she could do. She watched as Dr. Patel transferred the man’s data to a mail file and sent it to Dove’s account.

“How long do I have until he completes the program?”

“Two months. He’ll be in counseling almost daily, plus workshops on end of life issues.”

Dove bit her lip, gathering all the knowledge she had of this man. She remembered all the gossip she’d heard about him, the conversations she’d eavesdropped on when he’d first been admitted to the hospital. Jase Anders was well known to a certain class of people. He was the pain slut. He would allow anyone to do anything to his body, in exchange for the punishment he craved. His story had almost broken her heart. Now she had some understanding of his motives. He blamed himself for the death of his Imperative mate. It all fell into place.

Person to person, she had no clue how to deal with his problems. But doctor to patient? Dove Sinclair was a doctor. She saved lives. She wouldn’t let Jase Anders go without a fight.



## Chapter Two

The blaring music pounded in his ears painfully. The drink in his hand was too strong and laced with a benign opiate. He sipped and winced at the bitterness of the fluid on his tongue. Already, the stuff was threading through his system, warming his face and tickling his sex. It was tonight's house aphrodisiac.

Jase threaded his way to the kitchen, flinching at the occasional hand on his ass, the tugs at his clothing. The kitchen was empty, giving him a moment of blissful solitude. He spilled the expensive, mind-numbing beverage into the sink and then rinsed the glass. There were other drinks sitting in a crowded mass on the counter, but none appealed. He was thirsty. The need for a buzz wasn't pounding at him tonight.

Jason opened the freezer and found ice, and then filled his glass from the faucet. For a moment he rubbed the cool glass on his forehead, relishing the feel of moisture on his face.

He'd just endured the most hellish hour down in the dungeon, at the mercy of an old friend. Flora's tastes were quite specific where Jase was concerned. She beat him, she fucked him, and then she walked away. She respected his limits, once he'd finally gotten around to realizing that he did indeed have limits.

But tonight had been different.

After she'd ridden him to her climax, he'd rolled away, slipping the condom from his rapidly wilting cock, not wanting her to see that he hadn't come. Flora had lain behind him, tracing his back with almost gentle fingertips. "How did you get this scar?"

*Which one?* he'd wondered. He carried so many.

Jase had twisted, looking at the faint, smooth line that nearly circled his waist.

"You gave me that one, before..." Before the attack. Before his twisted psyche had taken another turn for the worse.

She moved away from him, sitting up. When she spoke, her voice was harsh. "I did that?" Forcefully, Flora pushed him to his belly, her long black hair tracing over his skin. Jase flinched as her hand passed close to his face. Her stillness betrayed... something. Guilt?

"I... Why didn't you go to the doctor? You could still get it removed."

Yes, nowadays medicine could remove scars, making a person look good as new. But some scars shouldn't be invisible. Already, Jase carried too many invisible scars.

He hadn't answered Flora, and she slid out of the bed, watching him as she pulled her leather pants back on. Once again, she'd pulled her Femme Homme persona on like a cloak of power, dark, dangerous and beautiful. Jase had smiled, knowing that Flora had seen something that disturbed her greatly. Something about herself.

"I won't be needing you anymore."

“I know.” He’d rolled over and sat up, not even bothering to hide his body. He and Flora had been feeding one another’s sickness for months now, and oddly, he felt a bit sad that this was the end. He’d actually grown to like her.

“I don’t think...” She swallowed hard, a sick look riding her beautiful features. Like him, Flora didn’t hide her identity, she was that self-confident. “I didn’t think I was really hurting you.” She dropped her head. “That’s a lie, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” He’d spoken softly, seeing that Flora was at a turning point that she hadn’t foreseen.

“You don’t like this anymore.”

No, he didn’t. Tonight the pain had simply been pain. It hadn’t masked the screaming agony in his brain. It hadn’t calmed his spirit. He ached over his ribs. Tomorrow there would be bruising.

“Then why, Jase?”

He shrugged, not having an answer to that question. Flora held his gaze for a long moment, and then she was gone. Another person had vanished from Jason Anders’ life.

\* \* \*

“Here you are!”

He opened his eyes. The latex-clad couple that stood before him were almost nightmarishly beautiful. Her blonde hair flowed to slender shoulders, the mask that hid her features anchored the hair back from her face. Full, cosmetically enhanced lips were painted the red of a tomato, and her blue eyes were darkened with airbrushed shadow.

Jase ran his eyes appraisingly down her body. She wore tight black shorts and a black lace bra. Other than her spike-heeled boots, she wore little else. Her companion matched, only his neck was circled by a studded collar with a loop for a leash. He wore an open vest revealing ringed nipples. Long, muscular legs were brown and naked, and his feet were bare. The mask he wore was similar to hers, pushing his black hair into a flowing mane. Full, sensual lips were tinted grayish blue, and a devilish goatee capped his chin. A slender mustache reached down to meet it. His kohl-smudged eyes were dark and beautiful. Those eyes caused a twist somewhere deep in Jase’s soul.

“Hello, Lady Selene. John.”

Assumed names, of course, but in spite of the masks and false names, Jase recognized the couple. She was an accountant with a small firm in the city. He wasn’t completely sure about the man, but recognition tickled at the back of Jason’s mind. He swallowed hard, pushing back the ever-ready panic that swamped him when he encountered a familiar stranger.

Selene liked to whip her subs till they bled, and then she masturbated as her current male ass-fucked the sub. She liked to hold their leashes, controlling the sex. He didn’t know which of the three of them was more whack. Probably him, since he allowed it. He’d never been with this new pet. He probably never would.

“We’d like time with you tonight, slut.”

Normally, the offer would have sent chills of anticipation racing along his skin, paired with a sick lurch of the gut. Tonight, only the sick feeling was there.

"I'm tied up for the evening, Lady."

This was the third offer he'd turned down tonight. He'd gone with Flora only through habit.

Anger sparked in Selene's eyes, and her hand gripped convulsively on the handle of her whip. She wasn't very good with her whip. The exquisite sting of Flora's blacksnake was a kiss compared to Selene's crude lashes.

John stood poised and ready to force the issue. Jase sipped his water, making full eye contact, letting her know he wasn't playing.

"What about if we leave out the punishment? Just fuck?" She ran a glistening pink tongue over those red lips.

He stifled a shudder. He didn't need to look to know that John's cock was brutally erect inside those latex shorts. While he was completely submissive to his current partner, the other man had been lusting after Jason for months. The feeling had been mutual.

Unfortunately for them both, Jase had been unable to tolerate a cock up his ass since the attack. He hadn't had a climax since his break-up with Neil. Just getting an erection was problematic these days.

And now? Seeking punishment seemed to be habit rather than compulsion. Now he was oddly peaceful, probably healthier than he'd been in nearly a decade. Even the heavy, ever-present pall of grief seemed to have dulled. There was finally a light at the end of the tunnel of his dark life. "Sorry, guys, I'm busy."

Lady Selene shrugged and turned away, John's melting dark eyes fixed him with a hot, needful gaze. Reluctantly, he followed his mistress from the small kitchen. Jase let out a breath that felt like it had been trapped in his lungs for hours.

Just six months ago, he'd have gone with them, and he'd have enjoyed it. John had been haunting Jason's dreams, firing his lust. But that had been *before*.

Jase followed them back to the party, propping himself against the doorjamb as he watched the milling crowd. Black was the predominant color choice, leather the favored textile. As far as he could see, Jase was the only person unmasked. He wore faded blue jeans and a simple cotton shirt that hung open. His feet were bare, and his hair cascaded past his shoulders in long, loose waves. It was his job to be easily identifiable. He was the party favor, the pain slut. He didn't care who knew him. None of these people would come to his funeral.

A hand rested on his ass, sliding down to cup his balls. He shivered a bit at the sensation. The hand tightened, squeezing mercilessly. "Hey, slut."

He gritted his teeth against the pain. "Hey, Magpie."

"Margaret, Lady Margaret, to you." Her chin was up, her eyes angry. "Jase, can I talk to you? In private?"

He shrugged and followed her back into the kitchen. Margaret wasn't the homeowner, but she organized the parties. Her little soirees were the hottest ticket around. Drugs and alcohol flowed freely, the sex was casual and abundant. And she always provided the party favors.

"I'm getting some complaints that you aren't playing."

"I'm not an employee, Margaret. I get invited like everyone else."

"Well, maybe we need to stop sending invitations."

He shrugged and sipped his water. Two months, what was the big deal? In two months, he would be unavailable on a permanent basis. Idly, he rubbed his forearm where the bones had been broken not so long ago.

"Oh, the injuries... are they still painful?" To her credit, Margaret was one of the few from the party circuit who'd visited him in the hospital. Flora had come by as well. Most weren't aware of the extent of his injuries. Only Neil and Mari knew that, and the doctors, of course.

"Yeah, Maggie, I'm still in pain. I tried... but not yet."

"Maybe you shouldn't have come."

There was no maybe. Jase definitely shouldn't have come. He looked out into the large house at the crowd. They were dancing, drinking, a few were fucking against walls, in semi-private corners. The designer opiate in the drinks lowered inhibitions while raising libido.

He felt as though he were seeing it all through the eyes of a stranger.

*What would she think?*

The question had never occurred to him before, and it sent chills down his spine. Miriam's face suddenly loomed in his mind, and every nerve in his body screamed in shame. Dizziness washed over him momentarily.

"Look, Jase, why don't you head up to one of the bedrooms, take some time out. That'll make it look like you're busy."

Her voice broke into his abstraction like a bell ringing in the distance. Not a bad idea. His head hurt from the noise, and his eyes and nose burned from the smoke in the air.

"Up the stairs. The bedrooms are to the left, just look for an empty sign."

She left him with a pat on the ass. He clenched his jaw with unaccustomed irritation. As Jase slowly ascended the stairs, the smoke and heat of the room followed him. At the second floor landing, he turned back and looked down at the crowd. Several people were crowded around a woman who was straddling the back of a naked man. He wore only a mask, a slave collar and an anal plug with a tail. He had a bridle clenched between his teeth.

Jase had never pursued humiliation, only pain. Abuse. His playmates took him in private. The games they played were much darker than what he was watching downstairs. Jason's playmates liked to dance with death. Only social constraints and fear of the law had kept a few from inflicting permanent damage on

Jason's willing body. Flora was far from the worst of the lot.

He wandered down the hall, looking at the doors. Maggie brought little hanging signs that indicated if the room was vacant or occupied. Not everybody liked to do their fucking in public.

He reached the end of the corridor before finding an empty room. With a sigh of relief, he slipped into the darkened space, turning the sign and shutting the door behind him. The silence soaked into his skin like water on a hot day. He was already without shoes, so Jase crossed to the bed and flopped down, only to bolt back up when he landed on a warm body. A woman's shriek sent him across the room.

"Sorry! Sorry!" He brought up the lights on the dimmer, revealing a very female form on the bed.

"Oh... oh my God! That's okay... I'd just drifted off..."

She was fumbling with her mask, securing it to her face. Most didn't care so much once they were in private. This one really didn't want him to recognize her. She scooted up into a sitting position, her legs crossed.

"Love the outfit."

"Oh..." She pulled self-consciously at the skirts. He really did love it. While everyone else was tricked out in black fetish gear, she wore a laced-up corset made of brown distressed leather. Her skirt was leather to the waist and hips, voluminous folds of fabric and ruffles cascading from underneath.

"You're dressed as a pirate!"

"Or a wench." She smiled reluctantly. The brown of the leather looked good with the vivid red of her hair, which was pulled up into a sleek tail at the crown of her head. "My... friend told me it was a costume party."

"Ah." He stifled a smile. A lamb among wolves, then. "I guess this isn't what you were expecting."

She gave an ironic little laugh. "There was an old song, a really old song about a guy who went to a party his mother told him not to go to."

"Twentieth century. The Three Dog Night."

"Yeah. That's pretty much how I feel." She looked at him speculatively. "Why are you hiding out?"

Jase found a chair and pulled it closer to the bed. He sat, long legs stretched out and propped on the mattress. "Just not in the mood. I was getting tired of having my ass grabbed."

"You too? Jeez! I felt like I had a sign around my neck! I swear my bottom is bruised!"

"Well, you are wearing a sign of sorts." She looked at him in question. "The collar."

"Deb... my friend gave it to me." Her hands flew to the brown leather band that circled her slender throat. She wasn't a large woman, but her breasts swelled invitingly over the leather bodice. The leather collar played up the fragile appearance of her neck.

"It's got a loop for a leash."

“A leash? Like a dog collar?” Behind the mask, her eyes went wide. In this light, he couldn’t tell what color they were.

“That advertises you as an available submissive.”

“Oh, damn!”

“Maybe your friend isn’t as good a friend as you think.”

Her cheeks went red with embarrassment. He could literally see the color bloom on her skin as it traveled from her face, to her neck, to her bosom. For the first time in months, Jase felt his cock grow heavy with interest.

Once again, he let his gaze wander. She was small, but shapely, with a tiny waist and rounded hips. Again his eyes settled on her breasts. He stretched out a bare foot and ran it along her leg. Her skin felt warm and smooth. Her bare foot was small and slender. She went still but didn’t retreat.

“Why did you come tonight?” His voice was soft, and a bit husky. Seductive.

Her lips parted. They were bare of make-up, pink and soft. They were the pink of a seashell, the pink that dances over the ocean at dusk. “I haven’t been out in a long time.”

“Lonely?”

“Yeah, I suppose I am.” Her smile was a bit sad. She looked a bit like he felt.

They sat in companionable silence for a time. Jase sipped his water, feeling cold beads of sweat running down the glass onto his hand.

“Is that water?”

He nodded.

“Could I... Whatever was in my drink...”

He moved to sit on the edge of the bed. Handing the glass to her, he watched in fascination as she swallowed. He shook his head, wondering what the hell was going on. Jase felt like his senses were suddenly overly acute. She leaned forward, handing the glass back. Their hands touched, and they both froze.

\* \* \*

Dove had been floored when she’d woken up to a warm body settling over hers. Without her glasses, she couldn’t see well, but when the lights came up, she could tell that the warm body was tall and slender, attached to a pleasing face with an abundant fall of hair. Blonde, wavy hair.

He didn’t have a mask on, and wore street clothing rather than the elaborate and shocking costumes that the other party-goers were sporting. He smelled good, like soap and ocean and whatever his clothing had been laundered in.

He was barefoot. She liked that.

But he didn't fit, and she couldn't quite figure out what he was doing at this party, in this room. She looked at the glass where their hands had frozen and was overwhelmed by the sudden urge to touch him, to get closer, to become intimate with this stranger.

She hadn't been quite honest with him. Her friend had pressured her to come, and had misrepresented the nature of the party, but Dove had been curious once she'd entered the house. The smells of vice hung heavy on the air, and the behavior she'd observed was certainly exhibitionist. While it was shocking, it was also fascinating. But when hands started touching, pulling at her, Dove grew overwhelmed. Debra had vanished, leaving her alone and feeling desperately out of place.

She could have called a cab, but that would mean leaving the safety of the bedroom. Dove had fallen asleep wondering what the hell to do next.

Now, she was again wondering what to do. The cool surface of the glass contrasted with the warmth of his hand. She glanced up at him. This close she could see the sculpted contours of his face. He was shockingly handsome, though perhaps his face was a bit too lean, his expression a bit too sad.

"Why did you come tonight?" She threw his question right back at him.

"Habit, I suppose. I haven't been out in awhile either."

That broke the spell, though he remained close, sitting on the edge of the bed. He sat in profile to her, his long hair dropping to mask his face. He then glanced her direction.

"Loneliness." His voice was so soft, she almost didn't hear the word.

He reached out almost unthinkingly and ran his fingertips along the length of her shin. Her sex gripped, but at the same time, it felt comforting. Good. Her nipples drew tight and her lips tingled in a strange fashion.

"I find myself overwhelmed by a need to kiss you."

It was a confession. Again, he looked at her. This close, she could see brilliant blue eyes and full, sensual lips. She wondered what he looked like when he smiled. Unconsciously, she licked her lips, and then stopped, seeing his eyes falling to her mouth. "I..." She swallowed hard, her mouth suddenly dry. "Yes... I feel that too." Her own confession. She should be afraid of the situation, of her reaction. But she wasn't.

He twisted on the bed, turning to face her on his knees. He didn't move eagerly, or aggressively, simply with deliberate intent. A hand settled on her bare shoulder, pressing her back into the soft pillow. He followed her down, his lips meeting hers gently, lingering for a moment, and then pulling away. His hair fell down like a curtain around her face. "Do I know you?"

She looked up at him. His eyes were familiar, but she couldn't place him. She shook her head, wondering at her own behavior. Again, he lowered his head and kissed her longer this time, deeper, urging her lips to part before exploring, tasting.

Her heart raced, and for the first time in Dove's life, her body heated with arousal. When he broke the kiss, she gasped a bit. Her hand caught the back of his neck. She pulled him back down, and he lowered



his body over hers. She felt his heart race, felt the swelling of his erection. Part of her brain called out for common sense, but her body overruled that tiny voice.

His hands came to her face, fingers tracing lightly over the edges of her mask, but he didn't try to take it off. Instead, he stared into her eyes for a long moment. He returned to her lips, kissing, exploring, leaving her mouth to nip at her jaw, to nuzzle at her ear. Dove was shocked to hear a groan break from her body.

"Baby, this is my stopping point." He rose up on his elbows, breath coming fast. This close, she could see his face clearly. So beautiful. "I've got to stop now, if I stop at all."

"Don't stop." Whose voice was coming from her mouth? But then she said it again. "Don't stop."

He paused for a moment. She brought her hand to his cheek, stroking the fine, tanned skin. She ran the pad of her thumb over his lips, tracing the shape before cradling his face in her hand. He kissed her again.

\* \* \*

Jase couldn't think straight. He couldn't recall ever seeing gray eyes so deep and tender, but he knew her. *Heknew* her! Her touch was gentle, silken, completely lacking the hard edges, the pain he usually needed for arousal. Under him, her body was soft, willing. Her breasts swelled from the top of the bodice. It took little effort to slide them free of the confines of the leather. He brushed the peach-colored nipples with the tip of his finger, watching them crinkle into arousal. He bent to taste, fluttering his tongue over the surface, and then pulling the nipple into his mouth, sucking hard. Her body arched, twisted, her hips thrusting up toward his. Arousal twisted through his body, his balls grew tight, and his cock grew even harder.

What was wrong with him? He paused for a moment, collecting himself. The better part of Jason urged him to stop, that he wasn't worthy of joy, not even the fleeting pleasure of sex with a stranger. The primal part urged him on, begged him to bury himself in her soft depths, driving her to climax again and again. Need won out over conscience.

With trembling hands, he unlaced the skirt, pulling it down her hips, enjoying the image of her pale body clad only in the brown leather corset and simple cotton panties. He glanced at her face. While she was masked, every thought, every emotion showed clearly. Her lips were parted and swollen, her face tense with arousal.

He slipped the panties down, looking at her fiery curls. She was glistening with arousal, calling his body onward. Crazy! This was crazy! He hadn't wanted anyone like this in ages! He hadn't wanted a woman since...

He put the thought aside. This wasn't the time to go backwards. Jase shifted until he knelt at her side, running his hands gently over her belly, down her thighs. When he prompted, she willingly parted her legs, giving him room to touch. He gently parted her labia, trailing his fingers through her slick tissues. Her thighs grew tight and tense, and Jase moved again, this time settling between her thighs, lowering his face to her sex.

At the first touch of his mouth to her pussy, she gasped, clutching his hair, winding it around her fists. He braced for the inevitable yank, but it didn't come. Instead she stroked, running her fingers through the length as though it were fine silk. He tongued her, and she massaged his temples. He circled her clit, stabbed into her depths, and still, she rode him carefully. Gently. He was stunned by his reaction.



“Baby, I can’t hold on...”

She coaxed him up her body. He straddled her waist as she unfastened the lower buttons on his shirt. As he slipped out of his shirt, she unfastened the buttons on his jeans. Funny that he should suddenly notice how loose they’d grown. He’d lost weight in the hospital, and maybe even more since then. When had he last looked at himself? Jase didn’t even own a mirror.

For the first time in months, he noticed that his belly was no longer flat. It caved a bit, his hipbones and ribs showing through his skin. He was still fit, still muscular, but he’d bypassed lean and was now thin.

His swollen cock swung loose from his pants, and in fascination, he watched as she fisted him, running her hand firmly along his length, her thumb finding and stroking his most sensitive spots. She cupped his testicles, rolling them, testing their weight before leaning forward and licking. He shuddered. It was strange... so very strange to feel this way.

Jase shifted back between her legs, untangling himself from his jeans, rising up on his knees. She looked wanton and yet innocent, wild and gentle. Jase fisted his cock. He slotted the head into her entrance, shivering as her warmth surrounded him. Rocking gently, he worked his way into her tight body, and then moved forward, covering her, coming down almost face to face.

He kissed her, and as their lips brushed, he thrust. She met him with a surge, bringing him home. Slowly, she undulated, her back arching, eyes dropping shut.

“Oh God, yes...” Her voice was soft and hoarse with passion. Her arms wrapped around his waist, holding him close.

He pulled back and surged forward once more, and with every thrust he sank deeper until finally, he’d reached the end of her passage, snug and warm and gloriously wet. The frantic urgency had mellowed into something deep and compelling, holding him as close to her body as possible. He wanted to sink inside of her, to pull her into himself.

Instead, Jase wrapped his arms around her and rolled them to their sides. He couldn’t move as freely, couldn’t sink quite so far into her depths, but the intimacy was blinding. She stroked his chest, ran her hands down his waist and around to his buttocks. He couldn’t move, didn’t want to move. Jase just wanted to stay here, buried in this stranger’s warm, comforting body. He wanted her arms around him, holding him close, filling him with peace.

She reached up, pushing the hair back from his face. She tucked it behind his shoulder before pulling his head down for a kiss. She explored his mouth, stroking her tongue alongside his, pulling back to nip his bottom lip before sucking on it lightly.

What his brain wanted and his body needed were two separate things. Involuntarily, his hips began to swivel into hers. She pulled herself close, her head tucked under his chin. Her leg hiked up onto his hip, pulling him deeper into her channel, until desire roared through him.

For years, Jase had been bottom, never taking the lead during sex. Tonight, he rolled her to her back, mounted her body, looking down at this sweet little bit of serendipity that he’d stumbled upon.

With every thrust into her body, her breasts jiggled over the top of the corset. She rolled her head to the side, bit her lip and moaned. He kissed her softly, catching the sound, letting it mingle with his own.

Her body arched into his sharply, quickly. She climaxed around him, her channel fluttering and rolling along his cock. Jase held steady, watching her for his cue. When she crested, he went still, letting her plunge down on him hard, holding him in an iron grip.

She panted, eyes shut, lips parted. "Oh my goodness."

He felt her belly heaving under his. She'd pulled him down to her body, and he only just managed to keep his weight from collapsing over her. He didn't fight her hold, giving her the time she needed to recover.

"Ready?"

She nodded. "Can you help me get this thing off?"

Jason reluctantly pulled out of her body, helping her to her knees. He examined the corset, finding that it clasped at her side. Quickly, he'd freed her body, and there she knelt, naked and pale and soft. She was cute as a button in her kinky leather mask.

Jase gave a playful growl and buried his face in her shoulder, nipping, sucking at her skin. He loved it when she shivered, clasping his arm for balance.

"The mask next?"

Her hand flew to the leather that concealed the upper part of her face. Oddly, he didn't recognize her. Jase knew most of the partiers downstairs. He didn't know her. But he felt like he should.

"Sorry... I want... have to keep it." She sounded absurdly apologetic and he laughed. Of course she wouldn't want Jase to know who she really was. Truthfully, he might end up following her home like a stray mongrel, starving for a gentle touch.

That was something he hadn't wanted in so very long.

"Make love to me. Please." His whisper was painful in his throat. Even as the words escaped, he regretted them. He'd regret this interlude so very much when it ended.

\* \* \*

Holy. Shit.

"John" didn't think he could take much more of this.

Selene had told him to wait in the end room. She wanted to give Jase another try for some one-on-one action. Lady Margaret had agreed to help get Jase upstairs. He'd ducked into the bathroom when the wrong person came in, and had been biding his time, waiting for the chance to escape.

Instead, his intended target came in and promptly began boffing the girl!

The plan had been for Selene to start some action with Jase. "John" would then enter the picture for a cozy threesome. It rankled his conscience that he'd agreed in the first place. It seared his mind that his cock had gone hard as stone at the very idea of finally being with Jason Anders.

It terrified him. He'd never been with a man before, and John was very frightened at what this meant. What frightened him more was the raging physical reaction he'd had to the redhead, and to their lovemaking. His fists clenched at his side, fighting the desire to glide into the room and insert himself squarely between the two.

He wanted to taste Jason's mouth after he'd kissed the girl. He wanted to go down on her, eat her, and then share her sweet juices with the other man.

Instead, he was trapped in a dark bathroom, peering through the crack in the door. And as soon as they were finished, one or the other would catch him in here.

Somehow, that excited him more.

They were on their knees facing one another. The woman stroked his face gently, as gently as he could wish for Jase. Over the past year that he'd watched the other man, he'd learned to separate the tortured soul from the façade. He knew Jase craved physical suffering in order to muffle his spiritual pain. He wasn't sick, he wasn't a slut. He was in pain that was so severe that the only way to combat that agony was with another pain.

Selene would have wanted him to hurt Jason. He didn't think he could do that. And from the looks of it, Jason's new lover was no different.

Her hands were gentle on his body. He ached when Jason flinched, expecting a pull on his hair or a slap on the face. Instead, she stroked and caressed him with care. She touched him like a lover.

"Mount him," he whispered softly.

She moved closer to Jase. He grasped her bottom so that she straddled his thighs. He lifted her slightly, and John could see both their faces as he penetrated her body. He spread his knees, giving her a better position, and she wrapped her arms around his neck.

She rode him.

John's hands trembled just a bit as he slipped his pants open, pulling out his aching cock. He was already wet with arousal. A little spit slicked him up. He stroked in time to their movements, reaching in to pull up his balls, tugging them a bit as the pressure built. He'd be behind her, sliding his cock along her bottom, bumping, stroking into Jase as they moved in synchronized rhythm. If she was willing, he'd enter her ass, moving into that snug passage, feeling Jase's cock tight against his own...

He stifled his gasp, breathed through the climax that was building in his groin, his back. He felt his belly go tight, and even as John squeezed the root of his cock in a desperate attempt to hold back, she was bucking, thrusting down hard on Jase, and he was matching her, a low, keening groan building in his chest.

As his climax grasped him in its vise-like grip, John watched the couple as they climaxed together, and he thought they were beautiful.

\* \* \*

"Oh..."

Jase went tight, then loose, spasms rolling through his entire body, feeling the silk of his semen mingling with the liquid heat of her body. He lost all strength, all ability to hold himself upright, so he remained where he'd finished, draped over her body, head buried on her shoulder. Tremors shook him like a leaf, and as tears involuntarily leaked from his burning eyes, she tightened her hold, keeping him in place.

Jase laughed then, maybe the first real laugh he'd had in years, but even as it broke from his body, sadness quickly took its place. He wrapped his arms around her, burying his face into her skin, unwilling to let loose of the fleeting sense of happiness she'd delivered to him.

"Gotta lie down... just for a minute."

At his words, she moved back, parting their bodies. She was shaking as much as he. They collapsed onto the mattress, heads landing on the pillow only by accident. They didn't speak. Jase didn't think he could hear past the pounding of his heart.

"Are you all right?" Her whisper was soft in his ear. She lay in his arms, their limbs twined tightly, sweat cooling on flushed skin.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Thank you, babe."

It felt odd, lying there in the dimly lit room, a strange woman in his arms, offering him so much comfort and ease. She gave a little sigh, and he could feel her drifting off to sleep.

"Baby, I won't be here when you wake up."

"I know."

"This meant... so very much to me."

She nodded, her skin smooth against his shoulder. She kissed his cheek and he smiled, letting himself drift away. It had meant something to her as well.

### Chapter Three

"Dr. Sinclair?"

She glanced up from her computer with a bit of annoyance. In the ER, she grabbed meals and breaks when she could. Dove cherished the novelty of taking her lunch whenever she wanted. And the luxury of an actual eight-hour day was unprecedented!

"There's a man here to see you. He says that he's a detective."

Behind the clerk's shoulder, Dove caught sight of a tall, dark figure. Her heart fluttered and her innate clumsiness suddenly manifested as her elbow smacked into a vase of flowers on the desktop.

She occasionally spoke with police in the ER, but having a detective seek her out was unusual. In fact, she knew only one detective. Dove nodded at the clerk, setting her partly eaten sandwich to the side. The clerk stepped back, allowing the man to enter.

"Hello, Detective Jain."

"Dr. Sinclair."

The silence between the two stretched out, and Dove's mind went blank. It always did around this man. Desperately, she tried to pull it together. "You were investigating the attack on Jason Anders. Have you made any progress with that?"

He gracefully lowered himself into the chair across from her tiny desk, and she flushed at her lack of manners. Dove automatically ducked her head defensively as she generally did around handsome men. Detective Jain certainly fit the description of a handsome male. Maybe he went beyond that.

His hair was inky black. His eyes were dark and expressive, heavily outlined by ridiculously long, thick lashes. His nose arched slightly, accenting lips that were sensually curved. In the months since she'd last seen him, he'd grown a distinctive mustache and goatee. His hair was longer, waving back from his face past his collar.

Her eyes sought to look anywhere but at his face, and so she looked at his hands, long and gracefully tapered. He was broad and muscular, and much too large for this tiny room. He wore no rings so he was apparently available. She felt another wave of chagrin at the direction of her thoughts.

"There have been more attacks. Last night culminated in a fatality."

His voice was musical, lightly accented much as Dr. Patel's. He wore jeans and a white cotton shirt, a black jacket over that. Under the desk, she pinched her wrist, trying to force herself away from his looks.

"Is it an escalation in behavior, or do you think they were simply too rough with the victim?" She successfully brought her thoughts to the Wilder gangs that had been wreaking havoc in the outer fringes of the city.

"In the known attacks since Mr. Anders', this particular group has grown progressively more dangerous. I believe that they've moved from being a simple Wilder gang to intending the death of their victims."

"You're sure that it's one group in particular?"

"The DNA you pulled off of Jase... Jason... identified three separate suspects."

"Oh. Nobody told me that."

His eyes met hers, and a spark of anger flared in their depths then quickly faded. Dove had the uncomfortable sense that he was angry at her.

"None of my business, I suppose. What can I do to help?"

"I need to talk about Jason Anders again."

"You could probably get more information from Mr. Anders himself. I treated him in the ER and followed up once or twice."

"You are treating him now."

"No... I'm just..." She broke off, aware of how close she was to violating Jase's confidentiality. "In all honesty, I haven't seen him since he was here in the hospital last year."

The detective looked at her with disbelief clear in his dark eyes. "I was given to understand that you will be Jason Anders' attending physician. As you're now in Mental Services, I assumed that you are treating him in therapy."

"I don't know who told you that, but any information about Jason Anders' current treatment is confidential. I can talk to you about the morning he was in the ER, but his involvement here is unrelated."

She felt the heat of anger rising up her spine. His tone was disrespectful, bordering on rude. Whatever the reason for his attitude, she didn't need it.

Abruptly, Dove stood, ready to escort him from the office. He sighed deeply, clearly tamping down his own temper.

"Anything I say to you about Jason's current treatment would be a breach of ethics, Detective Jain. I'll talk to you about the attack."

"Is it within your ethics to fuck your patient?"

"What?" The word shot out of her mouth like poison. "I've never even met Jason, beyond when he was in a coma. How dare you?"

"He was seen with an attractive redhead at a party last week. That redhead was you."

Dove's eyes widened. How on Earth had she been recognized? And Jason Anders? That was Jason? Matted, bloody hair and electric blue eyes...

"Oh my God." Dove dropped back into her chair, shocked and numb.

"You didn't know?"

She shook her head, belatedly remembering to be embarrassed. She'd had sex with a complete stranger. She'd gone to the party, been duped and tricked and made to feel like an idiot. Her drink had been spiked, and then she'd had sex with a stranger. Not just any stranger, but her patient.

"How could you not recognize him?" Detective Jain was looking at her with a skeptical look on his face. "Jase Anders isn't really hard to miss."

"I'm legally blind. I didn't have my glasses with me."

He lifted a brow skeptically.

“Look, Detective Jain, you didn’t see him those first couple weeks. He was a mess, nearly unrecognizable.”

“I saw the photos, read the report.”

“But you didn’t see him. His face... both cheeks were split wide open. His entire face swelled until it was difficult to see that he was even human.” Seeing that he wasn’t convinced, Dove turned to her keyboard and opened a coded file. She activated the screen at his side of the desk. “Did you see these?” It was a sequence of tight close-ups of Jase’s face and body. He’d no doubt seen the images on a print-out or as thumbnails in a report. These were life-size and in full color. He hissed and looked away. Jain had gone sickly pale under his honey-colored skin.

“That’s what he looked like the first time I met him. The second time...” She cleared her throat nervously. “At the party, I couldn’t really see anything beyond blurred figures. If he walked into my office right now, I wouldn’t recognize him.” She ran a finger over the screen before closing the file. “How did you know? About the party?”

“I was there as well.”

“But nobody saw us together!”

He glanced down at the floor, looking uncomfortable.

“*You watched?*”

“No... It wasn’t like that! I was waiting for someone... I ducked into the bathroom when you came in.”

Dove dropped her head to the desk, thumping it gently on the laminate surface. After she’d thoroughly beaten away her mortified embarrassment, she dropped her head onto a fist. “Why were you there anyway?” Without looking, she scraped her sandwich into the trash. Her appetite had fled.

“Working this case. Why were you there?”

“I don’t get out much.”

“And when you do, you go to sex parties?”

Dove lifted her very heavy head, dragging the glasses from her face. “It was a practical joke. My... friend told me it was a costume party. We got there, she guided me in, got me a drink and vanished on me.”

“The drinks were spiked.”

“Uhh... yeah. I figured that out when I found myself having sex with a stranger.”

“I’m sorry.”

Funny thing, he sounded like he meant it. However, in reality, she wasn’t sorry at all. Well, she was sorry she was going to have to face Jason Anders very soon and pray he didn’t recognize her. She rubbed an eye with the heel of her hand. He wasn’t her first, but every time Dove found herself in bed with someone, she was always convinced it would be her last time. Lovers were few and far between.

Actual relationships were even more rare.

But that night had been a fantasy come to life. And she'd been convinced it would never come back to haunt her. She could dream of her lover time and again, never experiencing the pain and heartache that attended a commitment.

"Look, Detective Jain, we need to reach common ground here. I can't violate his confidentiality. You need information. Why don't you just ask Jason?"

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and Dove suddenly realized that he'd told her more than he should. "You were working... undercover?"

He nodded, skin darkened with... embarrassment?

"Okay... and you think Jase has more information that he hasn't shared?"

"Yes. Your own report suggested that he lied. He said he 'allowed' them to attack, yet he had defensive wounds. Jase is known as a pain slut. I've always wondered if he had a limit. Obviously, he does."

She prickled at the offhand remark, and then took a deep breath to calm herself. In spite of the ugly words, stress carried on Jain's voice. He cared, and he was afraid.

"Detective, there is usually a deep, underlying reason when a person manifests this sort of behavior."

"He was self-destructive long before the attack. In fact, from what I've seen, he's begun to behave in a more conservative fashion since the attack."

"Well, that's because..." She broke off, sealing her runaway lips. What was it about this man that triggered her to say too much?

"Because what?"

She sighed. "I'm sorry, I can't say."

He sat back and scrutinized Dove. She quailed slightly under that hot, dark gaze. She forced herself to relax, sitting back, meeting his eyes.

"So you were an ER physician, but you're now in Mental Services. Jason Anders was your patient then, and he's now your patient once more. Can I assume you're behind this assignment?"

"No!"

"Did he request you?"

"No! I think we're finished here, Detective!" She stood up, circling the desk to escort Detective Jain to the door. As she rounded the desk, Dove caught her hip on the sharp corner, bumping her inbox and spilling papers to the floor. She hopped, stifling a curse against the pain.

Before she could move, Jain was up, gathering papers, putting a steadying hand on her arm. He was warm, and her arm tingled at his touch. Dove stood frozen for a moment before looking at the tall man. He held a paper, and was frowning as he scanned it. "Stop that!" She snatched the paper away. It tore



slightly before he released it.

He looked at her in horror. "Suicide? You're helping Jason Anders kill himself?"

She swallowed hard, surprised at the stunned expression on his face. Jain dropped the fragment of paper as though it were hot and repulsive.

"How could you." He was white and sick looking. "You're a doctor. How could you condone this?"

"I don't condone this, Detective. My boss called me to her office. She told me I'm to mentor an assisted suicide client." Her voice was tight and shaky. "I'm a doctor, Detective Jain. I busted my ass to keep this man alive, and now they tell me I'm supposed to hold his hand as he kills himself. How do you think I feel about this?"

She threw the papers back into the inbox, stalking the narrow depth of the office. "I save lives, Detective." Dove whirled around, looking at the man in her office. "I think we've both said enough. I think you should leave now."

Detective Jain took one step backwards, and then another, the look of horror never leaving his face. He reached behind his back, searching for the door handle. Without ever looking away, he backed out of the room, leaving the office feeling lighter, larger.

For long moments after he left, Dove stood very still, and when she returned to her desk, her legs trembled and quaked.

But she didn't cry.

## Chapter Four

Arav Jain strode rapidly down the hall, his strides nearly keeping pace with the beat of his heart. Without looking, he found the non-denominational chapel. He entered and lowered himself to a pew, leaning forward to rest his head on the bench in front of him.

Suicide.

Jason Anders wanted to die. Abrupt nausea welled up in his belly, and Arav took deep breaths, forcing the sensation away. He pillowed his forehead against his arms, allowing his body to relax, to recover from the shock. He pushed aside the denial and looked critically at the situation.

In the past year that he'd watched Jase on the circuits, the man had screamed of pain and sadness. The darkness in his blue eyes belied the smile that he so often wore. From the moment he'd first looked into Jason's eyes, Arav had been pulled to the man. He literally hurt for him. When Jase had broken with Neil Van Zandt, Arav had wanted to comfort him. When he'd learned of the assault, Arav had wanted to kill

for him. Instead, he plunged himself deeper into the case, his guilt carrying him along.

The Wilder gangs had been Arav's first big assignment as a detective. His first failure. Every month there was another victim, and every month the attacks escalated in severity. He'd read the reports, chafed in frustration as other officers interviewed the victims. That was the part of undercover work that was just fucked. He'd like to talk to the victims, the witnesses, but he couldn't. He clenched a fist, and then released it.

The information he'd gathered was good, but not enough. It was all tied up within the party community. Every attack was carried out the night of one of Maggie's galas. She was a woman of many facets, catering to the swingers and the leather crowd, as well as straight, above-board events. Margaret trod the delicate line of legality with her synth drugs and consensual violence.

But he didn't want to think that she was part of it. In fact, Arav was certain the attacks were hurting her business.

Jase was a vital part of the investigation, but he wasn't talking. And the little doctor? She was in the perfect position to gather information, but she wasn't talking either.

A flush of anger ran through Arav at the thought of Dr. Sinclair. Under her klutzy, befuddled exterior, she was sharp as a blade, and her burst of fury had almost seared him. She cared. Furthermore, she was almost as frustrated as he was.

Well, not quite as frustrated as Arav. She'd been lucky enough to fuck Jason Anders.

At the memory of what he'd seen back there at the party, Arav felt his cock fill painfully.

From behind the safety of his mask, he'd watched her come into the house. At first she'd been confused and then mortified. Dr. Sinclair had been adorable in her cute, leather pirate costume. He'd taken a moment to enjoy her before spotting Jase, his golden hair flowing loose around his shoulders, barefoot and fresh compared to the leather and lipstick and too-loud laughter of the crowd.

Watching the two of them in bed had split Arav down the middle. Jealousy had lodged in his stomach, lust had fogged his brain. Even now, he couldn't identify which feeling belonged where.

He'd long been in love with Jason Anders. That was a shocking truth he'd denied these past months. And the first moment Dr. Dove Sinclair had stumbled into his life, he'd wanted to catch her, to keep her from falling.

Arav straightened in the pew, looking up at the peaceful surroundings. No crosses, no symbols adorned the simple room. A stunningly beautiful stained glass panel was illuminated at the front. The windows carried similar abstract patterns in multi-hued glass. He'd read that it was the work of Con Montgomery, the artist who did the Harbor murals.

The brother-in-law of Dr. Dove.

"I want to save them." He spoke into the empty room, wondering who might be listening. "Do you hear? I want to save them both."

*"And so you shall."*

Arav jerked, looking around the still empty room. The words had been clear as a bell... not in English, but another language... Hindi? A lovely feminine voice still tickled his ear.

“Detective?”

He jumped at the sound of her voice, but rather than a Hindu Goddess, he saw Dr. Sinclair hovering uncomfortably in the doorway of the chapel. She stepped into the room, her head tilted slightly, tendrils of red hair waving around her face.

“Doctor?” He gave her a moment and then turned back to the front of the room. He didn’t see her, but felt her presence as she sat at the edge of the pew across from him.

This close, he could smell a light fragrance he thought might be lavender. He’d smelled it in the dim room as he crept away from the sleeping couple that night. Arav had waited downstairs. She’d been the first to wake and leave, waiting on the front drive of the house until a taxi came and picked her up. He’d been incredibly relieved that she hadn’t tried to walk home alone.

Not in these times.

“I learned something I wasn’t supposed to know.”

Indeed she had. He’d completely blown his cover.

“And I inadvertently violated my client’s confidentiality.”

“Guess we’re even.”

He heard her sigh. She relaxed just the slightest bit, back curved against the padding of the bench, her head dropping forward. She looked sad.

“What I am doing with him violates my ethics more than telling you did.”

“Sleeping with him or helping him take his own life?”

She was silent for a very long moment, and then she looked at him fully. “Did you climax while you watched us?”

“What?” He felt his cheeks grow warm.

“I asked if you climaxed while you watched.”

“I heard what you said.” But he didn’t answer. That was response enough for Dove. She got up and sat in the pew next to Arav, for a bit more privacy, he supposed.

“Were you angry? Jealous?”

Arav kept his eyes to the front, seeking images in the abstract art.

“How long have you been in love with Jason?”

“I don’t know.” His confession was spoken in a hushed voice. “I only realized it a few moments ago,

before you came into the room.” He turned to face her. She was pale with stress, her face bare of make-up. This close, he could see that her eyes were indeed gray, without a trace of any other color save a black ring around the iris. Her lashes were darker than her hair, thick and curling. Such pretty eyes to hide under glasses. Such a truly beautiful woman hiding there in front of him.

“I...” He faltered, and started over. “Men... I’ve never been with a man, never wanted a man.” She looked away and nodded. “The odd thing is, I’ve been attracted to you, as well, since the investigation opened. Seeing you together...” He felt his face heat even more, and was grateful for his dark skin. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to say.”

He looked at her then, taking in her profile -- the short, straight nose, the full, pouting lips. Even it its messy knot, her hair waved and curled with a life of its own. It had been straight the evening of the party. Straight and silky, it had looked much darker then. She had a slight frown on her face. When she turned to face him, they were only inches apart.

To his surprise, she leaned forward, pressing a long, lingering kiss on his mouth.

By the time she broke the kiss, his shock passed, leaving him wishing he’d prolonged the caress. But she didn’t turn away. Dove looked into his eyes without flinching.

“Why do you wear these?” He reached up, took the ill-fitting glasses from her face. She blinked, and then focused on him.

“I can’t see without them.”

“I know, but why not correction? Nobody wears lenses these days.”

“I’m phobic about things near my eyes.”

He reached up and stroked the skin along her temple, circling around to her cheek. When he looked her in the eye, her gaze slid from his. So the glasses were a shield. A cover behind which to hide. Without her asking, he slipped them carefully back onto her face. He removed them again and gently pressed the arms closer together. Not an expert fitting, but they’d stay on better.

“So, we’ve both shared what we shouldn’t have.”

She’d changed gears swiftly, leaving Arav slightly confused. He nodded in agreement, realizing she was referring to their earlier conversation.

“And Detective...”

“Arav. We’ve kissed now. We should be on a first name basis.”

She blushed. “Arav, we have a common goal.”

“Keep Jason alive.”

“And catch the people who hurt him.”

“That is my job, Dove.”

“He’s my patient, I’m his advocate.”

“And his lover.”

“No. That happened because of drugs in our drinks. That’s all.”

“Dove.” He reached down and clasped her hand. Her fingers felt so small. He looked down and marveled at the difference in the size and color. “Something happened between the two of you. The chemistry was unworldly.” He rubbed his thumb along the back of her hand. “I’ve observed Jase Anders enough that I know he felt something different than he’s felt in a very long time.” He carefully released her hand, setting it down on her thigh. “You know his reputation?”

“Yeah. The party favor. The pain slut. He’ll do anything with anyone.”

“I’ve seen it happen to him -- whippings, beatings. The brutal treatment he chases...” He pulled a deep breath, gathering the courage to continue. “Sometimes he climaxes, and when he climaxes with the pain, only then does serenity come to his expression. And only for a fleeting moment.” He reached out to Dove, turning her to face him. “With you, every minute, every second... that was a stranger to me. He was a different man, he was the man I’ve only glimpsed, and fell in love with.” He cupped her face in his hand then, looking long into her eyes. “You’re the one who can save him, Dove Sinclair.”

\* \* \*

Funny, that’s pretty much what she’d told herself, before realizing how badly she’d fucked up... in a very literal sense. Dove’s eyes felt raw as she looked up at Arav’s handsome face. She’d always been intimidated by his good looks, and he’d confessed an attraction to her! Of course, he’d also confessed to being in love with Jase. When she set the two men side-by-side on her mental scales, they balanced. She’d known Arav longer, but in a business sense. And Jase? How much more intimate can a woman be with a man? Frantic hours in the ER, followed months later by a blissful evening in his arms.

She looked steadily at Arav Jain and smiled slowly. “We can save him, Arav. Together.”

“Together.” He nodded. Something told him they couldn’t do it alone.

When they kissed, it was Arav who initiated the embrace. It was Dove who reached up, not allowing him to move away. Her mouth opened, inviting and warm, and Arav tasted her, his tongue delicate and skilled. He cupped her cheek, moving back slightly to look at her in question. Another soft kiss landed on her mouth.

“You are a beautiful man, Arav Jain.”

The smile he gave her was wicked, causing a spike of arousal to curl into her belly. “Only because you look at me through beautiful eyes, little Dove.”

One more light kiss, the third, and they’d sealed the agreement.

## Chapter Five

This was the day that Jase Anders began the final stage of his journey through this life. He walked along the shoreline, feeling the foamy surf caress his bare feet. He sat down in the sand, watching the waves reach up and then fall away.

He felt relief. For the first time in months, maybe years, he could relax, not worry about being floored by a stray thought, frightened by a phantom lingering on a street corner. Guilt didn't sit on his chest like an anchor holding him to the ocean floor. Freedom beckoned.

At the same time, he grieved over little things. Every morning, he woke with the sunrise, sitting on the deck of the *Gaia* to watch the sun's rays break over the eastward horizon. He'd miss the pods of dolphins that raced the sleek boat through the waves. He'd never again make love with his mystery woman nor would he discover the unique taste of John's kisses. But those were small sacrifices to make in order to attain his goal: peace. Everlasting peace.

Sometimes he wondered if he'd carry the mélange of feelings over into the next existence. In truth, he'd much prefer this life to be his last. Jase didn't think that he had the strength to live again.

He felt the presence at his back and smiled, leaning back against a pair of strong, tanned legs.

"Thinking hard?"

"Hardly thinking." He leaned forward, letting Neil move away and sit down beside him. Time had been kind to Neil, time and the Imperative. His old lover looked good. Happy.

"What are you doing out so early?"

"Rowing practice. We're switching to mornings now that spring is almost here. Besides, it gets me in to work a little earlier."

That would be so he could spend more time with Marilyn. Their mutual antipathy had blossomed into the romance of the century, it seemed. Jase glanced over at Neil. The man fairly glowed with contentment. He could remember feeling that way, so very long ago, back in the days of Miriam and the Imperative.

"What are you doing these days?"

The question he'd been dreading, because Jase knew that he had to tell Neil. He owed him that much. Neil had single-handedly steered Jase through some of the most painful, self-destructive years of his life.

He lied.

"I'm starting counseling today." Was omission the same as a lie? He felt Neil pull a huge sigh of relief. Both Mari and Neil had tried to bring up the attack, but he'd always shut them down.

"I'm glad, Jase." The silence stretched, but it wasn't uncomfortable.

"Are you seeing anyone these days?"

How did he answer that? Jase spent his days and nights fantasizing about a red-haired beauty in a mask, and about the strong, supple lines of a strange man's body. Lust was intertwined with fear in his crippled brain.

"I'm not seeing Flora anymore."

"Thank God for that!"

Jase gave an ironic laugh. He didn't need to tell Neil about Flora's moment of self-discovery. He probably wouldn't believe it. In fact, he'd be surprised if Flora managed to walk away from the lifestyle of pain. She had her own demons to sacrifice to.

"How's Mari? I haven't seen her around for a while."

"She's good... happy. In fact, she's asked about you. I know she wants you to come over for dinner soon."

The old, conditioned part of Jase rebelled, automatically refusing. He shook his head.

"No, I don't think..." Disappointment flashed over Neil's handsome face. "...I was actually planning to go sailing this weekend and meant to call you guys. We could make a day of it. Do some fishing, have dinner... whatever..."

Now where had that come from? But the happiness on his friend's face was a surprising reward. He truly cared.

"That sounds great... in fact... well, yes, we'll come. We'll bring the wine!" Neil was practically beaming as he rose to his feet, the early morning sun sparkling in his dark hair. Oddly, Jase felt only a winsome tug at his heart, no grief, no jealousy. Love, yes, but not want. When had that come about?

He rose to his feet, walking Neil up the beach to the strand. They didn't talk, and as they came to the paved path, he stopped, watching as Neil continued on his way home.

"Come by anytime you guys are ready."

"Will do. And Jase, thank you for getting help. Really."

As Neil walked away, the smile faded from Jason's face. He swallowed hard. It felt like something was lodged in his throat.

\* \* \*

Dove spent far too long in front of her mirror.

Jase Anders was her nine o'clock this morning.

On one side of the mirror hung the silly pirate costume. On the other hung an array of outfits as different as she could possibly come up with. Of course, she could wear her lab coat, but somehow, didn't think Dr. Drew would approve. They wanted casual, comfortable. Nothing in Dove's appearance should speak of her profession.

In a sudden moment of brilliance, Dove thought of the perfect advisor. “Hey, Debra, can you give me a hand?”

Within moments, her roommate’s bright blonde head peeked into the doorway. Her angelic blue eyes looked surly. It seemed odd that somebody so sweet in appearance could be so sour in reality.

“I’m seeing someone for lunch today, and I can’t figure out what to wear.” She stood back, waiting for Debra to work her particular sort of evil.

“It’s a guy I’ve kinda liked for a while now...”

Ah... magic words! Debra’s eyes took on a calculating gleam as her mean little brain began to work. Funny, Dove was normally a good judge of character, but she’d allowed Debra to set her up and knock her down more than once. That little game would be ending soon. While the salary of a resident wasn’t grand, it was enough that Dove could manage the house payment without help. Debra had two weeks to find a new place of her own.

“Gosh, Dove, that ivory blouse is nice.”

It was horrid. She’d never really cared for it, and at that moment, resolved to re-home the thing.

“But you know, I might have something you can borrow...”

She darted out of the room, returning shortly with a pale pink sweater vest that looked superb on her blonde complexion, but would illuminate Dove like an over-ripe tomato. Dove held it up over the insipid blouse and nodded. The ivory made her skin pallid, and the pink clashed with her hair.

“You think this’ll look okay? I don’t usually wear pink.”

“It’ll look great, Dove. You should wear pastels more often.” The smile she gave Dove was sweet as sugar. “You’ll knock him dead.”

Great, kill the man she was supposed to be saving. She returned Debra’s insincere smile and hooked the outfit over the door.

She’d blow-dry her hair before leaving the house. That would have every individual strand of hair doing its own version of the Twist. He’d be so blinded by her frizz and coloring, there’d be no way he’d recognize the masked woman he’d slept with the week before.

She hoped.

When she wasn’t having flashbacks of the most magnificent sex of her life, she relived those three soft kisses in the hospital chapel. How had things gotten so complicated?

\* \* \*

“So, what’s the plan, Stan?”

She blinked and brought herself to some level of coherency.



Jase had been handsome that night in the soft light and the haze of her poor vision, but nothing had prepared her for this.

He had the tanned skin that only blondes seemed to be gifted with. Long, waving hair was sun kissed, golden, and neatly tied back. Vivid blue eyes crowned a face that was simply exquisite in its harmony.

He wasn't as young as he seemed, perhaps in his early thirties. Smile lines had started around his eyes and his lids were hooded a bit from hours in the sun.

But under all that shine and luster was a pall of darkness.

She hadn't seen it that night. And yet he'd held her so desperately, so needfully. He'd fallen asleep in her arms, and hadn't stirred when she'd dressed and left the room. Even as he'd slept, she felt the weight of his need.

"Well, you have group in a half-hour, that'll be ninety minutes. Then one-on-one with Dr. Drew. I'll attend group this first time, but your sessions with Dr. Drew are private."

He nodded, sitting back in the chair, looking relaxed and easy. It was a stark contrast to the dark man who'd been in that chair the day before. Her heart raced a little at the memory of their pact.

"After that, I thought we'd have lunch, head out for a walk or something."

"And do what?" He was relaxed in appearance, but not reality.

"Hang out. Talk if you want, don't talk if you don't want to. If you'd like to go through your stuff, I can give you a hand or take notes."

He swallowed. She'd hit a raw spot. While Dove had never taken this last walk with a client before, she imagined that going through the artifacts of life would be difficult, to say the least. It slammed home the finality of his decision.

"Maybe we could do that another time."

"Sure, there's plenty of time." And time was ticking away. "We'll also want to look at your finances, get your bank accounts in order and so forth." She decided to go for another nerve. "Have you designated an heir? Or a trustee?"

He shook his head. The smile that clung to his face began to look fixed and stiff. "So you're a doctor?"

Very clever. He was going to turn the topic from himself. "Yes. I'm still a resident. I'm a generalist. This is part of my ongoing training."

"You ever work the ER?"

She froze for a moment. Had he recognized her?

"I came into the ER a couple times. I don't remember you, but that last time, I didn't really see anything."

"Well, I'm not the sort of person you'd notice."

“You’d be surprised what I notice.” He grinned, deep dimples gracing his face. “I like red hair. I’d have remembered.” His smile faded quickly and he glanced away. “You were there that night.”

She didn’t know what to say, so said nothing.

“I saw your name on the paperwork. I can’t remember being there, but I remember the name. You were the attending physician.”

“Yes, Jason, I was.”

“So you must be royally pissed at me.”

She gave him the full focus of her gaze, letting him see the fury that festered there. “I fought for your life. You fought for your life. Together, we kept you alive.”

“And I’m throwing it away.”

She clenched her jaw, tamping down the anger. “This isn’t about me and how I feel. It’s about a decision you’ve made and getting you through it with dignity and grace.”

“Why did they choose you?” He was sitting slightly forward, anger and fear and concern dancing across his expression.

“I don’t know, Jase. Maybe it’s part of learning to be a better doctor. I’ve been told that I don’t relate well to people. That I lack empathy.”

She swiveled her chair away, unable to continue looking at him. “I’m not here to advise you or talk you into or out of anything. I’m here to get you through the process. That’s all.”

“And it’s killing you.”

“Yeah, Jase. It’s killing me.”

“You don’t lack empathy, Dr. Sinclair. Not at all.”

\* \* \*

“Do you mind awfully if we don’t go out today?”

She looked up and blinked. The bright light of the reading lamp cast him into shadow. Setting the text aside, Dove pushed the lamp away and brought up the office lights.

He looked awful.

Group had been hard on him. The other participants had looked at his healthy body and carefully refrained from criticism. But it had been in their eyes, even after Jason had told most of his story in halting, painful phrases.

Even heavily edited, it sounded as awful as she knew it really was. The other patients had been brutal in their questions, laying bare his raw suffering after years of widowhood. He told them about beatings he’d

willingly endured, how the pain in his soul never ceased. He told them about the Wilders, but he didn't tell them everything.

It was a smart move on Jason's part, clever and manipulative. If he was considered to be suffering from the untreated emotional trauma of the attack, he'd have never been allowed into this program.

From her research into Jason Anders, she knew the masochistic, suicidal behavior wasn't new. But she also knew that he'd never acted on a death wish until after the attack. And from what Arav told her, she knew he wasn't seeking punishment anymore.

Clearly, Dr. Drew hadn't let Jason hide away in their private session. He was pale and haggard. His body looked thin to the point of emaciation. He'd hidden that through posture. "Jason, if you'd like privacy, the chapel is open. It's quiet there, and peaceful."

He stepped uncertainly into her office, pulling the chair away from her desk, moving it to the window. "It's peaceful here."

Those simple words nearly broke her carefully constructed control. Dove swallowed past the lump in her throat and opened a desk drawer, fishing out her lunch and a bottle of water. She dragged her chair to the window and sat next to him, splitting her peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Wordlessly, he accepted it, eating slowly, swallowing carefully. He seemed to savor the simple fare. She wondered if it reminded him of childhood.

"I'm tired." He didn't look away from the view as he spoke.

"I know you are."

"And I want to stop hurting people."

"It seems to me that you're only hurting yourself. And that's what's hurting the people who care about you." She carefully peeled an orange, offering him half.

They ate in silence, and when they were finished, she cleaned up, returning her chair to the desk, lowering the lights again, starting back into the psychology text.

They didn't speak again for several hours.

## Chapter Six

He hadn't expected it to be easy, but then, he hadn't expected it to be so very difficult.

Jason sat on the deck of the *Gaia*, staring out at the misty evening. He'd gone below deck and wandered from drawer to cabinet, picking up the detritus of his life, setting it back down. He'd carried

down a box and labels, and sat deciding which bauble went to which niece or nephew. He'd long ago discarded any memories of Miriam, returning them to her family.

The boat would go to Neil and Marilyn. Neil was a competent sailor. Mari loved the ocean as well. He'd like to leave them all of his assets. His sister didn't need his money. He'd get Dove's opinion on that tomorrow. After all, he was a fairly wealthy man.

His guitar hung on the wall. He gently removed the instrument from its hook and tuned the strings, idly picking out a melody, shifting quickly from jazz to classical, his true musical love. Even during the darkest times, he'd kept this one guitar, a gift from his parents when he'd performed his first recital at the age of twelve.

Over the years, he'd owned many fine instruments, but none that he loved like this one. Abruptly, he decided he'd like to take this one with him. There was really nobody who'd want it.

It went back on the wall, and Jase surveyed the cabin. Just removing those few items emptied it of all trace of Jase Anders. For some reason, that bothered him. He was leaving no legacy. There would be little to show the world that Jason Emerson Anders had lived. Not physically, anyway.

The people he'd met today, each and every one, were leaving loved ones, a lifetime of memories, of accomplishments and love at their passing.

They had looked at Jase with shadowed concern. Oddly, they seemed to understand. He had a healthy body, a healthy mind, and a grossly damaged spirit.

But could the damage to a man's soul heal over time? Did he feel better because the end was near, or had the attack jolted him from the cycle of grief and pain he'd fallen into?

Once he'd decided that this was the path to take, Jason's life had developed an odd sense of serenity, of acceptance. He'd taken the photo of Miriam that he'd hidden away and placed it in the galley, where she'd spent so much time cooking. It hadn't been that bad.

And then last week...

He didn't know what game his little doctor was playing, but if she'd thought to hide behind unflattering clothing and ugly glasses... he lay back on the pillow and grinned.

That had been the best sex he'd had in years, and after, he'd fallen into the most peaceful slumber he could remember.

He'd awakened to find her gone.

And now that he'd found her, Jase was seriously contemplating a repeat performance.

Time in her company was oddly peaceful, particularly since she had a bit of a temper. But odd as she was, little Dr. Dove understood him. She accepted him, and though she hated his decision, she supported him.

Sleeping with her again would be cruel. He wouldn't really do it, but the memory of that night played again and again as he lay in the darkness, feeling the gentle waves rock the boat.

He lay back, gripped a hand over his cock, feeling it grow hard just at the thought of her. There was only one thing he could think of that would be better than fucking the little doctor, but that one thing didn't bear thinking of. Much as his body might want John, that dark man was dangerous in some elemental way. To his body? Perhaps. But to his soul, those fiery dark eyes held a danger that Jase couldn't address. Over the past year, they'd barely exchanged two words, but every look, every glance told the story, and it was a story that Jase knew would never be written.

Jase kept his grip firm on his cock, rolled to his side, and fell asleep, fully clothed and fully erect.

\* \* \*

Dove looked up and glanced at the clock when the soft knock came at the door. She peeked at the security monitor and was suddenly very grateful that Debra had chosen that night to stay out with friends. It was another party night.

She opened the door and Arav stood there, looking handsome and roguish with the night at his back. She was absurdly grateful that she'd changed into a comfortable, cute workout suit rather than the tattered tee shirt she usually slept in.

"It's late."

"Not that late," he countered. She stepped back and he entered, glancing around the spacious house.

"This is nice." It was airy and uncluttered, save for a small pile of books and papers she'd been working through.

"Thanks. I had a small inheritance back when I was in college. Decided a house would be a safe investment. The payments have been a bit of a burden though."

"Do you have a roommate? That would help."

"Ahhh... yeah. The roommate's looking for a new place."

"Good." He sat on the sofa, his smile daring her to sit next to him.

She did.

"How did it go with Jason today?"

She curled up, legs under her body. "Oh, it was hard, Arav. Very hard."

"For you or for Jase?"

She looked up at him, surprised at the concern on his hard face. As usual, she simply wanted to sit and stare at him. "For both of us. I think it took him by surprise. We ditched our afternoon plans. He just sat in my office the rest of the day."

"Doing what?"

She shrugged one shoulder. "I worked. He sat looking out the window most of the day. Then he got up and left without saying anything."

“Do you think he’s changing his mind?”

She thought for a moment, her head propped back against the sofa. “He’s certainly got some things to think about. I hit the hot buttons today. I offered to visit and help him sort through his possessions. He didn’t like that.”

“I imagine not.” Arav looked around the room, his gaze sweeping the place, lingering on photos of family, a niche where she’d displayed treasured books, a piece of art. They were the things that told of who lived in this space, what they cared for. Take those things away, and the house lost the essence of who resided there.

Dove sat, staring pensively at nothing in particular. It would be difficult, giving away the evidence of your life.

“It was a hard day for you as well.”

She nodded. “Yes. I think his pain was a bit contagious.” She gave a sad smile and met his eyes, and suddenly Arav wanted to touch her face, to soothe the sadness away. Impulsively, he leaned over and gathered her into his arms, holding her close. This would be all, as far as he would dare to move with her. If she wanted more from him, it was her choice.

She lay still against him, head on his chest, and Arav reached up, massaging her neck, wishing he dared to release her hair. He wanted to feel it cascade down onto his skin. He wasn’t quite certain how his hand came to be on the bare skin of her back, the glide of his palm interrupted only by the narrow strap of her bra. And he certainly didn’t remember unhooking that bra, letting his hand slide around, stroking the tender skin at the side of her breast.

His cock was swelling, warm and heavy with arousal, and when her hand came down, stroking his length, Arav let out a shaky breath. Her hand slid between his legs, cupping his balls through his tight jeans.

He reciprocated by running his hand down her back, over her bottom, massaging her buttocks through the soft knit of her pants. Inspired, he brought his other hand to the back of her head, pulling her to him for his kiss.

And such a kiss!

She wasn’t gentle and shy as she had been for Jase. Instead, she attacked his mouth with hunger, catching his mustache, pulling, and then nibbling lightly. Clearly, she’d been thinking about this, maybe as much as Arav had. She struggled up, straddled his hips and pulled her top off, catching her glasses along the way. They ended up on the floor, followed quickly by Arav’s shirt.

Dove sat upright while he explored her body, hands skimming over her narrow waist and her ribcage. They hadn’t turned off the lights. The golden light of the stained-glass lamps cast her in a warm glow. He could see her breasts this time, soft and round and small, the tips pebbling with arousal, with exposure to the air of the room. Arav circled her breasts, cupping them in his palms, watching her flush as he pinched her nipples. Again, he massaged softly, stroking up, letting his skin feather over their crinkled surface.

Gently, but inexorably, he pulled her down to his face, his warm breath teasing, his tongue darting out to taste, to nibble and suck while Dove squirmed on his lap, her bottom shifting against his erection. She

braced herself on the back of the sofa, a hand on either side of his head.

“Take down your hair.” He watched as she carefully removed pins, letting them fall to the floor, her hair twisting in thick waves around her shoulders. He pulled her down again, this time for a hard, invasive kiss. The soft fragrance of lavender surrounded him, from her hair, from her body.

Her hands buried in his hair, pulling and tugging. She ground her chest to his. The feel of skin to skin made him dizzy with the sensations. How long? How long had he wanted without any satisfaction? Arav pulled her tightly to his body, one big hand on her bottom, rocking her rhythmically into his groin, groaning as he came precariously close to coming without even removing his pants.

Obviously, his urgency translated to Dove. She clumsily struggled off his lap, bumping against the coffee table as she shimmied out of her pants. Arav fumbled at the catch of his jeans. Even when her hand joined his, getting out of his clothing was a challenge.

Again he lay back on the couch, full length this time, watching in fascination as she lowered herself atop his body, exploring with mouth and teeth and tongue. She drew near to his cock, her soft breath brushing the swollen head. When she took him into her mouth, he groaned, and mercilessly, she grasped him around the base of his cock.

“You’re close.” He nodded wordlessly. She gave him a good, long lick and straddled him, her hand clasping his shaft as she lowered herself, just a little at a time.

He wanted to close his eyes, to lose himself in the moment. He wanted to watch every move she made as she worked his girth into her body. She wiggled a bit, lifted and pulled him deeper into her tight, wet channel.

Arav’s mouth dropped open. He panted, fighting against the climax that tightened his back, his balls, his belly. He cursed, and then with every fiber of control that he possessed, slowed his breathing, forcing himself to relax, to back off. The next time she raised, he very nearly slipped from her body. Only his cockhead remained gripped by her tight muscles, and when she rode down his shaft, he slid home, right to her very core.

She held there for a moment, hands braced on his chest, perfectly still. Her eyes were closed, her head tilted back. The look on her face tightened him again, maddening him with the need to move, to grind into her body.

She arched, her spine curved, her pelvis tilting into his. Unable to withstand the tease any longer, Arav grasped her hips hard. He’d probably leave bruises, but he needed her to move. Up and down on his shaft, hard and fast, until she collapsed over his body, belly to belly, chest to chest. She supported herself on straight arms, and he clasped the hair at the back of her scalp, tilting her head back, exposing her graceful white throat.

She began to croon her rising arousal, plunging down onto his cock. As she took him harder, he grew closer. Arav thought his heart would burst with the effort. When she completely lost her tempo, crying out, pumping onto him fast and hard, he hovered at that blissful, sparkling moment... the moment of surrender.

And he came.

He wrapped his arms around her body, pulling her down hard onto his shaft, holding himself deeply

embedded, perfectly still, his body vibrating with the first tendrils of climax. Her channel clasped him again and again. She'd buried her face in his chest, her body twisting and convulsing and slick with her sweat... his sweat. He thrust into her, helpless now, completely at the mercy of his orgasm.

The seed rushed from his body in a moment of sublime relief. Spasm after spasm emptied his balls until he knew he was ejaculating dry. With one final shudder, he went loose, barely able to hold onto Dove, yet unable to let her go.

At that moment, Arav Jain knew something he'd never known before. He knew that it was possible to be in love with two people. And strange as it might be, he wasn't even afraid.

\* \* \*

"I was rough. I'm sorry."

He fingered a pink spot on her hip. There was a whisker burn at her throat.

"It felt good. Right at that moment, it was perfect."

"Pain? You like pain during sex?"

"Not pain... not like... you know." The name went unspoken.

He sat up in the bed, her white sheets slipping down his flat, muscular belly. Dove watched him in unabashed fascination. She'd managed to rescue her glasses and now marveled at the sheer beauty of the man in her bed.

He looked devilish, and during sex, he was devilish, to just the right, exact degree she needed. Once their initial rush of lust had receded, they'd napped, waking to find more pleasure with one another.

He was more than adequate with his tongue, and with those fingers as well. He'd introduced her to the dark variety of climax that came with anal penetration, though he'd used only fingers there while he fucked her pussy. They didn't speak of what he was really preparing her for. They showered together in the darkness, exploring with hands and mouths, finally ending up sliding together on the slick floor of the huge shower, wet skin slapping against skin, skidding against the cool tile.

It had been perverse, amazing, and to her shock, she wanted more.

*Not pain, not like... you know...* He did know. He'd witnessed it often enough. "He doesn't get sexual pleasure from it." Arav felt defensive of Jase. Protective.

Dove leaned forward, stroking the gleaming black of his goatee. "I know he doesn't, Arav." Her fingers skimmed over his lips. The sensation caused a shiver.

"How long have I known you, Dove?" He reached out, pulled her into his arms. They had only hours before dawn, and time for her to work.

"I don't know, six months maybe? Why?"

"Because I love you."



“Yesterday you loved Jason.”

He kissed her forehead. “I love Jason as well. Odd, isn’t it?” He looked down at her, dark eyes gleaming. Immediately, she thought of her brother Duncan and his mates. But for her and Arav, there was no Imperative forcing the issue. Just love.

“I’m afraid to say it, but I think it’s true.”

“That it’s odd?”

“No. It’s true that I love you also.”

“And you love Jason as well.”

She was quiet for a moment. “No, I don’t think I love Jason. He frightens me too much.”

He shifted, looking at her curiously. “Why, Dove? Why are you afraid of Jase? He’d never hurt you.”

He had injured Neil. She’d heard that little bit of information from Duncan, who was good friends with Jason’s ex-lover. But somehow, she knew he’d never hurt her, not physically.

“I’m afraid that Jason would break my heart. In the end, I’m afraid he’ll break us both.” She looked up at him, and she was beautiful there in the darkness, her skin gleaming pearl white. “Arav, I’m afraid that Jason Anders has already broken my heart.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t think I can save him.” And she did love him, and knew damn well that Jase was too wrapped up in pain to love her back.

Well, at least she’d admitted it to herself.

She laid her head on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart, feeling his strength, his innate kindness.

“You’re wrong, Dove. But you’re right.” She lay still, waiting for him to continue. “Only Jason can save himself. It’s up to us to show him a reason.”

“And that is?”

“Us.” He stroked her hair. “We’re the reason that Jason Anders should live.”

She was sore and tired. The late winter sunshine made her eyes burn. As the traffic slowed, Dove stepped into the crosswalk, only to find herself jerked backwards and to the ground.

She landed with a grunt, and with an annoyed frown, Dove fished her glasses from her lap.

“Damn it, Dove, you scared me to death!”

Jason squatted beside her, his face slightly pale. “Didn’t you see that car?”

“Obviously not,” she said dryly. He stood up and helped her to her feet, standing back as she brushed off her clothing. The mud wasn’t going to come off so easily. She sighed, glaring down at her ruined outfit. The hose were shredded, her skirt was stained.

“Do you need to go home? To change?”

“Nah... I’ve got scrubs at the hospital.”

Her hair had come loose, tendrils waving around her face. Jason caught himself staring at the fiery strands. Every night for the past month, he’d lain in his bed, picturing her as she had been that night at the party, naked and beautiful, pinned under his body. He ached for her, and seeing her looking so forlorn and distressed, his heart ached as badly as his cock.

The thought made him ashamed.

“Did you deal with the friend who tricked you into the party?”

They’d started down the sidewalk toward the hospital again. Lunch would probably be on the roof today. For the first time in a week, the rains had stopped. He really needed to be outside. He needed the sun.

“What?” She came to a dead stop. Jase shut his eyes and cursed at his slip.

“You knew?”

She was really magnificent in her anger, and the arousal that had waned a moment ago surged back.

“Fuck.” He looked at her in embarrassment. “I’m sorry.”

She stood there, flummoxed, her expression shifting wildly. Finally, she dropped her eyes to the ground. “No, I’m sorry. I should have told you that first day.”

They entered the cool hallways of the hospital and stepped into an elevator, waiting until they exited to continue the conversation.

“You probably shouldn’t be mentoring me.”

“No, I shouldn’t. If you’d like me removed...”

“No.” He cut her off mid-sentence. “I don’t want you to go.” Even to his own ears, Jason sounded desperate and needy. He’d come to depend on her presence to move himself through these final days.

They moved rapidly down the hall toward her office. Suddenly, there was nowhere in the world he'd rather be than alone with Dr. Dove. Alone, with her in his arms...

"Dove!"

She looked to the side. Her foot caught and she tripped, heading face forward. As she fell, Jase lunged to catch her, nearly crashing into the tall man whose call had distracted her in the first place. They both bent down to help her to her feet, and their foreheads cracked sharply, sending them both reeling.

"Shit!"

"Fuck!"

Jase clasped his forehead. Damn! It was contagious! Cautiously, he and the other man got to their knees, turning to an astounded-looking Dove, who'd managed to break her own fall.

"That's twice today that I've saved you, Dr. Dove." His humor began to trickle back as he looked at the expression on her face. His humor came to a slamming halt when he saw the other man's possessive grip on her shoulder as he gently helped her rise. Dove had gone pink with embarrassment. His heart plummeted even as his stomach twisted in jealousy. For some reason, he'd never thought she'd be seeing someone else. He'd come to think of her as his own.

"Jase, Jason Anders, this is Detective Arav Jain. He's my..." She fumbled for words, and Arav stepped into the gap.

"Dr. Sinclair and I are seeing each other."

"Oh." Jase looked from one to the other, tamping down his jealousy and disappointment. After all, he was in no position to be starting a relationship. In fact, the idea was ludicrous and reeked of hypocrisy. After all, in less than one month, he'd be out of her life forever.

Once she was steady on her feet, Dove started toward her office, the men in her wake. Jase stole a glance. The man was teasingly familiar, and incredibly sexy. He knew that if he'd run into Detective Jain before, he wouldn't have forgotten the man. Jase had a weakness for dark men.

But this dark man was nothing like Neil, or any man he'd spent time with before. Jain was exotic. His movement was fluid as a great cat, and perhaps as dangerous. The look he'd given Dove spoke of possession and heat.

"So, how long have you..."

"Four weeks."

"Seven months."

He looked at them in confusion.

"Dove and I have known one another for many months, but we started dating just a month ago."

Just after he'd had his erotic encounter with the little doctor. The thought brought an ache to some

undefined area of his chest.

\* \* \*

Holy. Stinking. Crap.

Dove unlocked her door and let the men inside. If it had seemed crowded with only one, now the room closed in on her, and she could fairly taste the testosterone on the air. Who'd have thought a trip and fall would lead to the trappings of an erotic fantasy?

The two men were sizing one another up. She already knew Arav's feelings about Jase, though he was acting suspiciously territorial all of a sudden. And Jase? He could barely confine his gaze to one over the other. His bright blue eyes glittered with pent-up emotion.

She desperately needed to change her clothes. Did she dare to leave them alone?

"Arav, did you need to talk to me?" She prayed he'd offer to accompany her to the doctors' lounge.

"No, I'll wait here, I've been thinking..." He turned from Dove to Jase, and then back. "No, babe, it can wait."

Dove fished for an excuse to drag him along, and then gave it up. If she trusted anyone with Jase, it was Arav. They'd planned and brainstormed over the past month, and had come up with nothing. No brilliant ideas to convince Jase that life was worth taking a chance on. Maybe this was fate stepping in.

"Okay, I'll be back in a few minutes." She grabbed her purse and clipped the door on the way out, wincing and rubbing her arm. It had been a very bad day. She wondered how many new bruises she carried.

\* \* \*

"It's her glasses."

Arav turned and looked at Jase in curiosity. Now that Dove had gone, his entire focus shifted to Jason. He felt a flush crawl up his neck. He'd been so attracted to this man for so long, and as usual, Arav lost all his words. "What's that?"

"Her glasses. Hardly anyone wears corrective lenses anymore. They're distorting her peripheral vision." Jase moved to the low window and sat on the sill, arms crossed, gazing at Arav.

"It's also a lack of confidence, I think. In her own element... in the ER, she's a different person completely."

Jase looked at the floor with a slight frown on his face. Perhaps he was remembering? Or reconnecting with that guilt he carried?

Arav pulled the chair away from her desk and sat, pensively watching Jase Anders.

The weak sun spilled in the window. His hair caught that light and made it a little brighter. He looked good, healthier than Arav had ever seen him look. His hair had been cut, leaving it looking less disheveled. His face was clean-shaved, his clothing was neat. The shadows were still there behind his

eyes, but so was something else.

Arav felt a pull of suspicion. Had he seen a flash of jealousy in the other man's eyes?

"So, you're a detective."

Arav nodded, meeting the other man's eyes.

"What sort of cases do you work? Drugs? Homicide?"

"Primarily violent crime."

"There isn't much of that around here, except..." he broke off briefly, "...except the Wilders."

"There are always crimes of violence, Jason. Those Wilder gangs are high profile and spectacular. The smaller crimes are just as painful and destructive." He watched Jase steadily, wondering where the man's mind was taking him. The journey wasn't pleasant.

"Do you know about me? The Wilders?"

"Yes, Jase, I do. I don't work your case in particular, but I am familiar with what happened to you."

"You know that they raped me?" His blue eyes burned with the beginnings of anger.

"Yes, I was briefed on your injuries."

Jase snorted in disgust. "So much for privacy."

Arav did his best to hide his reaction. According to Dove, he'd never admitted to the rape, even though the evidence had been there. "Their violent behavior is escalating, Jason. They hunt more often, and there has been a death."

Jason turned his head away, giving Arav his profile. The silence was weighty and uncomfortable.

"And what is your role in the investigation... John?"

Arav sat perfectly still, his eyes never leaving Jason's averted profile. "Jain. My name is Arav Jain."

"And you party under another name."

He swallowed, suddenly aware that he now had to reveal all to Jason as well. His cover had been blown twice within a month. This wasn't good. "The attacks occur in the orbit of Margaret's parties. I've been working those parties undercover for some time now."

"You seem to enjoy your work. Does the department foot the bill for your gear, or do you use your own? By the way, those spandex shorts and boots were just hot."

Arav kept his arms folded defensively across his chest. He needed to keep his mouth shut, and let Jase vent his anger.

"How did Dove get pulled into this? Or are you undercover with her as well?"

“No!” He rose and began to pace the tiny office. “I met Dr. Sinclair after your attack. I questioned her about the night you came into the ER. Since I was undercover on the case, I couldn’t approach you with questions. I could only watch.”

“And you were always there, watching, weren’t you?” Jason looked at him fully. “I believed that ‘John’ had feelings for me. Maybe a bit of a crush.” He crossed his arms angrily.

“I find out that I had sex with my doctor, and the man who I was attracted to is the detective on my case. And he’s now sleeping with my doctor! This is just fucked, Detective.”

“You have no idea just how fucked it is.” Arav slumped back into the chair, uncertain what to say. He wasn’t leaving, that was for sure. It looked like Jason wasn’t planning to go anywhere either. He was bristling in anger.

“We are not manipulating you, Jason. Dove did not know what sort of party she was going to. It was only coincidence that I recognized her shortly afterwards.”

Jason looked out the window, not turning to speak. “Did she deal with the roommate?”

“Yes, the woman moved out of the house a few days ago.”

“Good. Who was it?”

“I only know her as Debra. She’s a regular on the circuit, but I don’t think we’ve met.”

“Do you know why I’m here? With Dr. Sinclair?”

“I know that Dove works in the Assisted Suicide program, and I know that you are her client.”

“Sorta speaks for itself, doesn’t it?” Jason swung back to face Arav. Whatever he meant to say was interrupted as Dove entered, wearing a pair of medical green scrubs and tennis shoes. She looked nervously from one man to the other.

“Dove, I have some news to share, and since it concerns Jason...” he glanced at the other man, and then back at Dove, “...he should hear it as well.”

Dove stared at him steadily. Her complexion went pale.

“He recognized me from the parties.”

She looked over at Jase, a fearful, guilty expression on her face. Instinctively, Arav rose and took her in his arms, giving her a brief hug, ignoring the anger on Jason’s face. He was no therapist, but in Arav’s opinion, anger was good. Jase had been wallowing in guilt for so long, he’d lost that magnificent survival mechanism: anger. He’d seen it flare to life briefly when Jase had mentioned the rape. Now he saw it as he held Dove in his arms.

Arav almost wished that Dove hadn’t returned when she had. Whether it was the result of therapy or anger, Jase had very nearly unburdened himself.

He stepped out into the hall and snagged an extra chair, and set it at the end of her desk, so the three

were in a rough circle.

“Why am I involved in what you were going to tell Dove?” Jase had his arms crossed over his chest. His anger radiated like a bright light.

“When you came in to the ER that morning, Dove collected specimens from your body, your clothing as well.”

Jase blanched slightly, and his gaze dropped. Humiliation and shame played across his face. “No one’s ever talked to me about this.”

“From what I heard, you weren’t receptive.”

Jase sighed, and the sound made Arav feel heavy and sad.

“Anyhow, there was no semen, but Dr. Sinclair did pull several samples from your body. Those samples were not your DNA.”

Bright blue eyes rose to meet his. “Some of them used objects to rape me.” Jason couldn’t meet Dove’s eyes. Pain and humiliation etched his face.

“That’s how we know you fought, Jase. You injured them, more than one, actually.” Arav looked over at Dove. She seemed to sense that Jase needed to know that he’d done his best.

“We found blood from two other individuals and DNA from a third. The lab has been processing them slowly. We don’t know who they are yet, but I just found out something very interesting.”

“What would that be?”

“Women. There were women in the Wilder gang that attacked you.”

\* \* \*

Women? Women had done this to him? Dove sat back in her chair, stunned out of speech. She looked at Jase in concern. He’d gone white as a sheet. If she was right, this was probably the first time he’d ever spoken of the attack, beyond the initial interviews by the police.

“I remember voices. They weren’t all men.” He cleared his throat, and automatically, Dove reached into her drawer, pulling out a bottle of water for him. He opened the lid and drank gratefully.

“I knew... they were going to rape me when they got me down, started stripping my clothes off. I just kept fighting. I kept hoping they’d knock me unconscious so I wouldn’t have to feel what they were doing.” His hands rubbed together nervously, over and over again. “But I felt it... all of it. They laughed. Someone knew me, said I was the pain slut, so I should love what they were doing.”

He stopped speaking for a time. His eyes looked sad, far away. “In all the years after Miriam’s death, I thought I deserved punishment, but never that. Nobody deserves that.”

“So will you help me on this case?” Arav looked directly at Jason, challenging him. Challenging him to fight back, to reclaim his existence.

“Why do you care?”

“Because this is my case, Jason. Because they’ve killed now, and they’ll do it again if they aren’t stopped. I care because they’ve driven you to suicide, and if you really carry out this foolish plan of yours, they’ll have killed you as well.”

“I was heading down this path long ago. As Dove knows, I applied to the program five years ago.”

“And in the past year that I’ve known you, watched you, it wasn’t until the attack that you moved in this direction, Jase. Did you ever seek counseling after your wife’s death?”

Jason stared stonily at the detective.

“Did you, Jase? Did you get rape counseling after the attack? Or did you simply mask the trauma, and use your wife’s death as an excuse for running out on life, when in reality it was the horror of what happened to you last summer?”

“Fuck you, Jain.” He stood so abruptly his chair fell over backwards, and Dove jumped as it crashed onto the floor.

“Do you believe this too?” His eyes were white hot and grief stricken.

“Yeah, actually, I do, Jason.”

He stood there, looking lost for a moment, turning away. When he reached the door, he turned back. “I’ll ask Dr. Drew...”

Whatever he meant to say was drowned in a sudden rush of sound. Dove’s pager went off, followed by Jain’s. Her phone was ringing, and down the hall, voices raised in sudden alarm.

“Sinclair here.” Jain had turned away, speaking quietly on his small phone. Jason stood, frozen in the sudden rush.

“I’ll be there.” Dove rang off and stood, meeting Jain’s eyes. As one, they turned to look at Jason.

“How are you with first aid?”

He looked at her in confusion, but she’d already grabbed her heavy medical bag and was moving without a trace of her signature clumsiness.

“There’s been a bus accident just down the street. All available hands are needed. Jase, if you can take directions and not faint at the sight of blood, I can use you.”

Arav was already heading down the hall at a run. In the distance, they could hear the wail of sirens. Fire units were responding.

They took the stairs instead of waiting for the elevator, and beat it to the ground level.



## Chapter Eight

Jase stood at the window, shade pulled back. His anxiety was palpable, and just a bit contagious. Arav sighed and turned back to the kitchen, putting away the last of the dishes.

Jase had barely eaten, and they'd exchanged only a few words in the past hour.

"You don't think she'll try to walk?"

"No, she's very careful at night, Jase. She's the disaster coordinator for the hospital. I imagine she won't be home till after midnight."

He hadn't really wanted to take Jason home to the empty boat, not after his hours at the site of the accident. As a police officer, Arav was somewhat desensitized to blood and pain, but it had been a rude shock to Jason. Without asking, he'd brought the other man to Dove's house. She wouldn't mind, and Arav was uneasily aware that he and Jase had some unfinished business.

"Is there food left for Dove?"

"Yes, I made a plate for her." She'd probably be too tired to eat, though. Arav poured coffee and took it into the living room where Jason paced anxiously. He settled into the comfortable sofa, content for the moment to sit and watch the other man fret.

"Are you upset about the accident, or about the conversation we were having?" Oddly, now that all the hidden emotions and agendas were coming to light, Arav was ready to talk openly with Jase. It was too late to take it all back anyway.

"You really are, aren't you? Attracted to me?" Jason pulled the curtains closed, but stayed at the window, waiting for Arav's answer.

"Yes, I am."

"Why wait so long to say anything?" He made no attempt to close the distance between them, though he eyed the cup of coffee on the low table in front of Arav.

Arav sighed and thought about what to say. There was so much, and his path to this place had been so complicated.

"First, you were with a companion. And your behavior was clearly disturbed, Jase. I was drawn to you, but you were unavailable both literally and emotionally."

Jason nodded his head jerkily, and carefully, he moved to pick up the coffee cup, returning to the window. He reminded Arav of some shy, wild creature.

"You were devastated after the breakup with Neil. I was really afraid for you. Sometimes... sometimes you were unconscious after a party, and people simply walked around you like you weren't there."

"I always woke up at home."

Arav leaned forward, clasping his hands between his knees.

"That was you, wasn't it?"

"In good conscience, and as a police officer, I couldn't leave you in a dangerous situation."

"Shit."

"I'm sorry..."

Jason turned away and Arav's eyes dropped back to the floor. He had no reason to apologize.

"Arav, I'm not angry at you. It just seems that no matter what I do, it ends up hurting other people."

"Only because they care about you."

"So why now? What has changed that you're willing to get involved with me?"

"You have."

He rose from the sofa and crossed the room. Jason turned away, back to the curtained window. He flicked the fabric aside. Carefully, Arav placed a hand on his shoulder, and while Jase flinched, he didn't pull away. Encouraged, Arav moved close to his back, wrapping his arms around Jason. Slowly, he began to relax into Arav's embrace. They stood like that for a long time, watching the moonlit street outside.

"I can't do this, you know..."

"Let me hold you?"

"No... sex."

"Not everything I feel for you is about sex. Besides, you've been with others since the attack. Dove."

Jason sighed, but didn't try to break away. "I'm bottom, I'm always bottom. And I can't do that anymore."

"Because of the injuries, or the trauma?"

"Both... I just can't."

"You don't have to."

Carefully, Arav turned Jason around to face him. He wasn't surprised to see that Jason's eyes were red with unshed tears, his skin white and pallid.

"You must understand, Jason, that love doesn't always fit a template. Do I feel passion for you? Yes, I do... but it doesn't have to be about who is on top if we have sex. I've never been penetrated, and I'm

not certain that I want that. I'm also not certain that I want to do that to you. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I don't know." Jason shook his head, letting it drop down to Arav's shoulder. By increments, their embrace grew more intimate. Arav gathered Jase up in his arms, wishing he could erase the years of self-hatred and sadness.

"You'd leave Dove for me?"

"No. I love her. Nor will she leave me for you." He stood back slightly, holding Jase at arm's length. "You must know, Jase, neither I nor Dove is crossing over to you. We are asking that you cross over to us."

"To both of you." His eyes grew large, and Arav had to smile as he felt a wave of heat emanate from Jason's body.

"Both of us."

"She's my doc..." His words were muffled as Arav kissed him gently, his lips stroking gently.

"Understand, Jason, anything that happens between us will not involve pain or violence. I do not have that in my nature."

"You could have fooled me, John."

Arav smiled wickedly, white teeth flashing from behind the black mustache. "But that is role-play. And while John might enjoy binding his partner, or sampling some erotic variety of sex, he never causes pain." He bent and trailed his tongue over Jason's lips, urging him to open once more.

This kiss wasn't so gentle, nor was it comforting. It was erotic, licentious. He coaxed, he urged Jason to play. It was seduction.

\* \* \*

Jase felt his cock grow heavy with arousal. His heart beat a rapid tempo in his chest. He stayed very still as this dark, dangerous man ate at his mouth, breaking free to nip his jaw, his neck, down the tender skin of his throat. He steadied himself with a hand on Arav's chest, the other behind his neck, burying his fingers into silky waves of ebony hair.

Down below, he felt the urgent bulge of Arav's erection. He'd seen evidence of this man's attraction to him many times over the past year. Many times his fingers had itched to stroke, to embrace, but John... Arav... had never before crossed that line.

Those burning dark eyes were looking into his, compelling and teasingly familiar. When they kissed, the mustache and beard tickled a bit, just mildly abrasive. Arav's hands on his body were strong and slightly aggressive, but never overbearing.

He let his own wander just a bit more, dropping till he felt Arav's hard belly through the fabric of his shirt, down farther till he cupped the other man's huge, hot erection. He released the top button of Arav's jeans and slowly pulled his shirt free. Another button, and then another, and he reached the band of his underwear. Arav reached to free himself.

“Stand still.” Jason’s voice was sharp and edgy, revealing his anxiety. Obediently, Arav dropped his hands to his sides. Clearly, the power had to shift. It had to, or Jase didn’t think he could continue.

“You don’t have to do this, Jase. You can say no.”

“And you’d be okay with me if I say no?”

The other man nodded. “I’m an adult, Jase. I won’t pressure you into anything.”

“Okay,” he breathed, dropping his hand down into the tight confines of Arav’s pants, stroking the thick length of his cock. He watched as Arav twisted, his back arching in pleasure. Slowly, deliberately, he withdrew his hand. “Go over to that chair and sit.”

He watched Arav obediently cross the space. He turned and paused. When Jason said nothing, Arav sat, his loose shirt falling to drape his rigid shaft.

Jason slipped his shirt off and let it drop to the floor. He slipped off his sandals, and then untied and dropped his linen pants. With each item of clothing that he abandoned, he could see Arav’s cock jump a bit. His own responded, feeling warm and thick, but not yet fully engorged. His fear wouldn’t allow that.

Naked, he crossed the room, coming to a halt in front of Arav, who patiently awaited his instructions. Jason was uneasily aware that he wasn’t trying to dominate the other man, but simply buy himself the time and space he needed to do this.

And he wanted this so very much.

At his instruction, Arav slipped out of his clothing. “Put your arms behind your back, and then sit on your hands.”

Arav followed his instructions, his eyes growing wide at the simple, yet effective restraint. Jason quickly straddled his thighs. As long as Arav was unable to lean forward, he’d be unable to free himself.

“What about Dove? Should we be doing this?”

Arav’s voice cut through his uncertainty. “This is about us... you and me. She understands and will want us to work through this.”

Jase took a moment, looking down at the sight of their cocks resting side by side, both thick and aroused, but neither man acting on that obvious need. Arav didn’t speak, leaving the scenario completely in Jason’s control.

He leaned forward, nipping Arav’s chin, pulling lightly at his goatee. He moved on to his mouth, kissing, taking his time, getting to know the taste and feel of the other man.

“Tell me a fantasy... something that excites you.”

He worked his way down Arav’s neck, sucking hard enough to bring up marks. Jason’s hand smoothed over Arav’s chest, his thumb circling his nipple. He tugged lightly on the golden hoop there.

“I...” Arav choked and began again. “I’m watching you and Dove... you’re making love together, on a

bed. I come from my hiding place and climb onto the bed with you. For a time, I sit at the end of the bed, just watching. I can see your cock pushing into her body. Her skin looks so soft and fine, and your muscles work with each thrust.

“I crawl up the bed, lay my head on the pillow and watch as you fuck her harder. She cries out, coming hard on your cock, but you keep pumping, thrusting hard, bringing her close once more... and then you cry out. Your body flexes and goes still in those final moments of climax.”

Jase listened, trailing his cock over Arav's thighs, up to his belly, and down the length of Arav's rigid shaft. His pre-come left a glistening trail on the other man's skin.

“She lies under your body, and you roll to the side, but your hands never leave her skin. She didn't come that second time. She's exhausted, but still aroused and needy, and you touch her breasts, her nipples.

“I bend over and kiss her. I can taste you on her lips. I can taste the salt of your sweat on her body. She pulls my hair in her need, and by now, I'm hot... desperate. I go down on her. I can taste your seed mixed with her juices...” Arav's voice broke on a gasp.

Under his body, Jase felt Arav's cock go even harder as he told his fantasy. In truth, his was growing close himself. He braced himself with one hand and clasped their cocks together, squeezing hard, gratified to hear the other man gasp.

As he continued, Arav's voice grew unsteady, hoarse with need. He struggled a bit against the restraint of his own weight.

“I taste you and I taste her, and it makes me crazy... She's bucking against my face and I look up. You're licking and sucking her nipples. She's got one hand in your hair, and with her other, she pulls me away from her pussy.

“I move up between her legs. I drag the tip of my cock through her slit and she's so damn, fucking wet. When I slide in, I feel your come... it's like silk on my skin... and I love it because it's part of you. I'm there, I'm so close to being there!

“She cries out and you kiss her hard and deep. I pull out and sit up, you lift her and help settle her over my lap. And then you move behind her. You wrap your arms around her body just as I do. You help her ride my cock.”

They were sliding together now, slick with sweat and pre-come. Arav's voice was barely coherent now. His hips bucked under Jason's body, and a fine sheen of sweat covered his skin. In abstraction, Jason saw the tiny gold hoops in his brown nipples, the fine black hair that trailed down his chest in a path straight to his pubis. Jason kept a steady tempo, his cock sliding over Arav's. He cupped a palm over their cock heads.

He felt his own climax shimmering along his nerves, his muscles growing tight. Sweat bloomed over his skin. His breath escaped in short, quick pants. Arav continued.

“And you... you're all ready again, your cock is hard and it's only been a few minutes. Her pussy is wet and hot, and you're sliding between her legs... Your cock keeps sliding past mine and it's too much...”

He gasped, unable to continue, and Jason was unable to prompt him anymore. He pumped his hips,

again and then again, watching in fascination as Arav arched helplessly beneath him. His cries were followed by ropes of semen that splattered onto his dark skin. In seconds, Jason's muscles convulsed, locked, and he spilled, his seed mingling with Arav's on his flat, muscular belly.

They panted, moaned a bit, and Jason let himself down, resting his head on Arav's broad shoulder. Belatedly, he remembered that he had the other man restrained. When he could move, he slid back, helping Arav to free his arms.

He tried to think of something to say, but words simply wouldn't come. So instead, Jason lay forward once more, letting Arav bear his weight.

## Chapter Nine

Jason jerked into wakefulness. Instead of being disoriented, he looked around in wonder. The bed he lay in was draped with filmy white fabric. The mattress was plush. The entire room bore Dove's signature fragrance.

He glanced down. Arav lay next to him, deeply asleep. It was strangely comforting to find himself here. Jason stretched. The novelty of waking after sex without bruises or injuries was not lost on him. His head was clear, his body felt good, and his heart...

But where was Dove? Worry tugged at him and Jase carefully slid from the bed, padding out to the living room. They'd abandoned their clothing. He sorted through the mess and found his pants. Feeling a bit more presentable, he moved into the kitchen, drawn by a faint light.

Dove was at the counter, head down, hair loose and sound asleep. There was a half-eaten plate of food in front of her. His heart twisted. She'd been too weary to make it to the bedroom.

Carefully, he bent, looped her arm around his neck and lifted her. On the way out of the room, her shoes fell off one by one. He kicked them out of the way and kept going, marveling that she didn't even stir.

When he returned to the bedroom, Arav was sitting up, hair mussed and looking worried. Immediately, he was out of bed, pulling back the covers, helping Jason get her comfortable. She moaned a bit while they undressed her. Jason noticed that Arav grew slightly aroused as they bared her skin. He grinned at Jase and winked, sliding back under the covers. Slowly, Jason followed, feeling a bit bewildered when Dove mumbled and turned into him, cuddling at his side.

Arav spooned against her back, one arm over her waist, his hand coming to rest on Jason's hip. "Go to sleep, Jason." Arav's dark eyes drifted closed.

But Jason didn't sleep. He lay awake for an hour or more, looking from one to the other. He listened to their steady breathing, and thought about what Arav had said earlier. They weren't crossing over to him, they were asking Jason to cross over to them.

They wanted him. They needed him.

Such a deep, wide river to cross.

Even with their help, Jason wasn't certain that he could do it.

\* \* \*

Light spilled into the room, dazzling his eyes, dragging him into wakefulness. Jase started to roll away, seeking the comfort of darkness, but something anchored his chest. His arm was numb and awareness flooded his body and mind. His cock was hard as stone, clasped in a warm, gentle grip. He gasped.

"Morning." Dove had her chin propped on his chest. Her hair trailed over his belly like a silk curtain. Her grip on his shaft didn't loosen a bit. She pumped him gently and firmly. He stretched, partly from the waking, partly in bliss at her touch. Jase buried a hand in her hair, tilting her head toward his. When he pulled her up for a kiss, her grip loosened for a moment.

"Where's Arav?" Even as he asked, Jason became aware of the soft music of the shower.

"He's getting ready for work."

"And you?"

"I worked a double, so I've got the day off."

She'd started on his cock again, teasing him, playing with him, but not too fast, not too determined. He enjoyed her ministrations, running his hands through her hair, over her soft skin.

"You and Arav were together last night?"

"I'm trying, Dove."

She nodded, looking away. Trailing the fingers of one hand over his belly, she smiled gently as his muscles flinched and quivered from the contact. There was so much to say, but it was all locked up inside, tied up in his chest. At night, when he'd looked up at the filmy curtains draped on the bed frame, images had danced there. Images of Miriam, her body swollen with pregnancy. Smiles and laughter, and for the first time in ages, her ghostly face hadn't looked to him for salvation. She had looked happy. The serenity in her presence was as he'd long ago remembered.

"You guys left a mess in my living room."

He grinned sheepishly. "Maybe I did more than try."

She chuckled softly, and then twisted, her head lowering to his groin, her mouth taking the place of her hand. He groaned at the sudden soft, warm clasp of her lips. She slid up and down slowly, one hand stroking the base of his shaft, the other cupping his balls. Her tongue swirled on his cockhead, teasing and light.

He didn't hear the bathroom door open.

“Morn... ing...”

Jase dragged his eyes open to see Arav standing in the doorway, a towel around his waist, brown skin glistening and wet. His hair was slicked back, revealing the exquisite planes of his face.

Dove must have been aware of the other man’s presence, though she had her back to him, her naked bottom in the air. Just imagining the view from where Arav stood brought another moan to Jason’s throat.

Arav approached the bed, and then he stood, one hand resting on Dove’s bottom, stroking up to her back, a hand sliding under to cup a breast. His face had gone intent with lust. His cock tented the white towel that wrapped around his waist. With a trembling hand, Jase reached out, letting the towel loose. Their eyes met in a brief, hot exchange.

He could do this... if it was about Dove, he could do this. When Arav left her side and climbed onto the bed, Jase followed him through half-opened eyes. Arav came to a stop, kneeling at his side. Slowly, he bent over, catching Jason’s lips in a slow, deep kiss.

Jase tasted the mint of toothpaste, smelled the wet fragrance of soap. His hips rocked as Dove’s attention to his cock grew more persistent, breaking through his distraction with the other man.

“Dove.”

She glanced up, looking at Arav.

“Mount him.” Arav’s voice was husky with desire. She let Jason’s cock slide from her mouth, lingering briefly over his balls. Jase panted, reaching down to help her up, to straddle his hips. Jason watched in fascination as the other man steadied her. Arav clasped Jase’s cock, holding it steady as she lowered herself. She took him slowly, her face a study in concentration as his thick flesh parted hers. Dove lifted and lowered, taking just a little at a time.

Jase bit his lip, fighting against the need to shove his way into her body. Her wet heat surrounded him in a lush grip and he couldn’t tear his eyes away. When he did, he met Arav’s hot gaze. Reaching out, he clasped the other man’s cock, pumping slowly. His tempo matched Dove’s, and he looked from one to the other, fighting back from the shimmering edge of climax.

Once Dove was settled, she leaned forward over his body.

“Arav?” She glanced at him, and Arav’s cock grew a shade harder in Jase’s hand.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes... please.”

Jason tracked Arav as he moved to the bedside, opening a drawer, returning with a condom and a small container. He positioned himself behind Dove, and within moments Jase almost lost his equilibrium as Dove gasped. Through the thin membrane of her body, he felt the gliding stroke of Arav’s finger.

He held perfectly still, even as Dove’s sheath clasped hard. She rested her head on his chest, her body shivering.

“If it hurts... don’t.” His throat was raw and painful. Above him, Dove shuddered, her gray eyes



meeting his, full of arousal, and a touch of apprehension.

“God... don’t stop, Arav... Please... I’m okay...” She didn’t look away from Jason as she spoke.

She grew tighter around Jason’s shaft as Arav widened her more.

“Bear down, sweetheart.” He watched her face, looking for signs that the double invasion was too much.

Behind Dove, Arav moved into her slowly. His hard, thick cock began an exquisite press against Jason, crowding into the tight back passage of her body. She moaned and Jase felt sweat bloom over her skin.

“It’s tight... oh God, it’s so tight...” Her voice was harsh with arousal.

“Do you need me to stop?” As usual, Arav held himself under tight control.

“No... keep going.”

Within long, endless minutes, Arav had penetrated her fully. His slow thrusts were an equally blissful torture for all three. Unable to do otherwise, Jase’s hips began to surge, and Arav went still, letting the other two take over all movement. He brought one foot up next to Jase’s hip, bracing himself as Dove surged back onto him, then forward onto Jase. She let out a sobbing breath and Jase reached up, cupping her cheek in his hand.

She was tight, so tight that the sensation was almost painful on Jase’s shaft. She was wet, and as his cock bypassed Arav’s, his breath caught in his chest. So right... the sensation was so right and complete that his heart beat even faster, and some of the adrenaline that shot through his system was inspired by fear that he didn’t understand.

“Open your eyes, Jase.”

He did so, seeing the two faces that meant so very much to him. He shut his eyes tightly, and then opened them again. Dove was flushed with exertion, with passion. Her eyes were unfocused, her soft lips parted. He’d been afraid they’d hurt her, but there wasn’t a trace of pain or fear on her face. Arav was upright, one hand on her hip, the other running up her back. Jase circled his arms around her waist, and as he began to thrust into her harder, deeper, Arav’s face went dark, his body went still. Jase thrust in, and then forced her back onto their partner’s shaft, deeper, faster, reveling in his control over them both.

Dove began to keen softly. She buried her head in Jason’s chest and went rigid, stiff, and then she was thrusting fast, her sheath clasp like a fist on his cock. Arav’s moan told him that she’d pulled him over into climax as well. The other man stayed upright, his head thrown back, one hand convulsively clasp over Jason’s where it rested on Dove’s hip.

Unable to hang on any longer, Jase shuddered, arching up into Dove’s hot sheath, thrusting hard. His ass clenched, his balls drew up and he cried out, holding her tightly, reaching up to clasp Arav’s iron-hard arm.

In a chorus of moans and the slapping of skin on skin, they all came together in one single, mind-bending climax.

Dove slowly melted down to his body. She was warm and right against his skin. Jase could still feel

Arav's cock snug against his, though they were both rapidly softening. Slowly, Arav pulled back, leaving them both. With a sigh, he collapsed onto the bed next to Jason. Dove lifted from his body and rolled to Jase's other side.

He lay sandwiched between two warm, surprisingly gentle bodies. Arav stroked his hair while Dove's small hand wandered his chest and belly. No words were spoken, but volumes were communicated in that moment.

In the brief moments before drifting off to sleep, Jase Anders became aware that somewhere, somehow, he'd made a terrible mistake. And he was afraid.

## Chapter Ten

Jase was gone when they woke.

Dove looked at the empty space between them and then scooted over into Arav's arms. "I guess it was too much to hope for."

"It was a huge breakthrough, Dove. Last night, he took the lead with me, and then this morning..."

"Yeah. This morning. It was pretty amazing, wasn't it?"

"God, yes. The question is, how are you feeling? That couldn't have been gentle." He sounded worried and she grinned.

"I swear, I was made for this, Arav. Nothing has ever felt so right." She stretched, running a bare foot down his leg. "Now if we could just convince Jase."

"He knows. That's why he's gone." Arav stretched and sat up, grinning as Dove grumbled in complaint. "Work, baby. Think I should tell the lieutenant that I was late 'cause I was having a hot threesome?"

He dodged a pillow and leaned down, blowing a raspberry on her belly. Dove giggled, finally wiggling away to roll off the bed. She landed on her bottom, and then climbed to her feet, searching for her glasses.

As Arav watched her disappear into the bathroom, his heart swelled with love. No, it wasn't the Imperative, but maybe it was something better, more precious. It was love that was natural and good.

Without bothering to dress, he meandered into the kitchen and programmed the kitchen unit for coffee. As he waited, he wandered into the living room. Jase had neatly folded his clothes, leaving them on the chair they'd used the night before.

Arav pulled on his jeans and settled into the chair, laying his head back. From the corner of his eye, he

caught the gleam of a brightly colored hair. Jase. He smiled and carefully dislodged the hair. It was long, silky and the color of the sun. And it was straight, not Jason's hair after all.

He started to shake it loose, and then reconsidered. No doubt it was the former roommate... Debra. He sighed and headed back into the kitchen.

\* \* \*

"Hey, Dove, do you want me to get the door?"

The doorbell rang once again. The chime began to sound strident.

"I've got it, hon."

He heard her footsteps and then the sound of voices. As he listened, one voice raised a bit, sounding angry. Curiously, Arav stepped into the living room, and then backpedaled, his heart racing in his chest.

"Debra, I'm sorry your new place isn't working out, but you really can't go on leaving your stuff here."

"God, Dove, it's just for a few more days! What's it going to hurt? You're hardly ever here anyway."

Dove hesitated, and Arav could sense that she was going to fold. Their argument didn't interest him, though. The identity of the roommate did. Standing there in the other room was Lady Selene, in the flesh. He didn't know if she'd recognize him, but Arav really didn't want to take that chance. His relationship with Dove was too new, too fragile to throw his sordid job in her face.

He retreated to the spare bedroom where he kept a few things for when he stayed over. He'd taken to sleeping at Dove's place most nights, but didn't want to move in on her completely. So a few of his things lived here, but he didn't invade her closet space.

As he buttoned his shirt, he caught sight of another bright blonde hair. As far as he knew, Jase had never been in this room, so the strand had to belong to Debra. Lady Selene.

He found a stray evidence bag deep in his pocket and gently worked the hair loose from the carpet, checking for a follicle. It was probably nothing, but still, that cop's instinct was working overtime. If it was a match to the DNA they'd collected from Jase, he'd know within hours. Arav tucked the envelope into his pocket and slipped into a jacket. Time to go to work.

\* \* \*

Carefully, Jase eyed the anchor rope, making certain the boat was securely fastened to the buoy. He was a couple miles upshore from Harbor City, just far enough to be out of reach of anyone looking for him. He'd already shut down his communications systems after checking his email. There'd been only one message. It was from Margaret, asking if he'd be at tonight's party.

Not likely.

He stripped naked and plunged into the chilly Pacific waters, diving deep and letting the blue-green of the ocean wash over his mind. He didn't want to think about or remember the events of the past day and night. He didn't want to replay the soft murmurs of love and the gentle touches.

He didn't want to remember calling the hospital, asking that Dove be removed from his case. As usual, he'd screwed up his life, dragging other people along for the ride. This crime had to be the worst yet, because he had no intention of backing down, and two very good people were going to be hurt by his decision.

After swimming long and hard, Jase pulled himself back onto the boat and lay on the rear platform, feeling the sun slowly begin to warm his body. He rolled onto his back, watching gulls wheeling through the air. If he lay here long enough, he'd be able to track the progress of the sun through the sky.

Jase closed his eyes and breathed deeply, the melody of a long ago composition running through his mind. The melody wandered, becoming something completely new and different. Harmony introduced itself, and for the first time in years, Jase was compelled to stand up, to search out paper and a pen and write out his inspiration.

He sat in the captain's chair for an hour or more, looking out over the ocean, adding notes to the mix, making the occasional adjustment to the manuscript. When he finished, he sat back, looking at the sheet of paper. It was so unfamiliar now, like trying to decipher a foreign language. He'd written only a few bars with shaky handwriting, but the writing soothed his brain, gave expression to the confusion that reigned in his heart.

A composition like this would take weeks... months, and for once, Jase didn't have that much time on his hands. His calendar had diminished to weeks and days. He'd been blessed that Dove had entered his life, granting him a bit of the peace that he'd craved so desperately.

Dove and Arav. He could practically hear that question Marilyn had asked him all those months ago, atop the roof of the hospital. *If you could ask Nature for anything, what would it be ?*

*Peace.*

Dove. The symbol of peace.

He suddenly rose, heading below deck to check his computer. Jase sat down and entered his search term. *Define Indian name Arav .*

Jase nearly laughed when the answer came up on the screen, blinking at him with all the innocence a computer could muster.

*The Indian name Arav is Sans krit for peaceful.*

Somewhere, someone was having a cosmic laugh at Jason Anders' expense.

\* \* \*

Arav stared at his screen, idly smoothing his goatee. He jumped at every message that dropped into his inbox. He'd already turned down Margaret's party invitation for the night. After a half-hour of consideration, he changed his mind and accepted. This party was bound to be different. It was taking place at Margaret's own home.

Arav looked down at the short-list of female suspects he'd compiled. Reluctantly, he'd put Lady Margaret at the head of the list, followed by Flora and Debra, aka Lady Selene. If he could identify even one assailant, they'd have a lock on the entire gang.

Based on his experience with Debra, she was mean and petty, but he didn't think she was smart enough, or bloodthirsty enough, to participate in a kill gang. Flora, on the other hand, had some major fetishes for pain. She'd been laying low since she and Jase had split, but that didn't mean too much.

Margaret? Well, in truth, she'd come to be his main suspect. If she wasn't involved in the Wilder gangs, someone was making it look as though she was. Virtually every attack had occurred within walking distance of one of her events. Arav didn't believe that this was coincidence.

He checked the clock. It was late, and still no lab results. Arav sighed and rose, shutting down his equipment for the day. He'd transfer his mail to his personal accounts. That way, if any new information came through, he'd have it immediately.

Outside, the sun was sinking over the ocean. As he walked down the Strand toward his house, Arav could see the empty slip where the *Gaia* normally rested. His heart ached a little, knowing that Jase was no doubt struggling with his future.

Dove had called her boss to remove herself from Jason's case, only to find that he'd already requested a new mentor. She'd cried a bit, and he hadn't been certain what to say to make her feel better. He suspected that Jason had no plans to return to his lovers. Not yet, anyway.

As the sun dipped into the ocean, Arav walked up the path to his house, not seeing the spring flowers, or the frog that hopped from the path into the bushes.

He also didn't see the shadows that surrounded him until it was too late. There was a sudden, flashing pain to his head, and everything went black.

## Chapter Eleven

"You came back."

Dove blinked tears from her eyes, standing back from the door to let Jase in. He was windblown and carried the smell of the ocean. His hair was still slightly damp from swimming.

He walked straight into her arms.

Loving Dove Sinclair was so very easy. The thought hit him like a thunderbolt, prompting him to hold her tighter. He wanted to care for her, protect her. He wanted to see laughter chase the sad shadows from her eyes.

He'd loved her from the first moment he'd turned on the lights and looked into her eyes.

This wasn't the giddy infatuation of the Imperative, but rather a deeply rooted connection, the slow

awakening of his heart. He had to tell her, but first... "Where's Jain?"

She stayed cuddled against him, her face buried against his chest. Jase had the suspicion that she was crying.

"He's working. He went to one of those parties."

"Shit."

During his long day, Jase had faced some hard realities. He'd also opened his sensitive ears to the memories of that night. The words that had been snarled in his ear; the tones and inflections, notes and pitches. His other lover might be walking into the lion's den.

"Is there something wrong? Do you know something?"

Jase shook his head, pulling her tight against his body. "No, I just... it's different now, you know?"

She pulled away, looking up at his face.

"I guess I'm jealous. I don't like him being there with someone else." He wondered if she could read the lie on his face. He'd listened to his memories, and had put faces to some of those hated voices. Masked faces that he knew so well.

"Would you feel better if you went? I'd feel better if you were there watching his back."

Relief swept over him as she provided him with the excuse he needed. Fear then flooded his body, and for once, Jase wished he could also don a mask among all those familiar strangers. He was afraid they'd see the knowledge on his face, the recognition of evil. "Yeah, I'd feel a lot better. I haven't been going lately, so maybe they'll leave me alone, especially if I'm with Arav."

Still, he didn't let her go. Jase felt like she was a fixture here in his arms, a lifeline. He buried his face in her hair, knowing he should tell her, but unable to speak. She opened her mouth to say something, but he silenced her with his kiss.

And oh, how he needed her! He needed her body naked against his, the feel of her yielding flesh under his hands. Right there in the entry of her house, Jase stripped the clothing from her body, raining kisses on her face, her throat, and her sweet breasts.

He dropped to his knees before her, his tongue trailing over her belly, his fingers parting the fiery red curls that guarded her pussy. He stroked, felt the first moisture of her arousal seep from her passage. Jase bent his face to her, hands on her buttocks, pulling her close.

He loved her with everything he had, mouth and teeth, hands and body. Her breath sobbed from her chest and Jase only renewed his efforts, his tongue seeking her clit, dipping into the honey-sweet entrance of her passage.

He dipped fingers into her juices and lubed her ass, pressing gently with a single finger, pumping as he thrust and licked and sucked Dove into a single, devastating climax.

He knelt before her, the moisture of his own semen darkening the front of his pants. He'd come without a single touch. Jase rubbed his face against her belly, listening to the sound of her breath, feeling her

hands clutching his hair. Even at her most passionate, she hadn't hurt him. Without a word, he stood, supporting her weight, carrying her into the darkened bedroom.

He could still smell the fragrance of their bodies and their lovemaking. Arav's scent of sandalwood tickled his nose, reminding Jase of the party, of the danger that Arav just might be facing. Alone.

"You are so very beautiful, Dr. Dove."

"And you are very talented, Mr. Anders." In the darkness, he could see the flash of her dimples.

"I need to shower before I go. You were so completely, ravishingly hot when you came in my arms, I came with you."

"Really?" She sat up a bit, grinning as she reached down and fondled the damp spot on his pants. His cock gave a half-hearted throb. Just a little longer...

"When we come back tonight, I want you ready, Dove. We'll be in bad shape, wanting you like we do." He ran his palm over her belly, up to her rounded breasts. "You know what Jain fantasizes about? He wants me to fuck you, to come inside your body. And then he wants his turn. He wants to feel your juices mixed with my come. He wants to taste us before he slides into your wet... sweet... pussy..."

His whisper tickled her ear, and to her surprise, Dove felt renewed arousal. Her moisture slipped down her thigh.

"I could make you come again, but we'll wait this time."

"All three of us?"

He settled a gentle kiss on her lips. "All three of us. I promise."

She looked up at him for a long moment, taking in every plane and angle of his face. In the darkness, she could very nearly see the color of his eyes. "I didn't want to love you, Jason. I've fought my feelings, but it happened. I still don't want to love you."

"I know. I understand. It can't be easy, loving someone who plans to die."

"You still plan to do it?"

"Yes. No. I don't know from minute to minute, Dove. But I want to talk about it later, when we're all together. I did a lot of thinking today."

"If you go forward with it, there's no going back, Jason. If you decide not to do it, that's a decision that can be changed."

No, there would be no going back. Death was pretty damn permanent.

"What about Arav? You say you love me, and I know he loves you."

"I don't want to love him, Dove. The idea of sex with him... it frightens me."

"You had sex with Arav. You know he won't pressure you to do anything you aren't comfortable with."

“Yeah. I know.”

How did he tell her? How did he tell her that something in Arav Jain’s burning eyes frightened him to the core? Something in his mannerisms, his speech...

Jase had recaptured many memories today, and the memory that came with Arav Jain was one he couldn’t face. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

“I need to go.”

She pulled him down for one more kiss. This one was hard and urgent. “Be careful. I don’t know why...” She broke off, moving away from Jase, crossing to the window.

“Why what?”

“I’m just nervous.”

He was too, but that was another bit of knowledge he wouldn’t share. He was beyond nervous. He was frightened. Familiar voices murmured in his ear, taunting him. He’d get Jain, they’d get the hell out of there and talk. They’d talk about who attacked him. Maybe they’d talk about what they’d done to Jason Anders’ body and mind.

“It won’t be long. I promise.”

\* \* \*

Watching Jase walk out the door was one of those rare moments that took her breath away.

He faded into the mist of the evening like a phantom. The moisture in the coastal air dampened his hair, causing it to lay in long waves down his shoulders. He looked different, moved like another man than the one she knew. His urgency had taken down her defenses and had planted a kernel of fear in her heart.

Dove closed and locked the door, then turned to survey the house.

Arav had been distressed and distracted as well. When they’d spoken during the day, he told her he was waiting for evidence to process. Since he hadn’t called back, she assumed that the information hadn’t come to him yet.

He hadn’t called, nor had he come by for a quick visit. She’d tried to contact him, but he hadn’t answered her call. Cops and doctors made the worst lovers.

She sighed. A free day was rare in her world, and Dove didn’t quite know what to do with herself. She could watch a film, or listen to music.

Dove headed to the entertainment unit that was hidden behind a wall when she passed the computer deck. It was powered up, and she decided to check for messages from the hospital.

She grabbed the unit and flopped down in her overstuffed chair. She could catch a slight fragrance, Arav’s sandalwood mingling with Jason’s ocean fragrance. Dove snuggled deeper into the chair and closed her eyes, imagining what they’d done together. Two beautiful men, bodies straining, groans of



passion...

The twist of arousal was powerful. She gasped as her belly clenched, and she cupped her mons, hoping to relieve the erotic pressure. Once she was back under control, Dove powered up the unit, listening to the slight hum as it booted up her mail.

When the screen projected in front of her, she frowned. Arav must have used it last, and he hadn't logged out. A queue of messages from work had piled up. One unread message flashed with a red flag. Obviously, it was urgent.

Automatically, Dove searched for the logout on his mail, but her eyes were pulled back to the message with the flashing strobe. Urgent.

She sighed, reached over to the communication controls on the table next to her.

"Call Arav Jain."

There was a brief pause. "Arav Jain is not responding."

Her chest went tight. Arav wore a stealth unit when he worked; he was always available. She frowned at the message.

*Lab results: 09587. Priority.*

Dove took a deep cleansing breath, and then she opened the message.

## Chapter Twelve

Jase almost bitch-slapped the first person that grabbed his ass that night.

The hair on his neck stood on end. The skin on his arms pebbled. Flight or fight. Every instinct told him to flee.

But not without Arav.

Eyes looked at him from behind masks. A drink was thrust into his hand. He pretended to sip, to smile, to have a good time. He shouldered his way through the throngs of people, looking for Arav, for Lady Margaret. Even Selene might be able to help him locate Arav.

The music throbbed in a heavy beat, and oddly, the tone of this party seemed darker than usual. The glittering laughter that usually carried over the music was absent.

Margaret's house was large and spacious, but still, it was crowded wall to wall with people dancing,

talking, fucking and fighting. He caught a glimpse of Flora's dark head. She stood as tall as most men. He caught her eye. She glanced away dismissively.

The place had a second story, but Jase decided to check the kitchen instead. Somehow, the idea of Jain upstairs, tangling with others in an erotic tableau, bothered him to no end. He wasn't jealous... just annoyed.

Jase shook his head and called himself a liar.

In the kitchen, he found an opaque glass and filled it with water. He wanted his head clear. Hypnotic smoke wafted from ornamental smudge pots, making his nostrils sting and his eyes burn.

Lady M was going all out at her house party. That stuff was expensive as hell, spreading lust and disintegrating inhibitions.

"Slut."

Great. Just what he needed.

"Hello, Lady Selene." Actually, she was exactly what he needed, though her voice grated his ears like steel on glass. She might know where Jain had gotten off to. A man appeared at her shoulder, a behemoth in spandex, his pudgy waist rolling over his belt. Jase swallowed his nausea.

"I want you with us. Now."

"No. I have other plans tonight."

"Now!"

He sighed. "Look, I'm not the party favor tonight. I'm here looking for someone, and then I'm leaving."

The look she gave him was lethal.

"I'm off the circuit now, Selene. No more parties. I'm in a relationship."

The two didn't relax much. In fact, the tension rose even further. Her red-painted lips were tight. Anger sparked her vivid blue eyes. She wasn't quite so pretty now.

"By the way, whatever happened to John?" He glanced pointedly at the monster at her side. He knew the guy; he worked as a bouncer at a downtown bar. Mean son-of-a-bitch.

"John's here." A calculating gleam entered her eyes. "He's downstairs in Margaret's private dungeon. But you can't get in unless you come with me." She held out her hand. A luminous code-stamp appeared briefly, and then vanished.

Did he believe her? Did he have a choice? With a cautious look at her companion, Jase nodded, and then followed her from the room, down a back hallway. He knew that this was very likely the stupidest decision he'd ever made.

Selene waved her hand over a cunning little sensor, and a section of wall slid away in near silence. She nodded. Jase started down the stairs, followed by Selene. The bouncer's feet thudded heavily on the

metal steps, the sound echoing in the darkness. Jase swallowed his mounting fear. In this space, he couldn't escape... couldn't even fight.

Another door barred his way. Again, Selene waved her hand and with an audible click, the door unlocked. She pushed him aside and stepped in front of him, leaving Jase alone with his guard. A moment later, she opened the door, pulling Jase by the arm.

Music throbbed through the smoke-filled room. The melody that beat in his ears nearly pulled a scream from Jason's innermost soul. It was one of his, a song he'd composed shortly before Miriam's death. The joyful anthem had been set to a dark, throbbing track, rendering it almost obscene. He took a moment and steadied himself, surveying the room.

Typical upper-class dungeon, climate controlled, all the luxuries that anyone could wish. An entertainment center projected images from fetish films. A top-notch sound system surrounded the room with music. His music. There were tables and frames, all manner of whips and electronic devices displayed on the walls. It was all mostly for show. He imagined Margaret usually held small, intimate soirees down here, entertaining her most elite clientele.

She'd been house-invaded.

Margaret herself was shackled to a wall, a gag in her mouth, her eyes wide and frightened. Across the room, Arav was suspended from a rack, his head lolling to one side. Dried blood streaked his forehead. He was naked, and Jase swallowed down his horror. Arav looked uninjured, but he couldn't really tell.

"I didn't know John was into bondage."

He decided to play the stupid card. Selene laughed, a trilling sound that shattered his nerves. He glanced around the room, looking for an exit. There was undoubtedly another way out. This whole thing was bad, very bad. The crowd mingled, and then formed in small groups around Margaret. She went stiff as hands touched her body, rudely invaded her genitals. They worked as a unit, almost hive-like in their unspoken communication.

Of course, they'd had plenty of opportunity to practice. This group of Wilders had been practicing together for over a year now. He knew every masked face, recognized every muffled voice. There were about ten of them, and they behaved as though Jase weren't even there.

Vertigo rushed through his head, partly the smoke, but mostly the situation, the memories, hearing his own creativity flowing from the hidden speakers. It was a quartet he'd written, though this arrangement sounded dark and distorted. He started across the room, heading toward Arav. Before he came close enough to touch, hands gripped his arms.

"He's not for you, slut." It was Selene's new friend. As though disturbed by the noise, Arav's eyes opened heavily, and he looked around the room in confusion.

"Jase?"

His voice was harsh and cracked. He blinked, clearing his eyes. And at that moment, Jase saw those eyes with perfect clarity. And he knew exactly where he'd seen Arav Jain's beautiful dark eyes before.

Dizziness and nausea threatened to take him to the floor. "Don't hurt him." He turned to Selene. Oddly enough, she seemed to be the voice of the group. She'd been the first to speak when they'd attacked him

all those months ago. A voice he'd conveniently suppressed.

"What'll you do in return?"

"Anything. Anything. Just don't hurt him." If they'd stripped Arav, surely they knew he was with the police. They'd know he was undercover, looking for them.

"Jase, don't!"

He didn't look at Arav, instead turning back to Selene. She stood, arms folded across her chest. She gave Arav a cold smile. "How do you think your little Dr. Dove is going to feel when you show up on her exam table, Detective? The first time I watched you fucking her, I recognized you, John."

Woman scorned. Jase wondered if that's why she'd attacked him as well. As though sensing his question, she turned back in his direction. "You were just for fun, Jase. Practice. Nothing personal."

The group had left Margaret and was gathering around Jase now, undoubtedly scenting blood. Hands fell on his body, and Jase was propelled to a table, forced to lean over it. In spite of his need to save Arav, he fought against the bonds. Behind him, he could hear Arav pulling frantically against his shackles. He heard the sound of skin on skin, wood creaking, Arav's grunt as a blow landed. Jase craned his head in time to see four men carry Arav's struggling form to the other end of the table. Even injured, he was a formidable opponent.

"You can keep each other company."

Arav was forced face down, his hands and feet secured as Jase's were. They ended up face to face, mere inches from each other.

"Shit, I'm sorry, Jase."

He shook his head, trying to clear it. Nausea welled in his stomach. The vertigo returned. *Think of this as a crossing in time*. Miriam, with her flashing brown eyes. Everything else was different, but those eyes were the same. He couldn't look away.

"Jase..." Arav swallowed hard. His head dropped to the wood of the table. "God, I'm dizzy."

"Imperative," Jase murmured.

"What?"

"I... It's the fucking Imperative, Jain!" Fucking stupid Nature really got her wires crossed this time! Jase forced himself closer to Arav. Every inch relieved the sensation just a bit. "Move closer, Arav."

The other man found enough play in his bindings that he was able to move so the skin of their cheeks brushed. Jase sighed, and the nausea receded just a bit.

A piercing scream cut through the room.

"God, they're going after Margaret!"

Jase forced himself to look. Through the mass of people, he saw Selene with her bright hair and mean

blue eyes. "It's Debra. Dove's roommate."

"I know." Jain dropped his head in frustration. "I saw her today at the house. I managed to find a strand of her hair to match for DNA, but since it hadn't processed, I couldn't get an arrest warrant."

"So you came anyway?"

Arav sighed. "No, they got me first. Initially, it was payback to Dove. I guess Debra wasn't happy to get kicked out, and she's been watching the house. I was in street clothes and they found my shield."

Jase brushed a kiss against his cheek. Arav shifted until their lips joined. "You taste like Dove."

"I told her we'd come home for her tonight. Together."

"That's why the Imperative came, then?"

"Yeah. I guess I managed to... deal." He wanted his arms free. He wanted to hold Arav tight, to save him this time, to never let him go.

"Do you think Dove's feeling it too?"

"Of course she is. We all bonded so quickly..."

What if it hadn't? He looked up, met Arav's dark gaze. What if they both died, leaving Dove alone and crippled as he'd been this past decade? He almost prayed the Imperative had passed her by.

Jase arched his body, fighting against the bindings that held him down.

\* \* \*

"So, what's the deal? You're holding a little party, and nobody thought to invite me?" A silky voice cut through the room.

In horror, Jase looked up. Flora stood framed in the doorway, magnificent in leather and silk. Unlike the other women, she wore snug leather trousers. Her red silk shirt hung open in front, displaying a black leather bra. She looked dark and ominous in the dimly lit dungeon. A blacksnake whip was coiled at her hip.

"Oh, fuck," Arav whispered.

The music cut off, leaving the room in silence.

Around her neck, a shield dangled on a long cord.

The room was suddenly filled with light, and to Jason's horror, Dove emerged from behind the other woman. She started toward the table, but was halted by Flora's powerful arm.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is a raid. Please move to face that wall. *Now !*"

She casually loosened the whip at her belt, and automatically, Jase cringed. That whip had tasted his skin more than once. Beside him, Arav cursed softly. Anger fairly radiated from his body.

Selene's brute started toward Flora, and without hesitation, her whip cracked, opening a stripe on his cheek. He roared and rushed her, and ended up on the floor with his elbow broken. While Selene was distracted, Dove reached their sides, fumbling at the buckles of the straps that held the men. Gratefully, they rubbed sore wrists, and absently linked hands as Dove hugged one, and then the other. They exchanged worried looks. She seemed... normal. Clearly frightened, but Dove showed no signs of dizziness or nausea.

There was a rumble of noise, and police began streaming down the stairs. One by one the Wilders were cuffed and taken away, while Jase and Arav sat naked, giving their statements to Regional Agent Florence Mendoza. Arav's dark eyes held checked fury. "I didn't know the Region had someone undercover on this case."

She sighed, and Jase noticed that she wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Detective Jain, I wasn't after the Wilders. My assignment was blown tonight. I was investigating Lady Margaret. She's part of a Region-wide con racket. They set up these parties and then blackmail the participants. No doubt she tried to squeeze someone who happened to be more dangerous than she is. The attack on Jason was probably a warning." Her dark eyes remained downcast, and she refused to look Jase in the eye. Well, that explained Margaret's frequent visits to Jason in the hospital. Good old-fashioned guilt.

Slowly, the room was emptying. Technicians were entering with their cases and equipment. "Detective, you'd probably better go to the hospital." Arav shook his head, putting an arm around Dove. "My girlfriend's a doctor, I'll be fine." He glanced over at Jase. Clearly, Dove hadn't had the same experience they'd had. How were they going to tell her?

Jase had pulled on his discarded clothing. Someone had given Jain a pair of sweats. Both men were barefoot. Jase looked around the room. The space had looked so ominous in the darkness, now it simply looked tawdry. Odd how things changed when you cast a bit of light on the situation. He stepped to Arav's other side. The need to touch was undeniable.

The Imperative... Twice in a lifetime. He was too numb to wonder at what could only be a miracle.

"Jase, can I talk to you for a moment?" Flora still stood at an angle to him, avoiding eye contact. He nodded at Jain and Dove.

"We'll wait upstairs." He watched as they left the room.

"How did she know to find you?" Flora turned and finally looked Jase fully in the eye. For the first time, he saw a torment there, a pain that nearly matched his own. She crossed to the entertainment system and selected a song. His eyes dropped to the floor as the melody filled the empty room.

"You wrote this."

"Before my wife died, I was a musician."

She nodded. "You weren't Jase Anders then, were you? You went by another name."

"Not so different. My given name is Jason Emerson Anders. I went by my initials. J.E. Anders. Family tradition."

“Jason, I’m sorry.”

Her voice was raw, but there were no tears for Flora. “I was warned about going undercover. I’ve always been strong, dominant. This world...” She looked around the room, and her eyes were edged with horror. “Jase, I allowed this job to corrupt me. I hurt you.”

“If I recall, that’s what I wanted.”

“I enjoyed it, Jase. I craved it... I crave it.” She swallowed hard. “After I saw that scar, I went for help, because people shouldn’t *like* hurting other people.” She pressed a fist to her forehead. “I told my boss, begged to get off this assignment. And you know what?” She looked up at him then. “They want me to take over Margaret’s circuit. I’m in so deep they don’t want me to come out.”

He pulled her into a hug, holding her tight. She stood rigid in his embrace. “Walk away, Flora. No job is worth your soul.”

Flora allowed him to hold her for a moment longer, finally pulling away, gathering her dignity. “Your girlfriend, she’s tough. She came here looking for both of you. She was scared witless, but wasn’t going to leave until you two were safe.”

“How’d she find you?”

“I found her. She looked like an innocent. I was trying to get her out. Things felt really bad tonight. She told me enough that I decided we’d better act fast. You two were lucky.”

“How’s Margaret?”

“She’s lucky too. A bit bruised and scared as hell. But she’ll be all right.”

“Good.” He glanced toward the stairs where Arav and Dove had vanished, his body, his very soul craving contact. With Arav. With Dove as well, but the Imperative swirled through every fiber of his body. That glimpse he’d caught of Miriam’s soul looking at him through Arav’s eyes had fed his newly awakened heart. He loved them both, needed them both.

“You’d better go after them. Take them home, and don’t ever let anyone hurt you again, Jase.”

She was standing in the shadows, her face once again hidden from his sight. Somehow, Jase knew that Flora needed saving nearly as much as he’d ever needed it.

He turned his back and walked away.

\* \* \*

They honeymooned on the *Gaia* .

The wedding had been discreet. Their families had attended. A string quartet had played the song that Jase had written on that fateful day he’d made his decision to live. Neil had stood as his best man, and a friend of Arav’s from the force had stood for him. Marina Davis had been maid of honor. The ceremony had been bittersweet. Arav and Jase had registered as Imperative Mates, with Dove as their wife. Dove had been exquisite in an antique, dove gray gown, her red hair spilling from a quaint updo. She’d



succumbed to pressure and had her eyes operated on, which had done very little to improve her balance.

If anything, it was worse, and in truth, Arav and Jase would have her no other way.

Tonight, the yacht was at anchor. The waves gently rocked the boat. Their lovemaking rocked it even more. They'd all discovered that with the Imperative between Jase and Arav, some things had changed, while others remained the same.

Jase was still a restless soul, and Dove had no doubt that he always would be. Some nights, she woke in Arav's arms, Jase missing from the bed. She'd find him on deck with his guitar and paper, sometimes at the computer, transcribing music. It was as though a dam had broken, releasing his long crushed creativity. Some of the music was so heartbreakingly sad she didn't think it would ever go public, but more and more, joy was breaking through.

The men rarely discussed the Imperative, and why Dove had not experienced it. But they loved her and both refused to move into their future without Dove at their side. She'd been afraid that she'd be on the outside, but that hadn't proven to be the case.

When they made love, they focused all their needs and passions on Dove. The men embraced, touched and caressed one another, but she was uneasily aware that her presence allowed them to avoid the issue of sex with one another. Yet they didn't seem to be suffering. They were in constant contact. There was no order to who slept where. Some nights Arav was in the middle, other nights it was Jase or Dove.

They seemed content, but increasingly, Dove had the sensation of tension... waiting for the other shoe to drop.

She lay quietly, her body sated, sore and very happy. The men had dropped into a heavy sleep. Restless, she slid from her side of the bed and slipped on a robe, feeling the need for some space. She found her favorite spot on the deck of the boat. From here, she could watch the sky and the ocean. The lights of Harbor glimmered in the distance. She sighed, the melody of one of Jason's songs running through her head.

"He's a very talented musician."

Odd, that she wasn't the least bit surprised to see Dr. Patel standing in front of her, gleaming in the same golden and red sari that she'd worn to the wedding. Obviously, she'd fallen asleep.

"He is. I had no idea."

"He kept it well hidden. It was part of his self-punishment."

"It wasn't fair, you know, taking his mate, and then all those years of suffering with the Imperative."

"Life isn't fair, Dove. And even the deities do not have all the answers. Allowing the two to cross paths again was the best I could do. They had to work out their issues together." Jason and Arav? Again? She blinked, and the Goddess Sakti smiled coyly.

"He asked for peace. I planned to send only Arav, but they both seemed pulled to you. Perhaps from another lifetime. And does the Dove not symbolize peace? It seemed logical."

Dove pressed her eyes tightly together. Surely, this wasn't happening? She opened her eyes, and her



boss was still there... glowing.

"You have questions, and they will be answered. But in truth, you already know the answers. You simply haven't accepted. Now go downstairs, and go back to bed before they miss you." She looked up at the sky, floating a tiny bit as she did so. "I've missed his music. He will share his gift for many years to come, and his children will as well." Dove's chest went tight. Children? Sakti laughed. The sound was music over the gentle waves of the ocean. "One more thing, Dove... if you ask Dr. Patel about this meeting, she won't remember. She knowingly loans me her body, but has very little memory afterwards."

Dove jerked awake, completely alone now. Dream? Hallucination? The wind grew chilly. She wrapped the robe tightly around her body and rose shakily to her feet. She very nearly slipped on the stairs as the boat pitched, and she braced herself in the doorway of their cabin.

The sound of a soft moan carried to her ears, and Dove paused, watching in amazement. Suddenly, the fear that had teased her made itself plain. Was she simply a body for the men to use as proxy for one another? She knew that Jase shied away from being penetrated. He was physically healed. There was no reason he couldn't participate that way if he wished. She also knew that the rape had damaged his psyche, causing him to shy away from even the gentlest touch back there.

She suspected that Jase had unburdened himself to Arav, and that was good, that was as it should be. But still, Dove had wondered if she was only a substitute lover.

But there on the bed, the men were entwined, Jase on top, face to face with Arav. They kissed gently, their hips surging together, soft gasps breaking over the sound of the waves on the side of the boat. Arav had his knees up, his legs spread. Clearly, Jase was working his way into the other man's body.

"Bear down," Jase whispered hoarsely, the very same words he'd whispered to her before.

"It... burns..."

"Do you need me to stop?"

Arav's laugh was soft, rueful. "No... It's a good kind of hurt..." He broke off on a deep groan as Jase pulled back slowly. Dove felt herself grow wet and aroused. She was witnessing their first consummation, and in the darkness, Arav's eyes gleamed. He knew she was there. It seemed he liked being watched almost as much as he liked watching.

Her mouth grew dry. Her head spun. The men's movements grew more confident, more focused, the occasional groan punctuated by the soft slap of skin to skin. She could see Jase was drawing close to his climax. Arav had clasped him tightly around the waist. Rough kisses were given, words of love carried on the air. She wanted to join them, to crawl on the bed, to touch, to watch. But she knew this was their moment. They needed this.

Jase buried his head in the crook of Arav's neck, thrusting hard now, his back arched, hips undulating. He sobbed as his climax washed over him. He was beautiful in his bliss, golden hair cascading over Arav's dark figure. He dug his hips, burying himself deep, wrenching the last shuddering spasms from his body.

He lay still for a long moment.

"You didn't come."

“Not yet.” Arav’s smile flashed in the darkness. “Will you let me...”

Jase pulled from Arav’s body slowly. He slipped off a condom as he rolled to his side, giving Arav his back, and meeting Dove’s eyes. His smile was uncertain, and automatically she moved to the bed, lying face to face with him. His hand dropped between her legs, stroking through her slit.

“She’s wet, Arav. She’s been spying, and now she’s so fucking wet.” His fingers wandered, pumping in and out, and then moving up to circle her clit. He brought his hand up to his mouth, sucking the juice from his fingers. When he kissed her, she tasted herself. She tasted Arav.

He stared into her eyes, and flinched slightly as Arav began to touch, to invade his body.

“Don’t do this if it bothers you, Jase.”

He placed long fingers over her lips. “I want it. It’s time.”

Down against her belly, his cock was growing heavy again. He pressed against her. He brought a knee up, resting it on her hip, opening himself to Arav.

She knew when Arav began to penetrate him. Jase hissed a bit, his eyes going unfocused. She stroked his face, glancing past him to watch Arav.

Arav looked at her in question, and she nodded. “Keep going.” Jase pulled her close, nuzzling her skin, his hand again wandering to her wet pussy. He thrust his fingers into her, hooking, pressing up into her G-spot. She groaned, feeling even more fluids seep from her body.

Behind him, Arav was beginning a gentle rhythm, thrusting and retreating, slowly, as gently as he could move. “Are you all right, Jase?”

He nodded, gasping. “Oh God... It’s good... good...” He still wasn’t erect enough to penetrate her, so Jase continued with his hand, and inevitably, their tempo increased. Arav pushed into him as Jase brought Dove closer and closer to the brink.

She felt his cock suddenly harden against his belly, but their position was too cramped, and besides, she was impaled on those long, clever fingers.

Arav was panting. His movement pushed Jase into Dove, and then she broke, clamping down hard on his fingers, plunging one hand into his silky hair, the other grasping Arav’s arm. She bucked and thrust, and without warning, Dove found herself on her back, Jase thrusting between her legs while Arav loomed above his body. They moved like a well-oiled machine, in and out, Jase into her body, then back onto Arav’s cock.

Before she came down fully from her climax, she was rising again, grinding herself against Jase, whimpering and cursing, and Jase responded, thrusting faster, slamming hard against Arav, until the dark man clasped his hips and groaned, his hips curling, forcing Jase deeper into Dove than she could have ever believed possible.

Her head roared, or was that one of the men? She bucked and cried out, relishing the weight of Jason in her, on her as he flexed, clearly in the throes of another orgasm. Together, they crested. Together, they came down, sweaty and amazed and grateful.

With a groan, Arav fell to her side. Jase simply remained there, his face pillowed against her breast. Dove reached out and looked at Arav, ran her fingers through the thick waves of his hair.

Imperative or no, she belonged to them, and they belonged to her.

\* \* \*

“Were you really okay with that?” The bathroom door had closed and latched. In seconds, the water pump started, covering their conversation.

“God, yes. I wanted... needed to cross this bridge.” Jase stroked his fingers down the fine skin of Arav’s arm. He flicked the golden ring that threaded through his nipple, leaning forward to circle it with his tongue. “She needed it.”

“She hasn’t said anything, but I can tell something’s wrong.”

“I think she feels like a vessel.”

“For us?”

Jase nodded. He’d watched her after sex, after they’d expended their bodies in hers. “She knows I was afraid to try with a man and that you wouldn’t push it. I think she feels like a substitute.”

“My God. Do you think this helped?”

“Well, it helped me!” Jase grinned. “I’ve never topped before. That was kinda nice.”

Arav ran his tongue up Jason’s chin, enjoying the rasp of his whiskers. “You were okay with me?” He’d been so afraid, but he no longer saw those shadows that had lived for so long in Jason’s eyes.

“That was sublime, you inside of me, while I was inside her. It was perfect, Arav.” They kissed, long and slow, breaking apart only when there was a sudden silence. The water had stopped. And the silence was broken by a thump, then a shriek.

“Dove!”

Both men darted from the bed, rushing to the tiny bathroom. Jase pulled the door open to find Dove sprawled on the floor. Her towel had slipped, exposing rosy breasts. Together, they lifted her up, ignoring her as she slapped at their hands.

“I’m okay, just a little dizzy. I’m sure it’s just the motion of the boat.”

As soon as they let her go, she swayed, toppling to the side. Arav caught her, and carried her to the bed.

“All right, that’s better.” They moved back, and immediately, Dove closed her eyes and groaned. Tentatively, Jase reached out and grasped her arm. She gave a sigh of relief. She opened huge gray eyes, looking from one to the other. When Jase let go, she blanched, and Arav stroked her cheek, calming her once more.

“Guys, I’m thinking maybe I’m seasick or something...”

“Or something!” Jase felt hysterical laughter bubbling up. Arav reached out and hugged him. He then hugged Dove, holding her tightly against his body.

“Funny I should feel better when we...” She sat bolt upright, looking from one grinning face to the other. “Oh my goodness!”

Belinda McBride

*Belinda lives in the wilderness of the Siskiyou Mountains and at night, she runs naked with a pack of wolves...*

Uhh...

Belinda lives *near* the Siskiyou Mountains and shares her home with a pack of Siberian Huskies who like to pretend they are wolves. And she usually keeps her clothing on when she goes outside.

Being born into a multi-racial family gave Belinda a unique outlook on the world and a love for history and genealogy. Her great-grandfather was a noted Comanche leader who was one of the founders of the Native American church. Other relatives were bond servants from Scotland, Mongolians from Central Asia, and a foundling of African ancestry. And then there was her grandmother, who had two husbands... at the same time...

Belinda loves to travel, collect rare gemstones, make soap and spend precious time with her daughters. Her degree is in History with a Cultural Anthropology minor. On weekends, you will often find Belinda ringside at a dog show, comb and spray bottle in hand.

She invites you to visit her website at [www.belindamcbride.com](http://www.belindamcbride.com), or email her directly at [belinda@belindamcbride.com](mailto:belinda@belindamcbride.com).