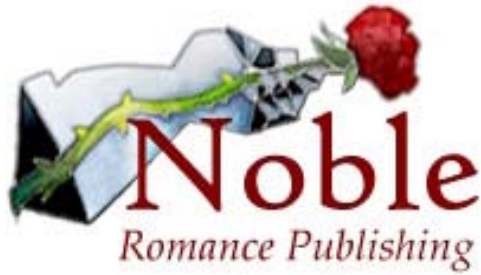


Noble Romance Publishing



CALL ME SIR, TOO

STORMY GLENN



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Call Me Sir Too

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Book Blurb

Dante knew Daniel was the man for him the minute he said his first curse word. He was everything Dante could ever want in a sub: gorgeous, spunky, and totally into the lifestyle Dante enjoyed most. But nothing's ever as simple as it should be. When Dante gets called away on business he expects to be gone for a couple of weeks. He figures to claim Daniel when he comes home, but two weeks quickly turn into six months.

When Dante finally returns, everything he'd been looking for in a mate is gone. Daniel's been assaulted and beaten by a Dom out of control. He no longer trusts anyone—including Dante.

Determined to find the man he knows Daniel can be, Dante moves Daniel into his home and his life. But along with Daniel's insecurities and lack of trust, Dante has to fight the

Dom that assaulted Daniel in the first place and a host of other misunderstandings before he can prove to Daniel that what they have is worth fighting for.

Prologue

"Hey, Dante, come on in."

"Hello, Joey. Hope I have not arrived too early," Dante said. He stepped into the apartment, handing his jacket to Joey. He glanced around the apartment, looking for the man Logan and Joey invited him to meet but he didn't see anyone.

"Oh, no, Danny's not even here yet," Joey replied as he shut the door. "More than likely, he'll be late. I don't think Danny's ever been on time for anything."

"That's not an inducement, Joey," Dante admonished. A man of distinction had to have rules he lived by. Punctuality was one of Dante's. Besides being rude, Dante felt being late showed poor character. "Being perpetually late is just bad manners."

"So? If your relationship with Danny goes the way I think it will, I'm sure you can train that out of him."

Dante lifted a brow. Joey gave him a nervous smile then shrugged. "Can I get you something to drink?"

Dante smirked. "Yes. Some tea would be wonderful, Joey."

"Tea?"

Dante swallowed back a laugh at the surprised look on Joey's face. He knew it was unusual for a man who owned a bar not to drink alcohol. He just chose not to. He spent too many years watching his father wallow in a bottle and decided long ago he wasn't going to follow in his father's footsteps. Another rule. "I don't drink. One tends to lose control when alcohol is involved."

"Oh," Joey replied. "Okay, tea it is. Any particular flavor?"

"Earl Grey, if you have it, please."

Dante smiled as Joe hurried off. Lucky Logan. His friend seemed to have found the perfect submissive. But Dante didn't hold out much hope that Joey's friend, Daniel,

would meet his needs the way Joey met Logan's. He didn't know if he would be that lucky.

Dante had very clear ideas of what he wanted and he wanted a permanent, fulltime submissive. He didn't mind playing around a little with the unattached subs who came into his club, but once he found "the one" he wouldn't need anyone else. His sub would meet all his needs.

So far, he hadn't had any luck finding his perfect match. Maybe the things he wanted were too hard to find? It wasn't like he asked for the impossible but he had yet to find anything even close.

"Dante, how are you?"

Dante swung around to see Logan walking into the room. He stepped over and shook the man's hand. "I'm good, Logan, thank you for asking. How are you?"

Logan laughed and sat on the couch, indicating the chair across from him. "I'm fabulous. Please, have a seat."

"You would be fabulous."

Logan didn't even have the decency to look ashamed. If anything, his grin grew bigger. Dante frowned. He didn't begrudge Logan having the man of his dreams. Logan deserved it. But did he have to be so damn cheery about it?

"You're positively revolting, Logan."

Logan chuckled. "You will be too, once you get your hands on Danny."

"You seem very positive this will work between Daniel and myself." Dante folded his hands together in his lap to hide his sudden agitation. He wished he had Logan's confidence that Daniel would be what he needed. "I wonder why?"

"You'll see."

"Well, that is very cryptic."

Logan laughed.

Joey walked back into the room and placed a small tray down in front of him. "I wasn't sure if you wanted sugar or honey, so I brought both," he said, gesturing to the tray.

"Either is fine, Joey. Thank you." He watched as Joey walked over and sat on the floor between Logan's legs, looking as happy as he could possibly be right where he was.

"I'm impressed with your training, Logan." Dante smiled. "Joey didn't even hesitate to sit at your feet."

Logan reached down and caressed the side of his lover's face. "Training had nothing to do with it, Dante," Logan explained. "Joey is allowed to sit wherever he wants to. He chooses to sit here."

"Is that true, Joey?" Dante asked, surprised. Most submissives he knew only did what they thought would earn them a reward. They didn't do things like Joey did because they chose to. Maybe that was the difference between a good sub and a mediocre sub.

Joey nodded. "I like it here."

"May I ask you why?" Dante asked.

"I don't know exactly. I like sitting as close to Logan as I can without climbing into him, I guess. This way, he's all around me."

Dante smiled. "Good answer."

"Yes, I agree," Logan said. "I just might have to reward him later tonight."

Joey beamed, and once again, Dante felt a pang of jealousy.

"So, tell me more about Daniel," Dante requested, changing the subject. He wanted to learn everything about the young man Joey and Logan wanted him to meet. After getting to know Joey, and learning that Joey and Daniel were best friends, he hoped for some similarities between the two men.

"I've only met Danny a couple of times," Logan replied, "but Joey shared an apartment with him until he moved in here. If you want to know more about him, you should ask Joey."

"Joey?" Dante inquired. He wasn't sure how he felt about Joey and Daniel sharing an apartment. Had they been in a relationship? That thought brought on yet

another jealous twinge and Dante frowned. Why feel jealousy over a man he'd never met?

"What do you want to know?" Joey asked.

"Does Daniel have your unique interests?" That would be the first question he needed answered. If the answer was no, there wouldn't be any point in even meeting the young man.

Joey's brows drew together. "Huh?"

"I believe Dante wants to know if Danny will enjoy sitting at his feet as much as you enjoy sitting at mine," Logan interjected.

"Oh," Joey said, nodding. "Yeah, pretty much. I mean, Danny is into a little more . . . um . . . well . . . he's . . ." Joey stammered. His face flushed and his gaze dropped to the floor.

"I believe what Joey is trying to say is that Danny is a little more into the lifestyle than he is," Logan said. "From what I understand from Joey, Danny prefers the D/s lifestyle and all that it entails."

Joey nodded.

"Do tell." Dante chuckled lightly. *Please.*

"Danny is—" Joey began.

The doorbell rang. Dante glanced in that direction. The man on the other side of the door could be his future or a complete flop. Dante wasn't sure which prospect made him feel more anxious.

"Here, apparently." Logan laughed. He patted Joey on the shoulder. "Go get the door, baby, and let your friend in."

Joey jumped to his feet. Dante watched as the door opened to reveal the most stunning man he had ever laid eyes on, if he discounted the messy strawberry blond hair and pale face.

Dante frowned. He didn't know Daniel but something wasn't right. The man looked too pale. He seemed almost frantic. When Logan got to his feet, concern written all over him, Dante stood as well.

"Danny? What's wrong?" Joey asked, ushering the man inside.

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry," Daniel said quickly. He grabbed Joey's hand. "Your father is in town. He came by the apartment. I told him I didn't know where you were, but I think he followed me."

"My father?" Joey asked. His face paled.

"Oh, Joey," Daniel said. "I'm so sorry."

"Joey?" Logan crossed the room to Joey's side.

Dante watched Logan take Joey into his arms. He watched the two men embrace then he turned to look at Daniel. While the man still seemed frantic, he kept casting interested glances in Dante's direction.

"Baby? Are you okay?" Logan asked. "What's wrong, Joey?"

"His father's in town, Logan," Daniel explained when Joey didn't say anything.

"So?" Logan asked.

Dante could hear the confusion in Logan's voice. He didn't blame the guy. He felt confused himself. Why would Joey's father being here cause Joey to practically tremble in Logan's arms?

Daniel shook his head. "If his father is in town, it's bad."

Logan grabbed Joey's chin and tilted his face up. "Joey, you don't have to see your father if you don't want to. It's your choice, but I won't allow him to hurt you."

"I don't know why he would want to see me after all this time. He hates me and everything about me," Joey said quietly. "They all do."

"Who cares about them, Joey?" Daniel asked. He patted Joey's arm. "We love you and that's all that matters."

"A very astute observation, Daniel," Dante said as he walked up to hold his hand out in greeting, impressed by the man's show of support. "Dante Frederic Antonio Lucien Giovanni, at your service. It's a pleasure to make you're acquaintance."

"I . . . uh . . . Danny, please," Daniel replied, shaking Dante's hand. His big, pale green eyes twinkled. "God, you're hot! Do you have a boyfriend 'cause I have to tell you I'm interested if you're single."

Dante felt his face blaze. What a cheeky young man! While Dante found his directness intriguing, if Daniel belonged to him he'd have to curb the man's wild tongue. Such speech in the company of others just wasn't proper . . . no matter how much Dante liked hearing the words.

* * * * *

"Don't you agree, Logan?" Dante asked. He arched an eyebrow when Logan turned to look at him, a look of total confusion on his face.

"Huh?" Logan asked. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear what you said."

"I was telling Daniel here that obedience is the core of any good relationship. If Joey's main concept is obedience, everything else can be achieved through training. Don't you agree?" Dante asked.

Logan took a moment, apparently mulling the question over, before he shook his head. "No, love and trust should be the core concept. Obedience is good but if Joey didn't love me or trust me, he'd never be able to truly submit to me. Obedience is a by-product."

"My mistake," Dante said, bowing his head at Logan. "Any successful relationship has to be founded on love and trust. I assumed that point was a given."

"Well, assuming that love and trust are given then yes, obedience is the next value," Logan said. "However, disobedience has a value of its own, as I know you are aware."

Dante's gaze strayed to Joey as he remembered the discipline scene played out in Logan's office a few weeks earlier. He grinned. "Yes, in certain cases, disobedience is valued as well."

Dante glanced over when he heard Daniel suck in a breath.

"You guys fooled around," Daniel accused.

"No, Joey and I fooled around," Logan said. "Dante merely observed Joey's punishment for disobedience."

Daniel's face reddened then he grinned. "If I'm disobedient, would you like Logan to watch?" Daniel asked Dante.

The idea of disciplining Daniel sent a shot of lust shooting through Dante that nearly took his breath away. He imagined how red the little ass he'd seen encased in tight jeans would look. Dante stifled a groan.

"Are you going to be disobedient, Daniel?" Dante returned. He gazed at Daniel, wondering if the younger man could see the desire in his eyes. He wasn't above administering a sub's punishment in front of a crowd. That would be something Daniel would have to learn about him.

"I could be, but you'd have to promise to punish me for it."

Dante's nostrils flared and his pants suddenly grew uncomfortably tight as his cock thickened. Daniel looked at him as if he wanted to lick him from head to toe. A few more minutes of this teasing and Dante would pounce on the man, audience or no.

"Okay, enough." Logan chuckled. "Any more innuendoes here and I'm going to get a piece of paper and draw you two a map. It's obvious that you want each other. You just need to put all of this evasiveness away and go for it."

Dante's face flushed as Logan got to his feet and stepped over to stand in front of him and Daniel. He hadn't realized his desire to master Daniel had been so evident.

"Danny, if Dante wanted to take you home and train you to be his submissive," Logan said, "including disciplining you when you're bad and rewarding you when you're good, what would you say?"

"Hell, yes!" Danny groaned loudly.

"Daniel!" Dante exclaimed, slightly outraged. He saw a bar of soap in the man's future. "Cursing is a sign of a lazy mind. You will remove these words from your vocabulary at once."

"Or what?" Danny challenged as he scooted off of his chair and moved over to kneel at Dante's feet.

The sight of those green eyes looking up at him had Dante in knots. Daniel looked very good there.

Dante raised an eyebrow at the challenge in the man's voice. He had every intention of taking the man up on it, and couldn't wait to paddle Daniel's ass until it glowed. Then he'd fuck him until he didn't have enough energy to challenge anyone for anything.

How delightful!

"Logan, would you mind terribly if I availed myself of your spare room?" Dante asked as he stood, his eyes never leaving Daniel's eager face. "I do believe this young man requires some proper instruction in respect."

Logan laughed. "Yeah, go ahead. There are some unopened toys and lube in the dresser; I'm sure you will find them useful."

"Come along, Daniel," Dante said as he walked toward the spare bedroom. He didn't wait to see if Daniel would follow. He knew the man would. Now he just had to see if Daniel could follow him once they were *in* the bedroom, as well.

"Works every time," Daniel said, giggling.

Dante smirked as he walked down the hallway. He could hear Daniel speaking to Logan and Joey behind him. Daniel had no idea how well his words of defiance worked but he would find out.

"I'm waiting, Daniel," Dante said as he stepped into the bedroom. "And I'm not known as a patient man."

Daniel quickened his pace but he had a cocky grin on his face. *Not for long*, Dante thought. *By the time I'm done with you there will be no doubt in your mind who is in charge.*

He waited until Daniel passed through the door then shut it quietly behind him. Turning, he studied the gorgeous man, his mind running over every little thing he wanted to do to him.

"Take your clothes off, fold them, and put them on that chair over there," Dante said, pointing to a rocker by the wall. "Then come back and stand before me."

Dante watched with eager, hungry anticipation as Daniel revealed inch after inch of silky white skin. Daniel had a jubilant air about him as he folded his clothes and laid them on the chair then came back to stand in front of Dante.

"What's your safe word, Daniel?"

"Pecan."

"Any boundaries I need to be aware of? Anything you won't do?"

Daniel shrugged.

"Speak, my dear boy; I require verbal communication, not a shrug in response to my questions."

"Well, I don't like defecation," Daniel replied. "I prefer not to experience anything that will cause me lasting pain and I don't like verbal abuse."

"I'm pretty much in agreement with all of that," Dante said. He walked around Daniel in a circle, reaching out to brush bits of naked flesh here and there. Daniel quivered in response. "I don't like humiliation of any kind. It's demeaning to both of us."

"Good, good," Daniel said. "What . . . what do you like, sir?"

Dante chuckled. "I like 'sir'." He stepped around to stand in front of Daniel and rubbed his thumb along the line of Daniel's plush lips. "I like the way it sounds on your lips but I imagine *master* would sound even better."

"Master."

The softly whispered word went straight to Dante's cock like a gentle caress. He barely suppressed a groan. It wouldn't do for Daniel to know the power he held at this point. He'd know soon enough.

"Stand here at attention, Daniel," Dante ordered then made his way over to investigate the contents of the dresser. The first drawer held lube and condoms. Dante grabbed both. The next drawer held many other more interesting items.

Dante chose a black silk mask and a small butt plug. He dismissed the paddle for now. He wanted their first time together to be more intimate, flesh against flesh. His hand ached to feel the rosy red curve of Daniel's ass without anything between them.

Dante walked back over and sat on the edge of the bed. He laid his prizes down next to him and gestured for Daniel to lie across his lap. "We need to address your disrespectful behavior before we can continue."

Daniel fairly vibrated as he quickly moved to lie across Dante's lap. Eager boy! Dante held his smile until Daniel faced away from him. He'd have to make spankings a regular part of Daniel's routine. Obviously, Dante couldn't use them for punishment. Daniel liked it too much.

"Count out loud for me," Dante said as he brought his hand down across Daniel's rounded ass. "And don't you dare come until I give you permission."

"One!"

"One what, Daniel?" Dante asked, pausing with his hand in the air.

"One, master."

"Very good, Daniel." *Smack.*

"Two, master!"

Daniel wiggled just a bit when Dante's hand came down again. By the fourth swat, his ass started looking a tad bit rosy. Dante massaged the red globes for a moment, enjoying the heat beneath his hand, before delivering another stinging swat.

"Five, master!"

Smack.

"Six, master!"

Smack.

"Seven, master!" Daniel's voice trembled.

Dante hardened his heart and raised his hand to deliver another blow. He wasn't using that much force—he didn't want to hurt Daniel or bruise him—but he did want Daniel to remember his first spanking.

Smack.

"Eight, master!"

Smack.

"Nine, master!"

"Last one, Daniel." Dante stroked his hand over Daniel's ass again before delivering the last, well-placed swat to the rosy red cheeks.

"Ten, master!"

Dante massaged Daniel's glowing ass, his fingers digging deep into the reddened skin until Daniel squirmed. He could feel Daniel's cock press against his legs. "Do you want to come?"

"Yes, please, master."

"If I let you come now, can you get it up again? I want your cock hard while I'm in your ass."

Daniel shuddered. "Yes, master."

Dante squeezed some lube out onto his fingers then slid them between Daniel's ass cheeks, stopping at the small circle of puckered flesh. He pressed his finger against the tight entrance, pushing in slowly.

"Then you may come, Daniel."

Daniel trembled, rhythmically humping his hips.

Dante added a second finger, and Daniel groaned.

"Come for me, Daniel."

Daniel's entire body stiffened. He cried out. Dante felt warm cum soak into his slacks, reminding him he was still dressed while the man over his lap was not. He'd have to fix that.

"I do believe you've messed my pants, Daniel. I may have to punish you for that." While Dante knew he'd ordered Daniel to come, he wanted to know what the man's reaction would be to more punishment. Would he accept it or balk?

"Okay."

Dante grinned as he rubbed his hand over Daniel's rosy red ass. Daniel sounded relaxed, melty, in a peaceful space. As much as Dante wanted him to enjoy that he needed relief himself. He ached.

"Stand up," he said as he patted Daniel's ass. "I want you to undress me."

Daniel jumped to his feet, waiting for Dante to stand. Dante smirked and stood. He watched Daniel unbutton his shirt and drape it carefully over the chair. His hands shook as he unbuttoned Dante's slacks.

Daniel knelt on the floor and pulled Dante's shoes and socks off, set them aside, then slowly – painfully slowly – he lowered Dante's zipper.

"Finish it, Daniel." Dante clenched his fists to keep from reaching out.

Daniel gripped the edges of Dante's pants and silk boxers and pulled them down. Dante smiled in self-confident amusement when Daniel's gaze zeroed in on the hard shaft jutting out from Dante's groin. Daniel's eyes grew wide and he uttered a soft gasp.

"Can I – can I – ?" Daniel reached out, pausing a mere inch from Dante's cock.

"You may." Dante grinned. He knew what Daniel wanted but he wasn't expecting it to feel so good when the man's warm, wet lips wrapped around his cock. Dante groaned, clutching Daniel's hair as he experienced the best blow job he ever remembered receiving. This would have to become a regular part of *his* routine.

Between the suction power of Daniel's mouth and the way his tongue stroked across Dante's flesh, Dante was quickly close to losing it. Daniel was a marvel.

"On the bed, Daniel," he ordered through clenched teeth. He needed to get his cock in Daniel's ass before he lost what little bit of control he had left. When was the last time he'd felt this hot, this needy?

Daniel got on the bed and knelt on all fours, lifting his rosy ass. Dante's handprints covered the soft globes, and the sight fueled the desire racing through his body at a breakneck speed.

Thankful Daniel had his head buried in his arms so he couldn't see his shaking hands, Dante poured more lube on his fingers. It just wouldn't do for a sub to see his Dom losing control.

Daniel groaned. Dante bit his lip. He thrust his fingers into the ass pushing back at him, stretching Daniel's hole. Dante used his teeth to tear open the condom. He pulled his fingers from Daniel and rolled the condom down his aching cock, adding just a little more lube and spreading it over his shaft.

"Are you ready for me, poppet?"

"Yes, master, please."

Dante groaned at Daniel's pleading tone. The desire in the other man's voice aroused him, made him want to pound Daniel into the mattress. Dante's gaze briefly fell on the butt plug and mask he'd pulled from the drawer. The toys would have to wait for another day. He couldn't bring himself to delay his satisfaction a moment longer.

Dante lined his cock up with Daniel's hole and slowly pushed inside, relishing the way the man's exquisite ass swallowed his length. Painful pleasure had him grasping Daniel's hips in a bruising grip.

He tried to lessen his hold but when Daniel started to shake and cried out, Dante thrust forward, sinking into Daniel until every inch of his cock was encased in hot, silky flesh. Dante froze, his body going stiff. He tried to distract himself, to think of something — anything — that might keep him from coming right then and there.

"Please, master," Daniel whimpered.

"I don't want to hurt you, Daniel."

"I promise to use my safe word if you do. You'll stop."

"I'm not sure I'll be able to," Dante admitted.

"I trust you."

"Bloody hell," Dante shouted as he gave in to Daniel's desire and began thrusting fiercely into the tight little body beneath him. Out of control, he pummeled Daniel's ass, his lust for the other man having taken him over. He had to believe Daniel would use his safe word, if needed.

Daniel's moans and cries of pleasure spurred Dante on.

"May I touch myself, master?" Daniel asked, his voice breathless.

Dante's mind overloaded. He quickly pulled out of Daniel and flipped him over, shoving back inside before Daniel's yelp cleared the air. Pearls of pre-cum pooled on the head of Daniel's cock. He knew the man was close.

Dante pulled Daniel's legs over his shoulders, tilting his ass up closer to him. When he thrust back in he knew he'd pegged Daniel's sweet spot. The man arched his body, his hands clenching in the sheets beside his head as he cried out.

Dante dug his fingers into Daniel's thighs as he watched the man squirm on the bed beneath him. Daniel was stunning in his desire. His skin glowed. His eyes were dazed. His lips were slightly parted. His small whimpers were music to Dante's ears.

"I'm going to make you come, poppet, without even touching your cock."

Daniel's eyes widened. He panted harder.

"After I come in your ass I'm going to put a plug in you and make you sleep in my arms all night long. The plug will wiggle around every time you move. In the morning, I'm going to fuck your tight little ass again."

"Yes, please!"

Dante moved his hands down from Daniel's hips to grip his ass cheeks. "And then I'm going to spank you again. You need to be spanked every morning. What do you think, poppet, should I spank you every morning when we get up?"

Daniel's eyes darkened as his back arched. He let loose a wail, and white hot spunk shot out of his cock. Dante's mouth tightened as he gritted his teeth. Daniel's inner muscled clamped down on him so hard he could barely move. *Heavenly.*

Dante thrust once, twice, then roared out his release as he buried his cock in to the hilt. He dropped his head back, his eyes closing as intense pleasure unlike any he'd ever experienced shot through his body.

"Master."

Dante opened his eyes and looked down at Daniel. He carefully lowered Daniel's legs to the bed then leaned over the man to claim his lips. He kissed Daniel, devouring him for several moments before lifting his head to stare down into the prettiest pale green eyes he'd ever seen.

"I'm keeping you, poppet."

Daniel grinned. "Okay."

Chapter Two

Six months later

The bouncer was new. He didn't even blink when Dante walked past him and through the doors of Club Refectory. Inside the bar, however, nothing had changed. Everything looked the same as it had the last time Dante dropped by, over six months ago.

Mack still mixed drinks behind the bar. Couples crowded the dance floor, and the loud music made it hard to think. People still seemed to be having a grand old time.

Dante let a small smile slip over his lips as he made his way to the bar and sat one of the red vinyl stools. He waited until Mack stood close enough then called out an order for ginger ale on the rocks.

Mack started to make the drink when he suddenly froze, a glass of ice in one hand and a bottle of ginger ale in the other. He lifted his head and glanced over to look at Dante. His face paled slightly.

Dante frowned. He knew he hadn't been into the club in awhile but it hadn't been so long that Mack had to look at him like he was a ghost.

"Mack?" Dante asked. "Is something wrong?"

"Geez, Dante, you can't be in here."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You have to leave, man, before Joey sees you."

Dante watched as Mack dumped his glass of ice in the sink and walked away. Once he reached the other end of the bar, Mack looked back. The stiff set of his shoulders matched the anger on his face.

What the hell? Why wouldn't Joey want to see him? Dante had been out of the country for nearly six months. While he and Joey weren't the best of friends, they *were* friends. At least, Dante thought they were.

Confused and just a bit miffed, Dante turned away from the bar and walked to the side of the room where the stairs led up to Logan's office. He was determined to get to the bottom of this, one way or another. Hopefully, Logan would have some answers.

At the top of the stairs, Dante paused, knocking on the door instead of barging in as he wanted to. The last time he'd visited Logan's office, Joey and Logan put on quite the show for him. He didn't want to walk in on another one unannounced.

"Come in," Logan called out. Dante smiled and opened the door, eager to greet his friend after his six month absence. He'd missed Logan, and even Joey. It felt good to be home again.

"Hello, Logan."

Logan's head swung up. His face turned pasty white then a deep, burning red. Dante frowned. Why was everyone reacting like he'd kicked their dog or something? If the clenched fists were anything to go by, Logan looked ready to punch him out."

"What the hell are you doing here?" Logan snapped. He jumped to his feet and strode around his desk.

"I thought I came to see an old friend," Dante replied. "Was I mistaken?"

"I think our friendship ended about the time you used Danny for an easy fuck then left him high and dry."

"Daniel?" Logan asked. "What are you talking about? I never used Daniel."

"Is that a fact? Then why in the hell haven't you contacted him in six months, Dante?" Logan smirked, crossing his arms over his chest. "Too busy out sowing your wild oats?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Where have you been for the last six months?"

Dante stepped back. He looked away, unable to hold Logan's intense stare. That was a question Dante couldn't answer, not truthfully. He clenched and unclenched his hands, trying to relieve their sudden tension. "I had business overseas to deal with."

"Business?" Logan snapped. "You had business to deal with? And you couldn't pick up a fucking phone and call Danny just once? What? You didn't have time in your busy schedule to send a postcard, an email? Something to let Danny know you hadn't fucked him and forgot him?"

Dante quickly turned to look at Logan. What was the big deal? Sure, he and Daniel slept together, but Dante hadn't done anything to hurt the other man. In fact, he'd promised to keep him. Dante couldn't help he'd been called away right after, and he was back now, to claim what was his. So why all the anger?

"What concern is it of yours?" Dante asked. "What happens between Daniel and me is none of your business."

Logan snorted. "That's what you think. As you've shown me what an upstanding guy you are, I'm asking you to stay away from Danny."

"Stay away from Danny?" Dante asked. "I came back for Danny. Why in the bloody hell would I want to stay away from him?"

"Because I'm asking you to stay away from him." Logan's face tightened. He suddenly turned and walked back over to his chair and sat down. He looked sullen. "Danny's been through enough because of you. If you care anything for him then do as I ask."

A rush of uneasiness replaced Dante's confusion. Something was clearly wrong. Dante considered Logan one of his best friends, even if they were no longer sleeping together, and he knew him well.

Dante moved over to sit in the chair across the desk from Logan, the same chair he sat in when he watched Logan administer punishment to Joey then fuck him over the top of the desk. Fond memories.

"What in the bloody hell is going on, Logan," he asked. "And I want a straight answer."

"Where were you?" Logan asked. "I got used to you popping in and out of my life but we were never that involved. Danny took what you offered him as the beginning of a relationship between the two of you. If you didn't want him, you never should have slept with him. You knew what he thought, what he expected, and yet you still disappeared."

Dante spread his hands wide. "When did I ever say I didn't want him? He's perfect for me. I knew that before we ever slept together."

"Then why the hell haven't you contacted him?" Logan asked. "It's been six months, Dante. We haven't heard a single word from you in all that time, not a peep."

Dante leaned forward and rested his arms on his legs. He clasped his hands together tightly as he stared down at the ground. "I wasn't in a place where I could get to a phone, Logan. Believe me, I would have called if I could have. It just wasn't possible."

"Can you at least tell me where you were?"

Dante looked up at Logan and shook his head. "No."

He would have liked to tell Logan everything, where he went the last six months, everything he experienced during that time, and even why. Having someone to share it with would have lessened the torment he suffered alone. But circumstances prevented him from telling anyone . . . even his best friend.

"Can you tell me anything?" Logan asked.

"Well, my friend, as the saying goes, *I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you.* You'll just have to trust me on this, Logan. Have I ever been anything other than a man of honor?"

Logan released a deep sigh. "No, Dante. You've never been anything but a man of honor. I guess I'll just have to take your word for it that you were unable to contact any of us. But I still don't like it."

Dante sat back in his chair. He pushed his hand through his hair. The tension in the room could have been cut with a knife. Logan didn't look particularly happy but at least he didn't look like he wanted to kill Dante anymore.

"I still think it would be a good idea if you stayed away from Danny, Dante."

Dante's mouth dropped open for a moment before he snapped it shut. "I don't believe that's up to you to decide."

"Well, Danny's not in any position to make decisions so you'll have to take my word on it," Logan growled. "You need to stay away from him. He needs someone more reliable, someone who isn't going to pop in and out of his life all the time."

"Logan—"

"You can't promise it won't happen again," Logan said. "Can you?"

True enough. While Dante had some down time now, he couldn't promise he wouldn't be called back in the future. But he still didn't understand what that had to do with his relationship with Daniel.

"No, I can't but —"

"Enough said then."

Anger brought Dante to his feet. He tightened his fists and he could feel a small tick in his jaw as he clenched his teeth together. "It is not *enough*, Logan. Daniel is an adult. It's not for you to decide who he can and can't see. That's up to Daniel. He can decide if he wants to see me or not."

"No, Dante, he can't."

The softly spoken words, after all the loud anger, hit Dante like a punch in the gut. He stopped and stared intently at Logan. Something more went on here than just a bit of anger over Dante being gone for several months.

"What aren't you telling me, Logan?"

Dante held his breath as he watched Logan rub his hands over his face. The man looked tired, worn out. But mostly, he looked worried, which sent Dante's concern through the roof. Dante only knew Daniel for a few days but in that short time, Daniel had captured a part of Dante that he knew he'd never get back.

"Logan?" Dante asked when the man didn't say anything.

"Danny waited for you," Logan said. "He stopped seeing anyone else, stopped participating in scenes. He felt positive the two of you had a relationship, that you had something together. He went to *Dante's Dungeon* every spare moment he had, waiting for you."

"And I never showed."

Logan nodded. "And you never showed."

"What happened?" Dante imagined all sorts of scenarios, none of them good. He knew he was right in his assumption when he saw the grimace on Logan's face.

"When you didn't show, his hopes began to die," Logan said. "Joey and I tried to explain that you have a history of disappearing but you'd be back. At first, I think he believed us but after awhile he started to think he'd done something to drive you away."

"Christ! No!" Dante started to pace. "This was just something I needed to go do. Hell, if I could have taken him with me I would have, but he wouldn't have been safe there."

"It wasn't safe for Danny here, either."

Dante stopped pacing. He closed his eyes as Logan's words washed over him, bringing with them overwhelming anguish. He opened his eyes and looked over at Logan, bracing himself for what he would hear. "Tell me."

"About six weeks ago, Danny finally gave up. He agreed to participate in a scene with some top who hung out at the club, as long as the man understood there'd be no actual sexual activity."

Dante's heart clenched as Logan paused.

"Danny safe-worded."

"And?" Dante whispered but he already knew the answer. It was written all over Logan's sullen face.

"The idiot ignored his safe word and continued with the scene, discounting everything Danny discussed with him beforehand about his boundaries." Logan shook his head. Dante saw one of his hands tighten into a fist. "We received the call after someone dropped Danny at the hospital. They didn't even stick around to see if he was okay, just let him out at the emergency room doors and drove away."

"Bloody hell!"

Dante's heart wept for Daniel, for what the man must have gone through and for what he now knew they'd lost. Daniel would never be the same. No doubt, he'd lost his ability to trust, the most important aspect of a relationship between a Dom and his submissive. And in that moment, Dante blamed himself. One phone call could have prevented all of this.

"I want to see him," Dante said quietly.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Logan said. "Danny's pretty fragile right now. Seeing you would just bring it all back."

"Please, Logan?" Dante took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He walked over and leaned forward to plant his hands on Logan's desk. "I'm asking you as a friend, let me see him."

"I can't, Dante, even if I wanted to. He refuses to see anyone except Joey."

"I *need* to see him, Logan. He needs to know this wasn't his fault. He needs to know my leaving wasn't because of anything he did. I didn't want to go, certainly not when we were just getting close. It was something I had to do."

"Dante—"

Dante pushed himself away from Logan's desk and walked over to look out the window at the night sky. The lit-up city stretched out peacefully before him, a direct contradiction to Dante's current mood.

"You have no idea how much I wanted Daniel from the moment I met him," he said quietly. He crossed his arms over his chest as he remembered how infatuated he had been with Daniel from the very beginning. "He had the right amount of submissive mixed with just enough spit-fire to make my blood boil. He seemed willing to submit to everything I wanted and yet he remained tenacious enough to make me work for it."

Dante glanced over his shoulder at Logan. "He was perfect for me."

"Then why did you leave?"

"I had to, Logan. I have obligations, obligations I can't ignore even if I wanted to."

"I'll admit I never understood why you went away from time to time but I accepted it." Logan frowned. "Maybe that's why we never had more than we did together. I needed more than you could give me."

"Don't fool yourself, Logan," Dante said. "We never had more than sex and friendship because we weren't right for each other. It wouldn't have mattered if I disappeared or not."

"But it *did* matter to Daniel," Logan said. "It *will* matter. If you want to see Danny, I'll see if I can arrange it, but you need to decide what's more important, your relationship with Danny or whatever it is that you go do. You can't have both."

Dante turned to stare out the window again. He knew what he wanted, he just didn't know if he could get out of his obligations. There would be hell to pay, a lot of very important people would be angry with him. Was Daniel worth it?

Dante turned. "I'll make some phone calls. When can you get Daniel to see me?"

Dante could feel the intensity of Logan's stare boring into him. He knew the next couple of seconds could decide the direction of the rest of his life. He held his breath as he waited, feeling like he stood on the edge of a cliff.

"I'll ask him if he'll see you tomorrow morning but I want you to understand this," Logan said, pointing his finger at Dante, "if Daniel refuses to see you, I won't force him. It has to be his choice."

Dante nodded. He wanted to argue but he knew he didn't have that right, not anymore. He'd lost that right when he put his obligations above the safety of the man who held a piece of his heart.

"I'll be down at the club," Dante said. He walked toward the office door. "You can reach me there."

"You won't find him, Dante, I've already looked."

Dante paused. Logan knew him too well. Dante had every intention of going down to the club and finding the man who'd harmed Daniel.

"Danny refused to name his attacker," Logan said. "No one knows who he is."

"He didn't press charges?"

Logan shook his head. "He won't discuss the attack with anyone, not even Joey. If anyone brings it up he gets hysterical. We've had to sedate him more than once."

Dante pounded his fist into the wall next to the office door, his anger too high to contain.

"Bloody hell!"

Chapter Three

Daniel's hand trembled as he brushed it through the tangles in his hair. He winced when his fingers encountered a particularly nasty snarl. He gritted his teeth and pulled his fingers through until the knot disappeared.

Dante was coming to visit. He'd come by every day for over a week and waited for hours to see him. Daniel heard him and Joey talking; sometimes Logan joined in. It was Joey who finally convinced Daniel that Dante wouldn't stop coming by until he agreed to see him.

Did he really want to see Dante after all this time? Did he have the courage? Dante had been everything he wanted in life, but his former life had been ripped away from him. Daniel knew he'd never get it back and he'd never be the same man Dante left behind all those months ago.

He had nothing left to offer the man, so he'd resisted seeing him. What was the point? Dante would be disappointed in the man Daniel had become.

He stroked the small scar that ran from the corner of his left eye down to his chin. Though mostly healed, it was still tender to the touch, and he would never forget exactly where he received it or who gave it to him. He saw the face of the monster every time he closed his eyes.

Daniel turned slightly when he heard the bedroom door open. He kept the left side of his face away from Joey, as he always did. He didn't want anyone to see his constant reminder of his stupidity.

"He's here, Danny," Joey said quietly. "Are you ready to see him?"

"Not really but I suppose I must."

"He's not going to hurt you, Danny, I promise."

"You can't promise that, Joey. No one can." Daniel snorted. He knew he sounded bitter, but he couldn't help it, not after what he experienced at the hands of someone who swore they wouldn't hurt him. "Dante will say whatever he has to in order to get what he wants, just like everyone else."

“Danny –”

Daniel waved his hand at Joey. They were wasting their breath, and they'd been down this road before. Joey didn't understand. Logan hadn't betrayed him . . . yet.

“Just let him in so I can get this over with.”

Joey started to turn away.

“And Joey, I'll see Dante, let him get everything off his chest so he'll feel good about himself, but then I never want to see him again. Understood?”

“Yeah, Danny, I hear you.”

Daniel doubted his words got through to Joey. They never did. He'd tried to warn Joey that Logan would eventually turn on him, abuse him, but Joey remained obstinately positive that Logan wasn't like the man who put Daniel in the hospital.

Daniel knew better. People like Logan and Dante said and did whatever they wanted and to hell with anyone else. Daniel knew he'd brought it on himself. He'd reached for something that didn't exist and paid the price. He'd never be that stupid again.

“Hello, Daniel.”

Daniel could see Dante out of the corner of his eye as the man walked into the room. His pulse sped up as his heart thudded painfully. His hands trembled. This would be much harder than he'd thought.

Daniel grabbed the robe draped across his shoulders and pulled it tighter around him, happy he'd chosen to remain seated for this meeting. His shaking legs would have never supported his weight. He gathered his courage and cleared his throat. “Hello, Dante.”

“It's good to see you, Daniel.”

Daniel couldn't say the same. He'd pretty much prefer to be anywhere except where he was right then. “What do you want, Dante?”

“No pleasant conversation then?”

“If you wanted pleasant conversation you should have stuck to speaking with Joey and Logan. I'm fresh out.”

"Still feisty, I see." Dante chuckled. "I'm glad you haven't lost all that spark I liked so much."

Daniel rolled his eyes. "Dante, say what you came to say, relieve your conscience, then go."

"Relieve my conscience?" Dante asked. "Is that what you think I came here to do?"

Daniel turned to glare at Dante, facing him head-on for the first time since the man walked into the room. "Isn't it? You heard about what happened to me and you feel guilty for leaving. You want to make yourself feel better." Daniel waved his hand in the air. "I relieve you of all guilt, Dante. I did this to myself. Now you can go."

"Daniel, I came back for you."

"Bullshit!" Daniel jumped to his feet and stalked across the room to stand in front of Dante.

"Daniel!"

"You came back because you feel guilty about what happened to me. Well, what happened was my own damn fault because I believed one stupid little word would stop someone from hurting me. I believed in all that D/s shit." He stabbed his finger into Dante's chest. "It had nothing to do with you and I don't need your pity. I don't need *you*."

"Oh, Daniel, it's not supposed to be that way," Dante said quietly. "Surely you know that?"

Tears of anger and frustration prickled at the corner of Daniel's eyes. Why couldn't everyone see what he saw? Why didn't they understand that people would say anything they needed to say in order to get their own way, even things they didn't mean?

Daniel jumped when he felt soft fingers stroke the side of his face. He jerked back before Dante could reach the scar on his cheek.

"Did he do that to you?" Dante asked.

Daniel backed away from Dante and turned to face the window. "He did a lot of things to me, none of which I asked for."

"Daniel, I never thought you asked for this," Dante said. Daniel could hear him walk closer, feel the warmth of the man's body as he stopped directly behind him. "No one would ask for what that man did to you."

Daniel spun around to glare at Dante. "What would you know about it?" he shouted. The tears gathering in his eyes started to slide down his face. "You've never been helpless, dependent on another person for your safety, for your very life. You've never had your choices taken away from you." The paling of Dante's face didn't make Daniel feel any better. It just made him angrier. "You've never had anyone touch you and do things to you even when you . . . when you begged them to stop."

Daniel's voice broke. Dante's arms wrapped around him, but Daniel refused to take the offer of comfort. He beat his fist against Dante's chest. "You're supposed to stop," Daniel cried. "Why didn't he stop?"

"I don't know, poppet," Dante whispered.

Dante lifted him in his arms and carried him to the big, plush cushioned chair sitting in front of the window. He sat, keeping Daniel on his lap. Daniel often slept in the chair, too tired to move to the bed, to *afraid* to move to the bed.

Daniel sniffled, his tears slowly ebbing. He could feel the warmth of Dante's body next to his, the thud of his heart beneath his ear. Dante's hand gently stroked his back, the soft hairs at his nape.

"What happened to you was wrong, Daniel," Dante said softly after several moments of silence. "I wish more than anything in the world you'd never had to experience something so horrendous. You have to believe that."

Daniel shook his head. He didn't *have* to believe anything, even if he wanted to. Dante's words filled him with warmth, or maybe it was just the sound of his voice that soothed him, but Daniel knew the truth.

"I told you I don't hold you responsible, Dante. You don't have to say these things."

"Yes, I do. And I'll keep on saying them until you believe me. Not only did that man ignore your safe word but he obviously did things to you against your will. He didn't give you a choice."

"How do you know?" Daniel whispered, giving voice to his greatest fear. "How do you know I didn't do something to indicate I *wanted* him to do those things to me?"

Had he somehow asked to be abused? He'd agreed to participate in the scene. He'd agreed to many of the things the man did to him. Had he somehow asked for more?

"Because I know you, Daniel," Dante said. "If you wanted the things that man did to you then you would never have used your safe word. Your safe word is supposed to stop everything immediately." Dante grasped Daniel's chin and tilted his face up. "You set down the boundaries before you started the scene, Daniel. He crossed the line when you had no choice and he didn't stop when you safe-worded. This is all on his head."

"I asked him to stop," Daniel cried as he buried his face in Dante's shirt. "I swear I did. I begged him."

"I know, poppet, I know."

"He put a ball gag in my mouth when I wouldn't stop screaming." Daniel hiccupped. "He said that I was h-his whore and I would do what he told me to do."

Daniel felt Dante's arms tighten around him. For a moment, fear filled him. He struggled until Dante loosened his grip, keeping him in a light embrace. Daniel could no longer handle being restrained in any manner. He needed to be able to get free.

"Shh, Daniel," Dante whispered. "I'll let you go whenever you want; just say the word. I know you don't believe me, but you choose a word, any word, and the moment you speak it, I'll stop whatever I'm doing."

Dante was right. Daniel didn't believe Dante would stop no matter what he said and there was nothing Dante could do to prove otherwise. The mere thought of giving up control, of trusting another with his body, brought on a wave of panic that made him nauseous.

“For right now, why don’t we simply use the word *stop*, okay?” Dante said. “In the future you need to choose a different word though, something that you will only use if you really need it. In the meantime, any time you say stop, everything will stop. Okay, Daniel?”

Daniel shrugged. “Whatever.” He twitched when Dante grabbed his chin and lifted it until their eyes met.

“Not ‘whatever’, Daniel,” Dante said, his voice steely and holding unwavering conviction. “You’re important. Your needs and wants are important. Don’t dismiss them because you’re afraid. I won’t.”

Daniel pulled his head away and buried it in Dante’s neck, no longer able to hold the man’s intense, too-knowing gaze. Daniel didn’t know if he was ready to let Dante see into his soul. It made him feel vulnerable, something Daniel swore he’d never feel again.

Daniel wiggled in Dante’s arms. He didn’t know if he was trying to get away or coax Dante to hold him tighter. His emotions were chaotic, going from one extreme to another in the blink of an eye.

On the one hand, he longed for Dante to hold him, to make all of his pain and anger go away. But on the other hand, he wanted Dante to leave and never come back. Above all, he feared he wouldn’t have the willpower to turn away the one man who already held a piece of him no one ever had.

“Shh, poppet,” Dante said softly, stroking Daniel’s head and back. “I’m going to take care of everything. I just want you to close your eyes and rest. I’ll keep you safe.”

Daniel doubted Dante’s words but he couldn’t keep his eyes from closing, the gentle touch of Dante’s hands and the warmth of his body lulling him to sleep. Dante continued to murmur reassuring nonsense words until Daniel fell into a restful sleep.

* * * * *

Dante knew the moment Daniel lost his battle to stay awake. The tension eased from the body he held tightly to his chest, relaxing for the first time since Dante walked into the room. Dante continued caressing Daniel's back until he knew for sure the man slept soundly.

He tried not to tighten his muscles as thoughts of Daniel's attack filled his head, followed closely by overwhelming rage and the need to rip someone into itsy bitsy little pieces, preferably while they still breathed . . . and watched.

Daniel was correct on one front. Dante did feel guilty but not for the reasons Daniel thought. He felt guilty because he hadn't stamped his claim on Daniel before he left, hadn't solidified their relationship. Maybe if he had, Daniel wouldn't have gone looking for something he felt was missing in his life.

There would have also been the added benefit of everyone knowing Daniel belonged to him. No one would have touched the man, at least no one who wanted to continue breathing.

He'd made one mistake by leaving Daniel unclaimed. He'd made another, without a doubt, simply by leaving in the first place. Logan was correct in his assumption. Dante had needed to decide between Daniel, and his obligations overseas. The decision had come surprisingly easy. Daniel needed to come first.

From here on out, he'd only accept assignments he could do from home. His superiors weren't happy when he told them but it was either that or Dante would resign permanently. Daniel's wellbeing came first. Dante just had to convince Daniel of that.

Dante turned and looked across the room when he heard the door open. Joey walked in, followed closely by Logan. They both showed surprise when they spotted Daniel sleeping in Dante's arms. Dante held his finger to his mouth. "Shh."

He started to get up, to transfer Daniel to the bed, but the man in his arms frowned in his sleep. He fisted Dante's shirt and a small whimper of protest fell from his lips. Dante leaned back in the chair, more than content to let Daniel stay right where

he lay. Daniel settled, his face softening out, but he didn't loosen his grip on Dante's shirt.

Dante gestured for the blanket at the bottom of the bed. Joey quickly picked it up and carried it over to him. Dante took the blanket and spread it out over Daniel, wrapping the edges around his body and tucking him in.

"It doesn't look like I will be leaving anytime soon, my friend," Dante said softly as he continued to rub Daniel's back.

"I can't believe he's finally sleeping," Joey said, "and without any sleeping pills. He hasn't slept without assistance since he came home from the hospital."

Dante glanced down at Daniel's sleeping face, raising his hand to stroke his thumb down the side of Daniel's cheek. "He's tired but I think he's afraid. He needs someone to watch over him while he sleeps, to keep him safe."

"And you think you're the man for the job?" Joey didn't quite snort, but his response held a definite note of sarcasm, showing he was still plenty pissed off. Dante tried not to take it personally. He knew Joey hurt for his friend.

"I *know* I'm the man for the job," Dante replied. "If I wasn't, Daniel would not be sleeping in my arms right now."

Joey looked like he wanted to argue until Logan stepped forward and placed a hand on his shoulder. "He's right, Joey, and you know it."

Surprised by the words, Dante glanced at Logan just in time to see him gesture in his direction. "If Daniel didn't want him here he wouldn't be curled up in Dante's lap getting the first good sleep he's had in weeks."

"I guess, but —"

"Joey, I only want what is best for Daniel," Dante began, knowing convincing him of his intentions would be his first big hurdle. Convincing Daniel would be next. "He needs to understand that what happened to him wasn't his fault. He also needs to learn to trust again."

"And you think you can teach him to trust again?" Joey asked, his voice quiet, somber.

Dante turned to gaze down at the man sleeping in his arms. "Oh yes," he whispered. "I plan to teach Daniel a great many things." He grinned up at Joey and Logan. "And I imagine, once he gets over his fear, he'll be a very apt student."

"Do you believe he *will* get past his fear?" Joey asked. "He hasn't discussed exactly what happened but I've seen his injuries. I talked with the doctor before we brought him home and at his check up. The wounds will heal, but emotionally, well, that's not something he's going to get past right away."

"I have every faith that Daniel will learn to trust me again," Dante replied, "but it will take time and care. I don't know exactly what happened to him either, and I agree with you; while his physical injuries may be grave, the ones to his spirit are more severe. It's those he needs to overcome."

"Did he . . . did he tell you what happened?" Joey asked quietly.

Dante shook his head. "No, but he will. Some of the things Daniel said led me to believe his attack wasn't just sexual. I don't know if this man chose Daniel specifically or if just any sub would have done but he wanted to humiliate Daniel physically, emotionally, and mentally."

"You think it was personal?" Logan asked, breaking the silence he'd held for most of the conversation. The steel tone in his voice and the way he suddenly crowded around Joey told Dante the man didn't like that idea in the least.

"It was very personal, Logan," Dante replied, "whether the man meant it to be or not."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it," Logan snapped. "Do you think whoever did this did it on purpose? That he chose Daniel specifically? Do you know how that sounds? What that means?"

"It means we may have a huge problem," Dante said. "Because either we have a Dom out of control, prowling the clubs for naive subs, or we have someone who is out to harm Daniel personally. Either way, we have to put a stop to it before someone else gets hurt."

"Christ!" Logan exclaimed.

"My sentiments exactly," Dante replied.

"Logan?" Joey asked. "I don't understand."

Dante smiled as he watched Logan comfort Joey. Despite his own issues with Daniel at the moment, he was happy Logan had discovered his soul mate. It gave Dante hope things would work out for him and Daniel.

"If this is a Dom looking for random submissives, he's a threat to not only them but our entire community," Logan explained. "People like him give the rest of the world the idea that we're nothing but a bunch of monsters who enjoy hurting other people."

"But . . . but that's not true," Joey said. "No one you've introduced me to at the club has been anything but nice to me."

"There is another side to the things we do, Joey. A more intense side," Dante said. "You haven't experienced that with Logan because you don't live the lifestyle twenty-four-seven, but many of us do. There are also many of us who participate in scenes that are more intense than what you and Logan practice."

"Baby, sometimes these scenes involve the administering of punishment."

"You punish me," Joey insisted.

Logan shook his head. "Not like that, I don't. I'm not saying it's wrong because it's not. It's just not something we do. Remember how you said Danny was a little more into the whole D/s thing than you?"

Joey nodded.

"Danny may like being spanked with a paddle or being whipped. He might like the rougher side of things. If he participated in a scene with someone and asked them to whip him, then was abused like he was, do you really think anyone outside of the community would believe him when he cried foul?"

Joey sank onto the edge of the bed as if his legs had turned to jelly. The emotions running rampant across his face made Dante wonder if they should have left off discussing this with him. The poor kid looked horrified.

"Joey?" Dante asked carefully. "Are you okay?"

“Do you think Danny asked for that guy to do what he did?”

“No, Joey, he didn’t,” Dante said. “That’s one of the fundamental reasons we have safe words. Daniel may have agreed to be in a scene with this man but he used his safe word. It should have stopped right then and there but it didn’t. In fact, when Daniel demanded to be let go, the man gagged him. Danny didn’t ask for this.”

“I’ve seen the marks on him,” Joey said quietly. “I don’t see how anyone could ask for something like that.”

Dante gritted his teeth. His hands tightened around Daniel’s body. “What marks, Joey?”

“He has deep welts all over his body, front and back,” Joey replied. His hands twisted together in his lap. His gaze stayed pinned on the floor as if he were too nervous to meet Dante’s eyes. “When he was first in the hospital they bled so much I never thought they’d heal. He was covered in bruises. The ones on his . . . his —”

Joey suddenly sobbed and turned his face into Logan’s shirt. Dante’s heart ached. He was almost afraid for Joey to go on for fear of what he’d say but Dante needed to know it all if he was going to care for Daniel.

“Joey, I know this is hard for you but I need to know about all of Daniel’s injuries,” Dante said, “and I’m not sure Daniel is in any condition to tell me. I need you to tell me, please.”

It took a moment for Joey to compose himself but he finally lifted his head. He wiped the tears from his eyes and turned to look at Dante. Dante could see he was shaken, and his concern for Daniel grew.

“There are tears and bruising inside . . . in his . . .” Joey’s face blazed and he dropped his gaze down to his lap again. “When he was first in the hospital there was a large bruise on his dick shaped like someone’s hand. It’s faded now but . . . but . . . it took over 360 stitches to close up all the cuts he had over his entire body. His kidney was bruised, one rib cracked. There were bruises around his throat like someone tried to strangle him.”

Dante swallowed past the lump in his throat, only just beginning to get a picture of the hell Daniel went through. If Daniel came out of this with only a trust issue, it would be a miracle.

"I just don't understand how someone could do that to Danny," Joey said. "He's never hurt anyone in his life. He didn't deserve this."

"No, Joey, he didn't," Dante said. "But I don't want you to think for one minute that Daniel asked for this or that someone from our community could do this. I don't know who this man was but he isn't normal, not even by our standards."

"But I thought you said he might be going into the club to find people?"

"Joey," Logan said, "no matter where you are or what you're into, you are going to find bad people. Most of the people in our community understand and respect the rules, like the use of a safe word. Those who don't shouldn't be in our community."

"That's putting it mildly, Logan," Dante snipped.

"Do you think this guy might come after Danny again?" Joey asked.

Dante tightened his grip around Daniel at the mere thought of the danger he might still be in. "Not if I have anything to say about it," he said. "I'm going to make sure no one ever hurts Daniel again."

"How do you plan to do that?"

"I'm taking Daniel home with me."

Joey sucked in his breath. "Do you think he'll let you?"

"Who says I am going to consult him?" Dante asked. "Daniel wants me to take charge right now even if he doesn't know it. He will hem and haw but he'll feel safer and more cared for than if I just let him stew about things. He needs me as much as I need him."

"How can you be sure?" Joey asked.

Dante smiled. "I wish I could give you a concrete answer, Joey, but I can't. I just know Daniel needs me. I am more capable of giving Daniel my full attention if we are in our own home."

"*Our home?*" Logan questioned, one dark eyebrow raised high.

"Of course," Dante replied. "When I said I was taking Daniel home with me I meant permanently. I'm moving him in."

Chapter Four

Daniel felt warm and relaxed. He didn't want to open his eyes and face the light of day. He'd rather stay cocooned in the dream world he seemed to be floating in but a bright light nagged at him.

He lifted his heavy lids and blinked at the sunshine coming through the windows. It was bright, brighter than anything he'd seen in days. He usually kept the curtains closed in his room, which begged the question, whose room was he currently in? Nothing here felt familiar.

He sat up and looked around. He was in a large room, in a massively huge bed, and had on a pair of silk pajamas. He stroked his hands down the emerald green pajama top covering his chest. As nightclothes went, these seemed to be top quality and the silky material felt great against his skin.

But where in the hell was he? He flipped back the white, goose down comforter and started to scoot to the end of the bed when he heard a noise across the room. His heart thudded with fear for a brief moment before he recognized Dante walking toward him from the head of a set of stairs.

His fear filtered away to be replaced with joy and anticipation as he gazed at Dante's tall, muscular body. The man was a work of art even with his clothes on. Daniel's delight at seeing Dante quickly faded when Dante turned to look at him, his deep, emerald green eyes twinkling with some unknown emotion.

"Good morning, Daniel," Dante said casually. "How did you sleep?"

"Uh, fine."

"I'm pleased to hear that." Dante reached down and grabbed a green silk robe lying across the bottom of the bed and held it up to Daniel. "Would you care to join me for breakfast?"

Daniel frowned. "Where am I, Dante?"

"Why, my dear boy, you're home."

Daniel wasn't sure exactly what those words made him feel. Not fear, and not joy. Something in between the two, maybe? He couldn't be sure. His emotions where Dante was concerned were all over the place.

But no matter his feeling of the moment — anger, fear, bitterness — Daniel couldn't seem to stop himself from watching the man's every move, no matter how many times he pulled his gaze away.

"Now, come along," Dante encouraged, "our breakfast is getting cold."

Bewildered, Daniel stood and slid his arms into the robe Dante held. Dante carefully wrapped the robe around Daniel, smoothing the silky material down with his hands. Daniel belted the robe then turned to look up at Dante.

That strange twinkled shinned in Dante's eyes again.

"Green looks very good on you, Daniel. It brings out the green of your eyes, makes them sparkle." Dante turned away and leaned down to grab a set of matching green slippers. He held them out, one at a time, and waited while Daniel slipped them on. "We'll have to purchase more items in this color, I think."

Daniel stepped back and gazed up at Dante's handsome face. The man's strong presence made Daniel feel small and intimidated. He didn't know what game Dante played but he'd be damned if he'd participate. Been there, done that, so not impressed.

"What am I doing here, Dante?"

Dante's lips twisted as if he were trying to repress a smirk. "Well, if you'd be so kind as to join me, you're about to have breakfast." Dante walked toward the stairs. "It is being served out on the balcony this morning, Daniel. I'll be waiting for you there."

Without another word, Dante walked away, leaving Daniel standing there with his mouth hanging open. Dante sounded so casual, so every day, as if they had breakfast together all the time. He didn't sound like a man who'd gone missing for six months, a man who'd ripped Daniel's heart out and stomped all over it.

Daniel didn't know what to think. He trailed after Dante's retreating form, his eyes widening when he reached the landing at the top of the stairs. Daniel slowly walked down, his mouth hanging open as he took in the most gorgeous living space he'd ever seen.

A huge room opened up below him with tall, white walls, vaulted ceilings, and hardwood floors. An overstuffed black sectional sofa sat on the far side of the room in front of a large floor-to-ceiling fireplace.

Blackwood bookshelves lined one wall, filled with books and assorted knick-knacks. Brightly colorful artwork hung on the walls. But the one thing that caught Daniel's attention the most was the wall of floor-to-ceiling windows on either side of the fireplace. The view took his breath away. He could see the entire city.

Daniel followed the line of windows until he came to the double glass doors. Dante sat at a small table just beyond them. He had a cup in one hand, a newspaper in the other, and he looked like he didn't have a care in the world.

"It's rude to keep me waiting, Daniel," Dante said without lifting his head.

Daniel startled at Dante's words. What was he, psychic? Daniel shrugged and stepped out onto the patio, figuring it couldn't hurt to join the man for breakfast.

The moment Daniel sat down, Dante folded the newspaper and laid it on the table. "I wasn't quite sure what you'd be hungry for so I ordered a few different things. If you'd prefer something else I can call down to the kitchen."

Daniel frowned, feeling totally out of his depth as he watched Dante lift the silver lids from several dishes of scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, toast . . . even fresh fruit. A large carafe of orange juice sat on the table as well. Dante thought of almost everything.

Daniel waited for Dante to say something, to explain why he was here or even where *here* was. He didn't. He just served up large portions on both of their plates then poured some juice.

"Eat up, Daniel," Dante said as he picked up his fork. "We have a busy morning ahead of us and you will need a nutritious breakfast to give you strength."

Daniel swallowed past the sudden lump taking form in his throat. "I won't have sex with you," he said, assuming that was why Dante brought him here.

"I understand," Dante replied. "I wouldn't expect any such thing from you in your current condition. I do, however, expect polite conversation at the table. Please refrain from discussing the intimacies of our relationship while we are eating."

Daniel's mouth dropped open. He felt like his jaw was going to unhinge with as much shock as he'd experienced since he'd opened his eyes this morning. Nothing Dante said or did made the least bit of sense.

"If you don't want sex from me then what in the hell do you want?" Daniel snapped.

He could feel the heavy weight of Dante's stare as the man set his fork down on the table and looked across at him. He wished he'd kept his mouth shut because he had a feeling he was about to find out exactly what Dante wanted from him. The thought scared the crap out of Daniel.

"A little civility would be appreciated, Daniel."

"Are you for real?"

"Quite."

Daniel waited for Dante to say more but he just picked up his fork and continued eating. Not knowing what else to do, Daniel picked up his fork and ate his breakfast. He chewed slowly, keeping a cautious eye on Dante all the while.

The food seemed to drop into his stomach like a weight. Feeling slightly nauseous, Daniel laid his fork down and waited for Dante to finish eating. He didn't think he could take another bite, which was par for the course lately. Nearly every time he ate he felt sick.

Finally, Dante laid his fork down on his cleared plate and wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin. Daniel's breath caught in his throat when the man looked across the table at him once again.

"Did you get enough to eat, Daniel?"

He shrugged. "I'm not very hungry."

"I imagine your nerves are pretty shot." Dante stood and pushed his chair in. "Well, we'll have to do something about that. In the meantime, I've chosen some vitamins for you to take that should keep you in good condition."

"Vitamins?"

Dante lifted a small box off the cart sitting nearby and set it down in front of Daniel. The box itself was clear plastic with four separate compartments for each day of the week. Each compartment held several different colored pills.

"Breakfast, lunch, dinner, and bedtime, Daniel," Dante said. "The bulk of the pills need to be taken with your meals. The last ones right before you go to bed."

"What are they?"

"The calcium will make your bones stronger. Iron helps with your immune system. Green tea will help your scars heal faster. Honey helps your wounds heal faster. St. John's Wort is for your depression. Glucosamine and Chondroitin are to maintain your joints and Valerian root will help with your insomnia."

"Is that all?"

"Your diet could use some improving but the vitamins should help with that." Dante popped open the first compartment for the day and dumped the pills out into his hand then held them out to Daniel. "I've informed the chef of your dietary needs and he will cook your meals accordingly."

"The chef?"

"I employ several people, Daniel. The chef, of course, works downstairs in the main kitchen. Unless we choose to cook ourselves, our food is prepared downstairs and brought up. I also have a maid service that comes in to clean three times a week."

Dante dumped the pills into Daniel's hand then gave him a glass of juice as he continued talking. "Once you are settled I will cut that back to two days a week. We shouldn't need them any more than that. And, of course, I intend to hire a bodyguard and have him stationed at the bottom of the stairs leading into the club. He'll be there at all times and only people who have been cleared are allowed upstairs."

"Cleared? Upstairs?" Daniel's voice wavered. "What are you talking about? Where are we?"

"This is home, Daniel. We're above Dante's Dungeon."

Daniel pushed away from the table so fast the chair he sat in fell backward, slamming to the floor. Dante grabbed his arm, but Daniel shook free, stepping back several paces.

"No," Daniel said, shaking his head frantically, "no, I can't be here. Not here." He shrank back from the hand Dante held out to him.

"Daniel, it's okay. No one can get up here. You are perfectly safe."

"No, you don't understand," Daniel wailed hysterically. He glanced around the balcony, looking for an escape route. He needed to get away. "He's down there. I know he is." He ran toward the double glass doors.

"Daniel, stop!" Though Dante didn't yell, steel laced his voice.

Daniel froze. His body still shook, but he waited for Dante to say something. Dante stepped up behind him, pressing his warmth against Daniel's icy body. He caressed Daniel's cheek with the back of his hand.

"You're safe here, Daniel," Dante said softly. "I promise. No one can get inside our flat unless we let them in. I installed extra security measures before I even brought you here. Would you like me to show you?"

"Our flat?" Daniel whispered.

"Yours and mine, Daniel."

"I don't live here," he insisted.

"You do now. I brought all your personal possessions with us when I moved you here from Logan and Joey's. Movers are packing the rest of your belongings as we speak. Everything should be delivered sometime today."

"You're having my apartment packed?" Daniel asked, shocked to his very bones. He turned to look at Dante. "Why? Why would you do that?"

"Because you agreed to be mine." Dante caressed the side of Daniel's face again. Daniel couldn't stop himself from leaning into the gentle caress. "Don't you remember when we were together that first time, Daniel? You said you'd be mine."

"But you left."

"Yes, I did," Dante said. His eyes were intent as he gazed down at Daniel. "I had obligations that I couldn't ignore but I'm back now, Daniel, and I don't plan on leaving again. I'm here to stay. I hope you are too."

"I don't—"

"You don't have to decide right this moment. You need a place to heal, someplace safe. This is it. And if you remember our discussion last night, all you have to do to bring everything to a halt is use one simple word. Do you remember what that word is, Daniel?"

"S-stop," Daniel whispered.

Dante nodded. "Just say the word, Daniel, and everything comes to a halt. I won't fault you or complain if you use it anytime you feel uncomfortable. You can use it if you just need to slow things down or if you have questions, anything." Dante gripped Daniel's chin gently and tilted his head up. "I will respect your safe word, Daniel."

"You're just saying that to get me to agree to do whatever you want."

"No, poppet, I'm not," Dante said, an unfamiliar look of sadness crossing his face. "I *will* respect your safe word, Daniel, I promise you."

"Fine, then," Daniel snapped. "Stop!"

Daniel frowned when Dante released him and immediately stepped back. Daniel expected Dante to be angry. Instead, Dante took another step back then gestured toward the balcony doors.

"You have the run of the entire place. Nothing is off limits to you. However, I would like to show you the security measures I installed before I brought you here. You will also need to know the pass code if you choose to leave."

Daniel's mind spun as he followed Dante inside. Fear and anger mixed with bitterness over his neediness. He wanted to believe Dante, ached to believe him, and yet

he knew all of this was nothing more than an elaborate setup. Dante wanted to throw him off his game, get him to lower his guard, and then the pain would begin.

His anger became a scalding fury. His mind a red haze, Daniel picked up the closest thing he could reach, a green glass vase, and flung it at Dante. The vase bounced his shoulder and crashed to the floor. Glass flew everywhere.

Dante whirled around, his mouth hanging open, his eyes wide. When Dante's mouth snapped shut, Daniel reached blindly for another weapon.

Daniel didn't realize he'd grabbed a statue until it was too late. The heavy silver object flew across the room and smacked Dante square on the head. A stunned look crossed his face before he went down, his body hitting the floor with a sickening thud.

"Dante?" Daniel whispered. He twisted his hands together and took a hesitant step toward the body lying on the floor. *Oh my god, I've killed him.* He walked around the back of the couch for a better look.

Dante lay unmoving on the floor, his eyes closed. He looked like he could almost be sleeping if it wasn't for all the blood surrounding him and covering his head. Daniel's heart squeezed. He ran forward and dropped to his knees next to Dante, not sure what to do first.

"Dante?" Daniel felt ice spreading through his veins when Dante didn't move, didn't acknowledge his words. Daniel took a deep breath and tried to regain control of his emotions. Dante needed him.

Daniel jumped up and ran to the kitchen. He pulled drawer after drawer open until he found the one containing the hand towels. He wet one, then grabbed a couple of dry ones before racing back to Dante.

"Dante," Daniel said, his gut churning with guilt and remorse. He wiped the blood from Dante's face. "Please open your eyes."

Daniel leaned forward and rested his forehead against Dante's. Tears streamed from his eyes. He rocked back and forth. "Please, Dante, wake up. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry."

* * * * *

Didn't mean it . . . sorry . . .

Dante's head throbbed. The pain was immense, nearly overwhelming, but not enough to drown out Daniel's words. Dante opened his eyes and looked up.

He reached for Daniel, his heart aching at the despair in Daniel's voice.

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Dante. I was just so angry," Daniel whispered, his head hanging low. "Open your eyes, please. I'll do whatever you want, I swear. I'll be your sub. I'll call you master. I won't safe word. I won't—"

"Daniel."

Only as Daniel's head swung up did Dante see the tears that glistened on his cheeks. Dante reached up and wiped them away with his fingers before cupping the side of Daniel's face. "You always use your safe word. Understand?"

Daniel nodded then sobbed as he buried his face in Dante's chest. Dante wrapped one arm around Daniel's head and gently stroked his soft, strawberry blond hair. With his other hand, he tentatively probed the bleeding gash on his forehead. He grimaced at the size of the injury. It felt huge. Luckily, it seemed to be on the edge of his hairline.

"Daniel," Dante said. "Listen to me."

Daniel raised his head. Dante could see the fear in his eyes, the guilt and anguish. "I'm so sorry, Dante. I never meant to hurt you. I just wanted—"

"Shh, poppet," Dante murmured. "I know you didn't mean to hurt me."

"I didn't, I swear."

"I know," Dante said, "but I still need to go to the hospital. I think this needs a couple of stitches."

"Hospital?" Daniel gasped. His face paled as he reached toward the gash on Dante's head.

Dante quickly grabbed Daniel's wrist, stopping him. He shook his head when Daniel looked down at him. "Don't touch, poppet. We need to put pressure on it to stop the bleeding. Okay? Otherwise we shouldn't touch it until a doctor can look at it."

Daniel quickly held up a clean hand towel. Dante smiled as Daniel folded the towel and pressed it against his forehead. Daniel used the wet hand towel to finish cleaning the blood off Dante's face.

Dante watched Daniel as the man worked, studying the deep lines of frustration and worry etched upon his face. His eyes were red and swollen from crying. The corners of his mouth turned down. Even the sparkle that usually gleamed in his eyes had faded, leaving them even more pale than usual.

When Daniel dropped the wet towel on the floor, Dante held out his hand. "Come on, help me up. We need to call Logan and ask him to come drive me to the emergency room. I don't think I should get behind the wheel right now."

"I can call him." Daniel's voice trembled, but not as much as his hand did when he held it out. Dante took his hand and climbed to his feet. He swayed, dizzy from loss of blood. Daniel grabbed him and quickly helped him move to a chair.

Dante fished his cell phone out of his pocket and handed it over to Daniel. The poor man looked like he needed something to do to keep him busy and keep his mind off Dante's injuries. Daniel called Logan and asked him to come over, telling him it was an emergency and he needed to hurry.

When Daniel hung up the phone, Dante grabbed his wrist and pulled him down onto his lap. Daniel burrowed into his embrace, burying his head in the crook of Dante's neck. Daniel's entire body shivered as he sniffled.

"Everything's going to be okay, poppet," Dante said. He patted Daniel's back. "The doctor is just going to put in a couple of stitches then give me something for my headache. I'll be fine."

Daniel nodded but didn't lift his head. The grip he had on Dante's hand spoke for him. Strong, almost frantic in nature, and bruising. Dante ignored the discomfort. At least Daniel wasn't fighting him. He also didn't seem to want to move from where he

sat, which suited Dante just fine. He was perfectly content to hold Daniel until Logan arrived.

Dante held the hand towel to his head with one hand and cradled Daniel with the other one. A few minutes later, he heard the front door of the apartment open then hurried footsteps. Dante looked up to see Logan and Joey run into the room. They both took one look at the blood on the floor and the towel held to Dante's head and blanched.

"Dante, what – ?"

"I had a little accident, that's all. I need you to drive me to the hospital," he said, gesturing to his head. "I think this might need a couple of stitches."

"Yes, of course, but what – ?"

Dante shook his head, looking at Logan pointedly. Now was not the time to discuss the particulars of what happened. He didn't hold Daniel to blame. Daniel didn't mean to hurt him. It just wasn't in Daniel's personality to hurt someone on purpose.

"Daniel, we need to go," Dante said and gave him a shake.

Daniel lifted his head, a dazed look on his face. Dante thought the whole incident more traumatic on Daniel than him. He looked devastated. His face was white, his eyes wide. His hands twisted together in front of him.

"Come on, poppet. You can go with me."

Daniel nodded and got to his feet. Dante smiled when Daniel refused to release his hand, holding on tightly. He stood and started toward the door, Daniel trailing right behind him.

Logan led the way out to the car, helping Dante and Daniel into the back seat. Joey climbed in front. The moment the door closed, Daniel cuddled up next to Dante. Dante wrapped his free arm around Daniel, patting him on the shoulder, and used the other hand to hold the towel to his still-bleeding forehead.

"I am sorry," Daniel whispered against Dante's neck.

"I know, poppet." Dante stole a look at Daniel. "Can you tell me what made you so angry?"

Daniel shrugged. He didn't raise his head.

"I want to understand but I can't if you don't talk to me."

Daniel plucked at the material of Dante's shirt where it came together over his chest. He looked dejected, as if his entire world spun out of his control. Dante rubbed his hand over Daniel's shoulder, trying to reassure him.

"Please, Daniel?"

"You kept talking about using my safe word," Daniel murmured in a broken whisper, "like it's an option but it's not and you don't seem to understand that. People say whatever they need to say to get other people to do what they want. They tell you to use a safe word if things get out of hand but ignore that word when it suits them."

"Have I ever not listened to you when you used your safe word?"

"No, but —"

"I'm not him," Dante said. As much as it infuriated him he knew he'd be the one to pay for what happened to Daniel. He'd have to win Daniel's trust again. "As I've already told you, I will always respect your safe word, no matter what the situation is. I only hope that you believe me one day."

"It's not that I don't trust you, Dante, but you've never —" Daniel bit his lip and shook his head.

"I've never been in a situation where I needed to use a safe word?" Dante asked. "Well, in a way, you're right. I haven't. But I have been in situations where I wished I could have whispered one simple word and everything would have stopped. I don't have a safe word, though."

"Is that — when you say, 'in situations', are you talking about wherever you went when you disappeared before?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me about it?"

Dante remained silent as he thought about what exactly he could tell Daniel. He definitely couldn't tell him everything but maybe he could get away with enough to satisfy Daniel's curiosity.

"I occasionally do investigative work. Sometimes it takes me out of the country, sometimes I can work from home." Dante rubbed his fingers along Daniel's arm.

"Is it dangerous, what you do?"

"It can be," Dante replied. He walked on thin ice at the moment. Daniel seemed to be willing to talk with him, discuss things, but there was only so much Dante could tell him. "Most of the time I just gather and interpret information but sometimes it can get a little dangerous."

"I don't want you going anymore, not if it's dangerous," Daniel whispered as if he were afraid Dante would deny him.

"You don't need to worry about that anymore. I called them and told them that I couldn't do any more work that took me away from you. I won't be going anywhere from here on out."

"You can have a safe word in case you feel like you need to use one," Daniel said in an odd, yet gentle tone. "I'd respect your safe word."

Dante's heart pounded. He felt a warm glow flow through him. He knew Daniel would only offer him a safe word if he were beginning to trust again. Maybe getting beamed on the head with a statue hadn't been such a bad thing, no matter how much it hurt.

"Thank you, poppet." Dante's voice broke with huskiness. He squeezed his arm around Daniel, pulling him closer as he leaned over and placed a small kiss on the man's head. "That means a lot to me."

"Do you have a word you'd like to use?"

"Why don't I use 'stop', just like you?"

Daniel fidgeted for a moment then shook his head. "I don't think that's a good word. We use it too much in everyday speech. You might get confused."

"Then what if we used red?" Dante asked. "Red for stop, yellow for slow down, and green for okay? Would that work for us?"

"Us?"

"Of course," Dante replied. "You get a safe word just like I do. I've told you this."

"Okay."

"Okay, we each get a safe word or okay on red, yellow, and green?" Dante heard a small muffled laugh from Daniel.

"Both?" Daniel asked, the hesitation clear in his voice.

"Both it is, poppet."

Daniel fingered the material of Dante's shirt again. "You're not mad at me?"

"No, Daniel, I'm not mad at you," Dante said. He knew he'd need to reassure Daniel a lot before the man believed Dante didn't blame him. "I know you didn't mean to hurt me. It was an accident."

"I didn't, I swear," Daniel said again for what seemed like the hundredth time.

"I know, poppet," Dante said. "And I'm going to be fine. I just need to have the doctor take a look at this then we'll go home. Okay?"

"Did you really move me in with you?"

Dante chuckled. "I did. I should have moved you in six months ago but I didn't have time before I left. I'm sorry for that. Maybe none of this would have happened if I had."

Daniel didn't say anything. Dante wasn't sure if he expected him to or not. He knew some of the blame for Daniel's attack rested on his shoulders. Not the attack itself but the reasons behind it. He hoped he could make it up to Daniel.

"We're here," Logan said from the front of the vehicle, breaking into Dante's thoughts.

Dante nodded then turned his attention back to Daniel. "You ready to go inside?"

Daniel nodded. He bit his lip, something Dante saw as a sign of his nervousness.

"Can I stay with you?" Daniel asked.

"I wouldn't consider anything else."

Chapter Five

Daniel stood outside the x-ray room, biting his nails as he waited on Dante to come out. He'd tried to stay with Dante but the technician wouldn't allow it. Dante finally had to order him out of the room with the promise he could come back in the moment the technician was done taking the x-rays.

Daniel couldn't explain his need to stay close to Dante, especially after everything that happened to him and all the things he said to Dante. He just knew he needed to. Being with Dante seemed like the only thing that made sense to Daniel in the whole crazy mess his life had become.

Everything seemed to be upside down and sideways. His emotions were chaotic and raw, and his anger and bitterness made it difficult to think straight. Instinct told him to just let Dante handle everything for now.

"Are you Daniel Ferguson?"

Daniel jumped and turned, his heart plummeting when he saw two police officers standing next to him. One had dark brown hair, the other dirty blond. Both were tall and muscular and made Daniel's knees shake with fear. "Yes."

"Would you come with us, please?" the officer with the darker hair asked. "We have some questions for you."

"Me?" Daniel glanced back at the x-ray room. "Now?"

"Yes, sir."

"I can't." Daniel pointed toward the door. "I'm waiting on someone."

"We won't be long, Mr. Ferguson."

"It's important that we speak to you, Mr. Ferguson," said the dark haired officer.

"But, I—"

"Please, Mr. Ferguson," the dirty blond said, "if you will just come this way?"

Daniel gulped as he saw the man in blue settle his hand on the hilt of his gun. He glanced at the x-ray room door one last time before turning to follow the police officers

down the hallway. They led him to a small, private waiting room and escorted him inside.

The dark-haired officer sat in a chair then gestured toward an empty seat directly across from him. The other officer crossed his arms over his chest and stood in front of the door.

Daniel waited, his heart pounding frantically. He looked quickly between the two police officers, desperately wishing Dante was here.

"I'm Officer McLarren," said the officer sitting across from him. "This is Officer Jones. We understand you came in to the emergency room tonight with Mr. Dante Giovanni. Is that correct?"

"Yes," Daniel answered.

"Can you tell me how Mr. Giovanni received his injuries?"

Daniel blanched. He gripped his hands together tightly in his lap. "I . . . uh . . . we were talking and I got mad and threw a statue at him."

Officer McLarren raised an eyebrow. "You threw a statue at him?"

"I didn't mean to hurt him," Daniel said. His heart plummeted to his feet as the officer wrote in his notepad. "It was an accident."

"Mr. Ferguson, I need to make sure I understand this," Officer McLarren said. "You admit you threw a statue at Mr. Giovanni and that's how he received his injury. Is that correct?"

"Yes." There didn't seem to be any point in lying about what happened to Dante. Daniel threw the statue. He was guilty of causing Dante's injury, plain and simple.

"How do you know Mr. Giovanni?"

"I . . . uh . . . well, we kind of live together." Daniel knew it sounded weird even as he said the words. He wasn't in the least surprised by the bewildered look the officer gave him. He just didn't know how to explain his relationship with Dante.

"Kind of?"

"We just moved in together."

"How long have you and Mr. Giovanni been acquainted?" Officer McLarren asked.

"We met a little over six months ago."

"And what is the nature of your relationship with Mr. Giovanni?"

"The nature of our relationship?" Daniel asked in confusion.

"Are you friends? Roommates? Lovers?"

"Uh, yes."

"You don't sound very sure, Mr. Ferguson," Officer McLarren stated. "Do you have some confusion concerning your relationship with Mr. Giovanni?"

Now there was a loaded question. Daniel had a lot of confusion over his relationship with Dante. He wasn't even positive he *had* a relationship with the man.

Had they even known each other long enough to be considered friends? Dante said he was moving Daniel in so that probably made them roommates. And true, they slept together once several months ago. That didn't really make them lovers. So, what was their relationship?

Daniel glanced down at his hands, twisting them together in his lap until his fingers turned white. He again wished Dante was here to explain things. Everything seemed to make more sense when Dante talked.

"It's all a little confusing," Daniel murmured.

"Is Mr. Giovanni forcing you to do something against your will?" Officer McLarren asked. His voice sounded gentle, concerned. His brown eyes were kind. "We can protect you."

The officer standing in front of the door snorted and rolled his eyes. Daniel thought he might not be very sympathetic to Daniel's situation, and in that moment he decided he didn't like Officer Jones.

Daniel quickly shook his head. "No, Dante would never force me to do anything."

"Yet you felt the need to assault him?" asked Officer Jones.

Daniel turned to glare at him. "It was an accident; I told you that." He waved his hand toward the door. "Ask Dante, he'll tell you."

"Oh, believe me, we will," said Officer Jones as he reached behind his back and pulled out a set of handcuffs. "In the meantime, Mr. Ferguson, you're under arrest for assaulting Dante Giovanni."

"Sir!" Officer McLarren exclaimed as he jumped to his feet. "This isn't necessary. There's no reason to arrest him yet."

Daniel eyes widened at the sight of the approaching officer, his gaze narrowing in on the handcuffs in the man's hands. He jumped up from his seat and backed away, terror filling him at the sight of the restraints.

"No!"

* * * * *

The moment the x-ray room door opened Dante expected Daniel to come running. When the orderly rolled him out of the room in a wheelchair and Dante saw no sign of Daniel, he frowned. The man hadn't strayed from his side since they left the house. It didn't make sense that Daniel would leave now.

Dante reached into his pocket to grab his cell phone when he heard a cry that made his stomach clench and the blood in his veins run cold. Ignoring the fact he had a hospital gown on in place of his shirt and he sat in a wheelchair, Dante jumped to his feet and ran down the hallway toward the desperate voice.

"Daniel!" he shouted as he pulled open door after door in a frantic search.

"Dante!"

Dante paused until he heard the cry again then ran down the hallway to a private waiting room. He wrenched the door open and bounded in, taking in the scene with a glance. Dante growled at the sight of a police officer trying to handcuff Daniel.

"Get your fucking hands off him!"

"Dante!" Daniel cried out. His eyes were wide, desperate, panicked. He pushed his way past the police officer and ran toward him.

Dante crossed the room, meeting Daniel halfway. He grunted a little as Daniel landed heavily against him. Dante immediately wrapped his arms around the man and cradled him close.

"What the hell is going on here?" Dante asked, glaring between the two officers.

"They want to arrest me for assaulting you," Daniel whispered against his chest.

"Assaulting me?" Dante frowned. "Don't be ridiculous. I slipped on the hardwood floor and hit my head when I fell." Dante heard Daniel gasp. He tightened his hold on him, silently warning Daniel to remain quiet.

"Is that the story you're going with, Mr. Giovanni?" one of the officers asked.

"Mr. Ferguson has already admitted to throwing a statue at you."

"This whole situation has been rather traumatic for Daniel," Dante said carefully. "I imagine he is confused about what exactly happened. Daniel would never hurt me. He just doesn't have it in him."

"Mr. Ferguson seems to be quite confused about a great many things, like what exactly your relationship is. He doesn't seem to know if you're friends, lovers, or just roommates. Care to clear up that confusion, Mr. Giovanni?"

Dante bristled. He didn't like the fact that Daniel was unsure of their relationship but he guessed he couldn't expect anything different, under the circumstances.

"All of the above," Dante said. "Daniel and I have been lovers for over six months. We've just recently become roommates. As for friendship, you can't be lovers without it, not if you want more than a one night stand, which both Daniel and I want."

"So, you are lovers then?" the officer with the handcuffs asked.

Dante frowned. He didn't like the officer's tone. "Yes, is there a problem with that?"

"We just need to know whether this is a domestic dispute or something more. If Mr. Ferguson broke into your apartment and assaulted you then —"

"Is there some part of *he didn't hurt me* that you're not getting?" Dante asked. He could feel his anger level starting to rise. "I slipped and fell, hitting my head. I will not file charges against Daniel and if you persist in arresting him, I will testify in court that Daniel has never hurt me. I will also pay for the best lawyer around to not only defend Daniel but to sue you for false arrest."

One of the officers snorted.

"I'm sure you can understand our concern, Mr. Giovanni," the other officer said. "You came into the emergency room with an injury obviously caused in a fight. The emergency room staff called us to report the incident."

"Well, it wasn't obvious to me and I never once told the hospital staff I was injured in any way other than how I just stated to you now. I have no idea why they called you."

The other officer pushed his way to stand in front of his partner. "It doesn't matter why we were called, Mr. Giovanni, just that we were. And in a case with a domestic disturbance, state law mandates that someone goes to jail." The officer grinned. "So, either your lover assaulted you, or you assaulted him. Which is it? Because one of you is going to jail."

Dante pushed Daniel behind him and held out his hands. "Fine, I assaulted Daniel. My injury came when I ran across the room at him and slipped on the hardwood floor. I hit my head. Daniel never lifted a hand against me. Arrest me."

"No, Dante!" Daniel exclaimed, grabbing at his arm. "Don't—"

Dante turned to hug Daniel to him. "Poppet, you know you can't be restrained. You wouldn't be able to handle it. You'd lose your mind. Just let me do this and you can go home with Logan and Joey. The moment I'm released I'll come and get you."

"But, you didn't—"

"Damn it, sir, this is really starting to get out of hand," the other officer snapped. "You know we have the discretion to not arrest anyone if we deem the situation non-hostile. There is obviously nothing hostile between these two." The officer waved his

hand between Dante and Daniel. "If anything, they're arguing over who gets arrested and who gets to go free."

"One of them is going to jail."

"I'll go," Daniel said, stepping forward. "You already have the report that I assaulted Dante, along with my confession. You can see that he's the injured party here. I should be the one to go to jail."

"Daniel, no," Dante argued. "You know you can't handle being restrained. It'll bring back bad memories."

"It's okay. At least I'm used to it." Daniel patted Dante's arm. "I'll be fine."

"Daniel —"

"Oh, to hell with this," the officer shouted as he reached for a second pair of cuffs. "You're both going to jail. McLarren, go find out if Giovanni can leave the hospital and get the doctors to release him."

Daniel didn't resist when the officer placed the cuffs on him, but he drew in great gulps of air and his face turned pasty white.

"Daniel, are you sure you can do this? I don't have a problem going alone. Logan and Joey can take you home."

"I'm okay." Daniel didn't sound okay. His voice wobbled and his lips trembled as he tried to smile.

"If you get scared, just remember I'll be with you all the way, okay? And no matter what happens we'll be together." Before the officer could stop him, Dante leaned over and kissed Daniel gently on the lips. "You're one of the strongest men I've ever met, Daniel. You've survived the impossible and found your way back to me. Don't forget that."

Daniel blinked up at him, looking slightly dazed. "Okay, Dante."

Dante looked down at Daniel for a moment then nodded. He turned and held his wrists together behind his back. A moment later he felt handcuffs being snapped into place.

The officer read him his rights twenty minutes later as they walked down the hallway. The doctor had put a few quick stitches in his head and given him a bottle of pain pills for later. Luckily, the doctors didn't think he needed to stay for observation, although they wanted him watched. The officer who handcuffed Dante snickered as he assured the doctor there would be plenty of eyes to watch him . . . in jail.

Dante looked back over his shoulder to see Daniel watching him, a worried frown on his face. Dante smiled, trying to reassure him.

"Look, I can't stop Officer Jones from arresting you but I'll try to make the process quick so that you can get home."

Dante turned to look at the officer, confused by the man's words. "I don't understand why everyone is making such a big deal about this. It's a little bump on the head. Daniel really didn't mean to hurt me. I'd trust him with my life."

The officer shrugged. "I don't understand it either. Officer Jones was waiting for me when I arrived. He's the lead on the case." The man chuckled. "I'm new to this precinct. Officer Jones seems very . . . intense."

"You don't sound as if you like him much."

"Never met him before tonight but like I said, I'm new. I haven't met all the men on the force."

"What's your name?" Dante asked.

"Officer McLarren, Jack McLarren."

"Thank you, Officer McLarren."

The officer smiled. "You're welcome."

Dante pursed his lips and glanced at the officer as they started out the front door. "Look, I wonder if you could do me a favor?"

The officer chuckled. "I've already had my donut quota for the day, thanks."

"No, no, nothing like that," Dante said. He was starting to like this officer. He seemed like an okay guy. "Daniel recently suffered a very traumatic experience. He was restrained and assaulted. Can you keep an eye on him? I'm not sure how well he's going to handle being handcuffed and locked up."

The officer looked astonished. "That's why you tried to go in his place?"

Dante nodded.

"I'll do what I can but Officer Jones has more seniority than me. He gets final say on how this case proceeds until you're booked and go before the judge. I'm just here to assist."

"I'm not worried about me, Officer McLarren, just Daniel."

Officer McLarren opened the back door to his squad car. "Watch your head," he said as he helped Dante in.

Dante settled back in the seat and glanced over to where the other officer helped Daniel into another squad car. It wasn't until that moment that he realized they wouldn't be riding together. The thought of being separated from Daniel froze his heart.

"We're not riding together?"

"No, its general operating procedure to separate suspects involved in any incident. Officer Jones will drive Mr. Ferguson to the precinct. We'll meet them there."

Daniel stared at him across the space between the two cars with wide, frightened eyes. Dante smiled and blew him a kiss through the window. Daniel smiled back but even from this distance Dante could see it wobble.

He watched Daniel as the car pulled away, his eyes on him until they were out of sight. When he could no longer see the other squad, Dante sat back in his seat and sighed. Daniel was having a hell of a time.

"If I don't press charges against Daniel can he still be charged?" That thought nagged at Dante since the handcuffs were slapped on him. How could they arrest Daniel if he didn't file charges? He didn't even call the police.

"Not for assault, no, but as Officer Jones stated, in a domestic dispute someone has to be brought in. It's mainly set up to give people time to cool down and have time to think about things."

"So he should be let go then?"

"He still has to be booked but then I see no reason why he shouldn't be released, especially if you don't press charges."

“And me?”

“I’m not sure exactly what charges Officer Jones arrested you for. He’ll have to fill in that particular information when he reaches the station and you get booked.”

Dante knew he’d just have to wait but the waiting was killing him. He didn’t want to be separated from Daniel any longer than he had to be. This was a crucial time in their bonding together and if they lost it, Dante didn’t know if they could get it back. Daniel had just started to trust him again.

“How much farther to the police station?”

“Just a couple of more blocks.”

Dante grimaced.

“Do you smoke, Mr. Giovanni?” Officer McLarren asked.

Dante looked up to see the officer watching him in the rearview mirror.

“I know it’s not exactly procedure but I haven’t had a break in several hours,” the officer said. “Would you mind waiting for a few minutes when we get to the police station while I have a quick cigarette?” The officer shrugged. “Maybe by the time I’m done your friend will have arrived.”

Dante grinned. “I don’t smoke but I’d be willing to wait while you had a break. You can even leave me in the back of your squad car.” Dante would do anything to set his sights on Daniel once again.

“Oh, I don’t think that will be necessary, Mr. Giovanni. I don’t think you’re going to run on me, are you?”

“No, sir.”

Dante saw the officer grin. Dante had dealt with the police a time or two operating Dante’s Dungeon. Some he liked, some he did not. This one, he liked. Officer McLarren seemed to understand the situation even if he had brought Dante into the police station in cuffs.

Dante tapped his foot lightly against the floor as the squad car pulled into the police station parking lot. Officer McLarren pulled into a designated parking spot and cut the engine. He climbed out, and a moment later he opened the door for Dante.

"You might as well get some fresh air while we wait," the officer said as he reached to help Dante out of the car.

Dante gratefully accepted the officer's assistance and climbed from the backseat. He took a couple of steps around the door then leaned up against the side of the police car. Officer McLarren reached into his pocket, pulled out a pack of cigarettes, and lighted one up.

"You know those things will kill you, don't you?"

The officer took a drag then smirked. "Someone will probably shoot me long before that happens."

"You say that like this city is ripe with violence," Dante said, frowning. "I know we have some crime-ridden areas but I didn't think it was that bad."

Officer McLarren chuckled. "It's not but I have a bad habit of sticking my nose into places it shouldn't be. Hence, my reassignment to this precinct." He took another drag and blew the smoke out. "My superiors thought I'd be better suited to a less crime-ridden area where I couldn't get myself into trouble and embarrass the police force."

Dante didn't know quite what to say to that. Officer McLarren seemed like a nice guy. Maybe if there were more men like him on the police force, men who got involved in the community, there wouldn't be so much crime.

"So, tell me about this traumatic experience your friend went through recently? You said he had been restrained and assaulted?"

Dante grimaced, looking down at the ground. "Have you ever heard of a club called Dante's Dungeon?"

"Over on the eastside?" Officer McLarren asked. "Yeah, sure."

"I own it."

"Oh."

"I also believe in the lifestyle. About six months ago, I met Daniel. We started something together but I had to go away on business. I was gone for several months." Dante took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "While I was gone, Daniel participated in a scene with strict instructions about his boundaries. When he told the other man to

stop, he wouldn't. By the time he was dropped off at the hospital, Daniel was in pretty bad shape."

"Shit!" Officer McLarren tossed his cigarette on the ground and smashed it with his boot before looking at Dante. "At least tell me the guy's gonna do time."

Dante shook his head. "Daniel refuses to name his attacker. He's too terrified."

"Do you know who this guy is? Do you want me to look into it?"

"I know he hangs out at my club but that's it. Daniel won't tell me any more than that. As for looking into it, I'm not sure you'd have much luck. Because of the nature of our lifestyle we tend to not trust the intelligence of the police force, no insult intended."

Officer McLarren waved his hand at Dante. "None taken. And I get it, your lifestyle, I mean. I don't understand it, but I get it. Stop means stop and this guy didn't."

Dante chuckled, surprised he could find any amusement in the situation involving Daniel. "Actually, pecan means stop."

"Pecan?"

"Daniel's safe word." Dante frowned. "Although, now it's red because pecan didn't help him with the guy who assaulted him and he doesn't trust that word anymore."

"What's a safe word?"

"A safe word is a word someone can use to stop everything, no matter how far into a scene or situation you are. Once that word is spoken, everything stops and there can be no repercussions on the person saying the safe word."

Officer McLarren looked confused. His forehead wrinkled. "And this safe word works?"

"Most of the time, yes. In Daniel's case, it didn't. His attacker ignored his safe word. When Daniel complained the man gagged him so he couldn't scream for help." Just thinking about it made Dante's blood start to boil again. "Daniel's trust was broken and I don't know if he'll ever get it back again."

"Is that why he hit you with a statue?"

"I slipped, remember?" Dante chuckled.

The officer laughed. "Oh yeah, right. Well, why did you *slip*?"

"Daniel was angry with me because I insisted he use his safe word, a word he doesn't trust any longer." Dante shrugged. "He was just trying to get my attention."

"I'd say he got it," Officer McLarren said, pointing to Dante's bandaged head wound.

Dante started to laugh but quickly sobered when four other police officers walked toward them. He straightened and glanced down at the ground when they walked up to Officer McLarren. It wouldn't be good for them to know how friendly the two of them had gotten.

"Hey, McLarren, did you hear?" one officer asked. "Someone stole Jones's squad car while he was on a call. Just got right in and drove away with it. Man, the captain is going to be so pissed when he finds out."

One of the other officer's face turned bright red. "I was on a call, you know. Time was of the essence."

"Had to make sure you got to the donuts before they were all gone?" another officer laughed. The other officers joined in.

"Oh, come on, guys."

One officer slapped the back of the one with the red face. "Don't worry about it, Bob. I'm sure the captain will understand. Just bring him some donuts."

Laughter broke out around him but Dante didn't hear any of it. His entire world narrowed down to the information his brain tried desperately to process. The conclusion he was coming to scared him to death.

"You're Officer Jones? Bob Jones?" Dante asked. "And your squad car got stolen tonight?"

"Yeah, what about?" the officer asked, the laughter around them dying away.

Dante felt his entire body go cold. He glanced over at Officer McLarren only to see the same shocked expression on his face Dante felt sure was on his own. Something was horribly wrong and Dante knew Daniel was in the middle of it.

"I'm real sorry to hear about your squad car, Jones," Officer McLarren said as he grabbed Dante by the arm and led him toward the back of the squad car. "I'll be sure to keep an eye out for it. You hear of any news and you just let me know. I'll help track it down. I'd hate to see you get in trouble for some bonehead's idea of a joyride."

Dante didn't protest when Officer McLarren put him in the back of the squad car and shut the door before climbing in the front. Within moments they pulled out of the police station parking lot and headed down the road.

"Here, uncuff yourself," Officer McLarren said as he tossed a set of keys into the back seat.

Dante grabbed the key and started to unlock the cuffs. By the time he was done, Officer McLarren pulled over to the side of the road.

"Get in front."

Dante wasted no time. He climbed from the backseat to the front, shutting the door behind him and slipping his seatbelt on. He glanced over at the officer. "How fast can this damn car go, Officer McLarren?"

"Under the circumstances, I think you can call me Jack, and this car can go pretty fast with the lights and siren on." Jack flipped a switch on the lights and siren then pulled out into traffic, tires screeching.

Dante held onto his seat, his heart pounding. Not from the rapid whipping of the squad car in and out of traffic, but from fear for Daniel. He suspected whoever had his lover was connected to the man who'd attacked him.

He wasn't the same man, though, just connected. If he'd been the same man, Dante had no doubt Daniel would have screamed bloody murder at seeing him again. Still, the man had some connection. Dante just wondered what it was.

"Can you shoot a gun?"

Dante turned to look at the officer. "Are you serious? Can't you get in trouble for that?"

Jack grinned. "Told you I had an issue with sticking my nose into places it didn't belong."

Dante chuckled. "Yes, I can shoot a gun. Do you think I'm going to need one?"

The officer reached under his pant leg and pulled out a small handgun then handed it to Dante. "You might."

"That's reassuring."

"The hard part is going to be figuring out who this asshole is and why he took your friend."

"I need to make some calls. I know a few people who might be able to help us out," Dante said as he reached into his pocket for his cell phone. "Bloody hell! Daniel still has my cell phone."

Chapter Six

Daniel's heart beat frantically. He took deep breaths to try and calm himself but nothing seemed to be working. Every time he looked into the front seat of the squad car and saw the officer looking back at him through the rearview mirror, his terror would return twofold.

He began to shake as fearful images built in his mind. What was going to happen to him? Would he go to jail? Prison? Would he ever see Dante again? It was impossible to steady his erratic pulse. Paralyzing panic rioted through him.

Daniel didn't feel any better when the car pulled into a long, dark alley and came to a stop next to a tall, brick building. It looked like a dilapidated warehouse, with broken windows, debris, and rusty metal pipes. One thought filled Daniel's head, written in bright red ink across his mind. *This is not the police station.*

A large neon sign off in the distance advertised naked dancers. Daniel didn't recognize the area, and his heart fell to his feet when the officer climbed out of the front of the squad car and stepped back to open Daniel's door.

"Get out."

Daniel shook his head. They weren't at the police station and there was no way in hell he was getting out of the squad car. He didn't know what was going on but he wasn't stupid. He'd heard stories of people being shot as they *escaped*.

Daniel yelped as the man grabbed him by the arm and hauled him out of the car. His grip was fierce and Daniel knew he'd have bruises in the morning. If he was *alive* come morning.

The officer dragged Daniel to the warehouse. He pulled open the door and thrust Daniel through. With his hands cuffed behind his back, Daniel had no way to stop himself from hitting the pile of wooden pallets stacked across from the door.

He cried out as his stomach collided with the wood, pain flaring across his side. He heard the officer snicker before he could right himself, a hand grabbing him again, propelling him across the room.

Daniel tried to slow their progress by digging his heels into the dirty floor but that just earned him a smack to the back of his head. He couldn't grab onto anything. He screamed for help. Officer Jones just laughed.

The officer led Daniel to a small room toward the back of the warehouse. Probably an office at one time, the tiny space looked like it hadn't been used in years. Broken furniture and old papers littered the floor, and cobwebs hung from the dirty ceiling light. The place made Daniel's skin crawl.

The moment Officer Jones unlocked the cuffs from around one wrist, Daniel started hitting and scratching, biting and screaming, in a futile effort to get free. Officer Jones took the wrist that was still handcuffed and attached the other end of the metal cuffs to a thick pipe attached to the wall.

Daniel kicked out, wincing when his foot connected with Officer Jones's shin. But the pain paled in comparison to the gratification he felt when the man shouted, bent over, and grabbed his leg.

Instinctively, Daniel brought his knee up, smashing the officer in the face. A loud crack echoed in the room, and Officer Jones slumped to the floor.

Daniel remained motionless, his heart pounding as he waited for the man to rise. When several minutes passed and nothing happened, he gathered his courage and nudged the man with his foot, first lightly then a little harder. When he didn't get a response, he pulled back his leg and delivered a kick to the officer's side.

Still nothing.

Daniel released a pent up breath. *I actually managed to knock the man unconscious.*

He knelt on the floor and searched around for the handcuff key. When he couldn't immediately find it he started searching Officer Jones's pockets. Where was the blasted key?

A sudden ringing made Daniel nearly jump out of his skin. He scooted away from the unconscious officer until his back hit the wall. His heart pounded. The ringing continued. At first, Daniel didn't know where it came from. Then he realized it came from his pocket.

His hand trembled as he reached into his pocket and pulled out Dante's cell phone. He flipped it open and held it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Daniel?"

"Dante?" Daniel cried. Tears sprouted in his eyes.

"Where are you, poppet?"

Daniel looked around the room. He shook his head until he realized Dante couldn't see him. "I don't know. Some deserted warehouse, I think."

"A deserted warehouse?" Dante shouted. "What the hell are you doing in a deserted warehouse? Where's the police officer who was with you?"

Daniel winced at the outrage in Dante's voice. He glanced down at the unconscious man lying on the floor a couple of feet away. "He . . . he's here."

"Let me talk to him."

"I can't," Daniel whispered. "I sort of knocked him out."

"You —"

"He was trying to handcuff me to a pipe and he hit me and" Daniel pushed his free hand through his hair and tugged on the ends.

"Okay, start at the beginning, Daniel," Dante said. "I need to know where you are so I can come get you. Just tell me where you are."

"I don't know. It's some warehouse somewhere. It's not a nice neighborhood, though, I can tell you that, and this building looks like it hasn't been used in years."

Daniel's forehead wrinkled in confusion as he heard Dante talking to someone but before he could ask who, Dante was back to asking questions.

"Did you see any road signs? What direction did you go when you left the hospital? Is there anything that might give us an idea of where you might be?"

"We headed south, I think," Daniel replied. "Oh, when we pulled into the alley by the warehouse I could see a huge red sign that said something about naked dancing on it. Does that help?"

"Yes, poppet, that helps a lot."

Some emotion Daniel couldn't quite identify started to well up inside him at Dante's words. He covered his mouth with his hand to keep from saying anything in response. He didn't want to sound like an idiot.

Just then, Daniel spotted a small piece of metal in the dirt next to the officer's hand. His breath caught in his throat. He dropped the phone and scrambled as far across the floor as he could to pick up the key. *Yes!* He crawled back to the pipe in the wall.

His hands trembled so badly he had to make several attempts at unlocking the cuffs before he got it right. The lock clicked, the cuff fell open, and Daniel heaved a huge sigh of relief. He leaned back against the wall and took a deep breath.

As his gaze traveled around the room, it finally landed on the unconscious man on the floor in front of him. Daniel stared at him for several moments, too many thoughts running through his head to settle on one. Then he grinned.

He grabbed the handcuffs and climbed to his feet. Cautiously he approached the officer, keeping his eyes on the man as he grabbed one wrist and locked the cuff around it. It took all of his strength but Daniel pulled him over close enough to close the other end of the cuff around the pipe he'd been cuffed to.

He scrambled away then stood back to stare at the officer for several moments. The man's eyes remained closed, his breathing slow and even. Spotting the cell phone on the floor, Daniel darted forward and grabbed it before hightailing it out the door. He might not know why he'd been brought here but he didn't plan on sticking around to find out.

Daniel ran to the front of the building. He cracked the door open a sliver and peered out. When he didn't see anything moving, he stepped out into the alley. He looked around, spotting the red neon sign. Not knowing what else to do he headed in that direction as fast as his feet would carry him.

As he ran, Daniel suddenly remembered the cell phone in his hand. He mentally crossed his finger and hoped he hadn't been disconnected. "Dante, are you still there?"

"Daniel?" Dante shouted. "What in the hell happened? Where did you go?"

"With any luck," Daniel replied, "toward that stupid red sign."

"What?"

Daniel snickered. "I told you I knocked that asshole out. I found the key and uncuffed myself."

"Where is he now?"

Daniel swallowed back a wave of hysterical laughter. "Handcuffed to the same damn pipe he handcuffed me to."

Daniel heard an answering chortle come through the phone and then Dante said, "I'm very proud of you, poppet."

Daniel was proud of himself too. He still felt terror floating through him but he also didn't feel quite so much like a victim as he did an hour ago. "I got him, Dante. I didn't freak out. I knocked his ass out and kicked him and now he's handcuffed to a pipe in some deserted warehouse."

Dante chuckled. "You just keep heading toward that red sign, Daniel. If you see any street signs or stores you let me know so I can come get you." Dante sighed deeply. "I need to see that you're okay, poppet."

"I'm fine, Dante."

"I know but I need to see for myself that you're okay."

Daniel rolled his eyes. "Yeah, okay. I get you."

"You already have me, Daniel." Dante's voice sounded thick and unsteady. "You did from your first curse word."

* * * * *

The relief Dante felt couldn't be put into words. His mood turned suddenly buoyant. Daniel still wasn't safe. He wouldn't be safe until Dante held him in his arms. But at least he wasn't handcuffed to a pipe.

"Do you see anything yet, Daniel?"

"Just a lot of warehouses, wire mesh fences, and garbage."

Dante relayed that bit of information to Jack, hoping the man might know Daniel's location. "Does it sound familiar?"

"It sounds like he might be down by the waterfront somewhere. There are lot of abandoned warehouses down that way and a few girly bars."

"I wouldn't know." Dante smirked.

Jack chuckled. "I'll bet."

Dante stared over at Jack. What did that mean, exactly? Was he straight? Gay? Did it even matter? No, Dante decided. Daniel was the only man who interested him.

"Dante?" Daniel asked. "Who are you talking to?"

"Jack," Dante said as studied his surroundings.

"Jack?"

"Officer Jack McLarren."

"Oh. He isn't going to try and handcuff me to a pipe, is he?"

"No, Daniel, in fact, he's helping me look for you." Dante considered not telling Daniel about the man who took him but decided he needed to be honest. He'd only find out later and then he'd go back to mistrusting Dante again. "Listen, Daniel, that man you chained to the pipe? I don't know who he is but he's not a police officer."

"Well, that explains a lot."

"What does it explain? Did he say something to you?"

"No, but it just didn't seem right for a policeman to take me to an abandoned warehouse and handcuff me to a pipe, not unless he's on the take or something. And if he's on the take, why go after me? I don't have any money and I certainly don't know anything he might want to know. The whole situation just didn't make sense."

Dante could picture the confused look on Daniel's face and wished he was there to reassure him. After everything Daniel went through over the last several weeks, this had to top the list.

"Oh, hey, a street sign."

"What does it say?" Dante gripped the seat beneath him as he waited for Daniel's reply.

"One says Adams Avenue. The other one says 17th Street," Daniel replied. "Does it count if the sign is on the ground?"

"17th and Adams," Dante said to Jack, then answered Daniel's question. "And yes, Daniel, it counts. Now, I want you to wait right there. Jack and I are only a few blocks away."

"Can you hurry? It's kind of creepy around here and I don't—uh, Dante," Daniel said, his voice suddenly sounding very low and a little shaky, "there are several very large, very mean looking men walking toward me."

Dante's heart froze. "Run, Daniel, just run," he shouted into Jack's cell phone. "Run as fast as you can. I'll find you."

Dante could hear Daniel's rapid breathing. He could hear his feet slapping against the cement ground, beating to the same quick rhythm of Dante's heart. Dante closed his eyes for a moment and prayed for all he was worth that they would get to Daniel in time to save him. Dante just didn't think the man could survive being assaulted again.

"Christ, Jack, hurry."

"Five minutes, man, I swear."

Dante didn't know if Daniel would be alive in five minutes. Fear and anger knotted inside him when he heard Daniel scream. Several loud voices shouted out but Dante couldn't decipher what they were saying . . . then the phone went dead.

Dante dialed the number again. It rang and rang and rang then went to his voicemail. He dialed again, then again. Every time, he reached voicemail, and every horrible scenario possible went through Dante's mind.

He gripped the phone and tapped his foot rapidly on the floorboard. Buildings flew past, and car tires screeched as Jack wove in and out of traffic.

"He should be somewhere on the next block," Jack said, "right around the corner."

Dante avidly watched out the window. He held onto the dashboard as the squad car flew around the corner then suddenly slowed. Dante scanned the street, the buildings, even the alleyways. He searched everywhere.

A shock of emerald green caught his eye. Dante squinted, looking harder, then he pointed. "There!" he shouted. "He's over there."

As Jack drove closer, Dante realized Daniel sat on the hood of a beat up old truck, surrounded by a group of men, all of whom looked like a cross between a lumberjack and a biker.

Dante jumped out of the squad car the moment it stopped. His hands clenched into fists as he readied himself to do battle for Daniel. He hurried toward the rough bunch. "Daniel!" he shouted.

The group of men closed ranks around him, preventing Dante from reaching Daniel's side.

"Dante," Daniel cried as he waved one hand at the men around him. "No, no, this is Dante, the man I told you about."

Dante nearly fell over in shock when smiles spread across the hardened faces of the rough looking bunch surrounding Daniel and they parted to make room for him to go through. One extremely large man lifted Daniel down off the hood of the truck and set him on his feet.

Daniel hit the ground running, leaping into Dante's arms a moment later. Dante caught Daniel and wrapped his arms around him. He buried his head in Daniel's hair and took a deep breath. Nothing ever smelled so sweet.

"I knew you'd come," Daniel whispered against Dante's chest.

"I told you I wouldn't let anyone hurt you again," Dante said. He raised his head and caressed the side of Daniel's face, then lifted his chin to look in him in the eye.

"Although, I think this time you protected yourself."

Daniel looked stunned for a moment then a wide grin crossed his lips. "I did, didn't I?"

"You did, poppet, and I'm very proud of you." Daniel couldn't help but feel overjoyed at the stunned amazement on Daniel's face. A bit of Daniel's self confidence had been restored, and they were one more step closer to him achieving a full recovery.

"Did he tell the truth?" asked the man who lifted Daniel to the ground. "Is someone after the little runt?"

Daniel rolled his eyes and turned back to face him, crossing his arms over his chest. "I am not a runt. How many times do I have to say that?"

The man, who stood inches above Dante, grinned. "Ah, it ain't personal, runt." He chuckled. "You're just so much smaller than the rest of us."

When Daniel began to sputter, Dante quickly laid his hand on his shoulder, quieting him. "Daniel was kidnapped. The man who took him impersonated a police officer, stole a squad car then handcuffed Daniel to a pipe in a deserted warehouse."

The man glanced past Dante and Daniel. He nodded in Jack's direction. "He a real cop?"

"Yeah, he's good," Dante said. "He helped me search for Daniel."

"We don't much like cops round here." The man stuck his thumbs in his pockets and puffed out his chest, rocking back on his heels. "Always sticking their noses in where they don't belong."

Dante could see the direction this conversation headed. He needed to put a stop to it before it got that far. He didn't completely trust Jack yet but up to this point, the man had been nothing but helpful. Dante would give him the benefit of the doubt.

"I'm Dante Giovanni," he said, holding out his hand.

"Big John," the man replied, shaking Dante's hand.

"You know Dante's Dungeon down on 5th Street?"

"Yeah, I heard of the place." Big John rubbed his chin as he eyed Dante. "Not really my kind of thing, if you know what I mean."

Dante nodded. "You go on in and ask for a man named Bert. Tell him I sent you in and the drinks are on me, all you can consume."

Big John tilted his head. "Why would you do that for us?"

Dante looked down at Daniel. He rubbed his hands over Daniel's shoulders, pulling the smaller man back against him. "Daniel means more to me than anything in the world. You protected him when I couldn't, when you could have done far worse to him. That means something to me."

"I hear you." Big John nodded. His face seemed to soften just a bit as he looked down at Daniel. "Man has a right to protect what's his."

Dante tried to size up the big man in front of him. He dressed like any other hooligan or thug roaming the streets, but there seemed to be a softer side to him. And Dante would be thankful for it for the rest of his days.

"You all got any work down in that club of yours?" Big John asked.

Dante frowned. "I might. Why? Are you looking for a job?"

Big John chuckled. "No, I wouldn't do good off the streets no how but I got me this boy." Big John shook his head. "He's a good boy; don't belong in this way of life. He goes to school during the day and works down at the local eatery nights but the place done closed last week. Think you might have something for him?"

Dante understood where the man came from. They were two of a kind, really, working to protect what was theirs. "How old is your son?"

"He's going to be twenty-three in a couple of weeks, almost done with school too." Big John looked pensive. "He's a good boy, never got involved in the street life the way I did. I'd like to keep it that way."

"If he can stay away from the street like you said then I'll find him a job."

"He's got to stay in school," Big John warned. "It's the only way he's going to make anything of himself."

"I'm sure we can work around his schedule. You just send him down to see me and I'll see what I can do."

"I'd be real thankful," Big John said. "Now this guy that took the runt, what'd he look like? Maybe me and the boys can help you all out with that."

Dante grinned. He had no doubt Big John and his boys could help. They probably knew the neighborhood better than anyone, even the police. "I need to get Daniel home where he'll be safe, but if you could help Jack . . . er . . . Officer McLarren out, that would be great. Daniel handcuffed this guy to a pipe after knocking him out but we still need to find him."

"The runt done knocked him out?" Big John laughed but Dante could see a glint of respect for Daniel growing in his eyes. "I sure would have liked to see that. I imagine it was quite the show."

Dante smiled down at the top of Daniel's bowed head. "I'm very proud of him but we still need to find the man who did this. Until he's behind bars, Daniel won't be safe. We don't even know why he kidnapped Daniel."

"I get you. You just tell us what you're looking for and we'll find it, won't we, boys?"

There were several nods and grunts of agreement. Dante couldn't believe he was looking to a bunch of street thugs to help him find whoever kidnapped Daniel but he wasn't about to turn down their help.

"Daniel, do you remember where this guy took you?" Dante asked.

"Just some warehouse down there," Daniel said, pointing down the street past the squad car. "It was really old and dirty. I don't think it's been used in awhile."

Several of the men snickered.

"There's a lot of that around here, runt," Big John said. "This neighborhood has been going to pot for years."

Chapter Seven

Daniel snuggled into the blanket Dante placed around him and settled back into the corner of the couch. He gently blew on the cup of hot chocolate in his hands and waited for it to cool down enough to drink. The last day had been crazy.

Dante called Logan and Joey to let them know they were okay then rushed Daniel back to the loft. Daniel was then given a hot shower, dressed in clean pajamas, and fed. Now, he sat curled on the couch in front of a roaring fire.

"How are you feeling, poppet?"

Daniel tilted his head back to glance up at Dante. A feeling of excitement he hadn't felt in months tingled down Daniel's spine at the feel of Dante's hand on his shoulder. "I'm okay."

"Warm enough?"

"Yes, Dante, I'm warm enough." Daniel nearly rolled his eyes but he knew Dante just wanted to take care of him. He meant well. For that reason alone, Daniel ignored the overbearing way Dante tried to take over his life.

Amazing how much could change in such a short period of time. Twenty-four hours ago he thought he'd never see Dante again. But with the way Dante hovered over him now, Daniel felt pretty sure he wouldn't be able to pry the man away with a crowbar.

He liked the attention; who wouldn't? Dante was a gorgeous man. But he still didn't know what he wanted from him or if he could give it.

Dante walked around the couch and sat opposite Daniel. He leaned back in the apex of the corner, one leg bent at the knee and lying on the couch, the other stretched out alongside.

"Come sit with me." Dante gestured for Daniel to come closer.

Daniel hesitated for about two seconds before he scooted across the couch to sit next to Dante. Daniel's breath quickened as Dante lifted him and cradled him in his lap, wrapping him in his arms.

Dante rubbed Daniel's back over the top of the blanket and gently stroked his hair. Daniel slowly lowered his head until it rested on Dante's shoulder.

"You've had quite the day, haven't you, poppet?" Dante whispered against the top of Daniel's head.

Daniel squeezed his eyes closed and nodded. He couldn't quite remember ever having a day like this. Granted, it started out horrible but it looked to be ending well. Still, Daniel couldn't help but be anxious. There were still several hours left in the day. Anything could happen.

"Any of it you want to talk about?"

Daniel studied his hands. "How's your head?"

"I won't lie to you, it hurts, but it's nothing I can't handle. I took something for it a little while ago so the pain should lessen soon."

Daniel raised his eyes to find Dante watching him intently. "I am sorry," Daniel whispered. "I never meant to hurt you, not really. I wouldn't do that."

For an instant, a wistfulness stole into Dante's expression. "Oh, Daniel, I know that," he said in an odd yet gentle tone. "You were just trying to get my attention. I never worried that you were trying to hurt me."

Daniel looked back down at his hands, fidgeting with his fingers. "Why do you always call me poppet? It's an English word, isn't it? I thought you were Italian."

Dante chuckled lightly. "That might take awhile to explain."

"I don't think I'm going anywhere anytime soon."

Dante sighed. "Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"Yes."

"My mother was English, my father Italian. He raised me after my mother died when I was a young child. He was a drinker, and he was never around, even when he stood in the same room with me. He treated me like an afterthought."

Daniel's hand moved of its own volition from his lap to cover Dante's lightly. He didn't pat or squeeze, just rested it there. The simple gesture seemed to be enough. Dante took a deep breath then continued speaking.

"I spent my growing up years in Italy with my father but I would stay summers with my grandmother in England. That was the only time I felt truly happy. My grandmother lavished me with love and attention. Mind you, she was strict, but I always knew she loved me and accepted me just the way I was."

"So what does that have to do with you calling me poppet?"

"She called me poppet."

Dante said the words so simply, as if they explained everything. Daniel turned and stared up at him in confusion. "And?" he prompted when Dante remained silent.

Dante pushed a stray tendril of hair away from Daniel's face. "I call you poppet because even though I will be strict with you I will also give you all of my love and attention and accept you just the way you are."

"But what if 'just the way I am' isn't what you want?" Daniel whispered. "What if I can't ever be your sub again?"

"Daniel, you will always be my sub and I will always be your Dom," Dante replied. "That is a given. How the dynamics of that work is up to us."

"What if I can't . . . can't . . . do things?"

"You're sitting in my lap, aren't you, in my arms?" Dante smiled. "I'll bet you didn't expect to be here twenty-four hours ago."

Daniel laughed. "No."

"Given another twenty-four hours, I'll bet you will have done more that you never expected."

"How can you know?"

Dante seemed so assured. True, Daniel never expected to be sitting here in Dante's lap but that didn't mean things could go back to the way they were. What if that part of his life was over for good? Would that be such a bad thing? The things he wanted in the past caused him nothing but trouble.

"Let's try a little experiment, okay?"

Daniel's heart pounded a little faster. "O-okay."

"Let's lose the blanket, okay?" Dante asked.

Daniel dropped the blanket from around his shoulders then pushed himself up to a standing position. He stepped over between Dante's legs and sat down again. He held his body stiffly, afraid to touch Dante, frightened he'd take it as an invitation for more than Daniel could give.

"Now lean back against me."

Dante applied gentle pressure to Daniel's shoulders until he leaned back. He clenched his jaw and stared straight ahead, not sure what Dante meant to prove with this little act of his.

"Relax, poppet."

Daniel took a deep breath then let his body settled back against Dante's chest as he let it out. He shuddered, the feel of Dante's hard muscles behind him almost more than he could handle. He remembered how it felt to be held against Dante, how much pleasure he received from such simple contact.

Dante rubbed his hands up and down Daniel's arms. "Are you cold?"

Daniel shrugged.

"That's not an answer, Daniel." Dante's voice sounded firmer, more like he used in his dominant role. "Remember what I told you all those months ago? I require verbal communication, not a shrug."

"I'm not cold exactly, just—"

"I'm not going to do anything you don't want me to do. Just remember your safe word. Red, remember? If you want me to stop, use it and I'll stop."

"Okay."

Daniel stiffened when Dante began rubbing his hands up his arms to his shoulders, then down over his collarbone. Dante's warm breath fanned over his cheek and the side of his neck.

"Shh, poppet," Dante said softly. "I want you to get used to the feel of my hands again. It's been way too long since I've been able to touch you just for the simple pleasure of touching you."

"Whose damn fault is that?" Daniel snapped. His eyes went wide and he reached up to cover his mouth, realizing what he'd said, and how he'd said it. No Dom would ever allow a sub to speak them in such a manner, not without repercussions.

"You're right, Daniel, it *is* my fault," Dante said sadly. "I should have claimed you before I left."

"You shouldn't have left," Daniel grumbled.

"No, I shouldn't have, but I did." Dante's voice trembled, as though some emotion touched him. "And bad things happened when I left. I have to live with that for the rest of my life."

"You?" Daniel asked incredulously.

"Yes, Daniel, me," Dante replied. "If I just took the time to claim you as I wanted to before I left, to move you in here, then maybe none of this would have happened. I thought I would only be gone a couple of weeks at most. I thought I would be coming right back to you and I wanted to claim you the right way. I wanted you to have all the fanfare you deserved. So, I waited."

"That was stupid."

Dante chuckled. "Hindsight, Daniel, hindsight."

Daniel's lower lip popped out as he frowned and he looked down at his hands again. "It was still stupid."

"And someday I'll ask your forgiveness for that but not today."

"Why would you ask my forgiveness?" Daniel asked. "You didn't do this to me."

“Didn’t I?” Dante tilted Daniel’s chin, forcing him to make eye contact. “If I claimed you as I wished would you have ever agreed to participate in a scene with that man?”

“No, but —”

“Why not?”

“You would never have allowed it.”

“What if I ordered you to participate? Would you have done it then?”

“If you told me to, yes, but you would have been there to make sure nothing happened to me, that he respected my saf —” Daniel’s voice broke he looked away.

“Finish saying it, Daniel,” Dante encouraged. “I would have made sure he respected your what?”

“My safe word,” Daniel whispered. He clenched his jaw to try and still the sob in his throat. “You would have made sure he respected my safe word and never hurt me.”

“So, if I claimed you as I wanted to, you never would have participated in a scene. If I had been here and told you to participate, you would have, but I would have been here to protect you. But, because I didn’t — and I wasn’t — you got hurt.”

Daniel felt Dante’s hands tighten on him for a brief moment before they went back to rubbing.

“Now do you see why I have to ask your forgiveness?” Dante whispered into Daniel’s hair.

Daniel turned sideways and drew his legs up until he lay curled in Dante’s lap. He wrapped one hand around Dante’s waist and laid the other on his chest. He rested his head directly over Dante’s heart.

“So what now?”

“Now you learn to be my sub again.”

“And if I can’t?” Daniel asked, voicing one of his greatest worries. Would Dante want him still if he couldn’t do the things he did before? Or would he leave again? Daniel didn’t know if he could survive Dante leaving again.

“Remember what I said? The dynamics of our relationship are up to us.”

“But what if I can’t do any of that again?”

“You will because you want to please me and you please me by doing what I tell you to do.” Dante gripped Daniel’s hair and gently pulled his head back. “And you also please me by being the little spitfire I know you can be, the one who needs to be punished on a frequent basis.”

Daniel shuddered. He could feel Dante’s cock through his pants, growing harder under Daniel’s ass. Part of Daniel feared Dante’s arousal, but a part of him grew excited, as well, and that terrified him even more.

“Dante, I can’t –”

“Shh, poppet,” Daniel murmured. “The only thing you need to do right now is feel my touch and remember to use your safe word if you need it. Okay?”

Daniel hesitated for a moment then nodded.

“Good boy,” Dante said. “Now, turn around like you were before, lying back against me. If you get cold, let me know and we’ll cover you up with the blanket.”

Daniel lowered his legs back to the floor and slid around until his back once again rested against Dante’s chest. His heart seemed to beat a million miles a minute. What now? What would Dante do? Daniel clenched his hands into fists at his sides and waited.

Dante touched him, lightly at first. His fingers glided gently over his shoulders and collarbone, and along the soft curve of his neck. Then they slowly moved down his chest, popping the buttons on his pajama top one at a time until Dante could separate the silky green fabric.

A tingling started in the pit of Daniel’s stomach as Dante touched his naked chest. He could feel Dante’s uneven breathing on his cheek as he held him close. Gently, Dante used his fingertips and outlined the circle of Daniel’s nipples, first one then the other.

With a light and painfully teasing touch, Dante moved his hands farther down Daniel’s chest. Daniel’s breath hitched in his throat, the gentle massage sending currents of desire racing through him.

He licked his dry lips as his body hummed with excitement. He never thought he'd feel desire again. "Dante," Daniel groaned. The touch of Dante's hand grew suddenly unbearable in its tenderness.

"I've got you, poppet," Dante crooned softly. "Just let me take care of you."

Daniel nodded, not sure if he was agreeing with what Dante said or with what he *did* but he knew he didn't want the intense pleasure to stop. The chills racing through his body and making his toes tingle was something Daniel hadn't felt in six months, not since the last time Dante touched him.

But as Dante inched his hands toward the waistband of Daniel's pajama bottoms, Daniel suddenly tensed. The last hand that touched him intimately did so with the intent to hurt and cause pain.

"Dante," Daniel whimpered. His body stiffened, his legs going straight as he tried to lift himself away from Dante's soft touch.

"Remember your safe word, Daniel," Dante said. "Use it if you need me to stop."

"I-I don't—" Daniel stammered.

"Do you want me to stop, Daniel?"

Daniel agonized over that question for several moments. Fear overwhelmed him but did it mean he wanted Dante to stop touching him?

"Will you trust me to give you pleasure, Daniel?" Dante asked. His fingers feathered across Daniel's abdomen. "I ask for nothing in return but you trusting me enough to give you what you need."

Daniel finally nodded, his body still held stiff. As Dante's hands moved under the waistband of his pajamas, pushing them down until his hard cock and balls were exposed, Daniel relaxed back against the man.

His breath moved rapidly in and out of his chest and he closed his eyes in confusion. He wanted Dante's touch so much, ached for it. And he was scared that he needed it so much. After everything that had happened, he shouldn't. Should he?

Then finally, suddenly, Dante's fingertips brushed the head of Daniel's cock. The touch was so gentle, so feathery light, Daniel almost missed it, until it happened again

then again. When Dante finally wrapped his hand around Daniel's aching shaft and lightly gripped him, Daniel couldn't hold back any longer. He arched up, driving his cock farther into Dante's hand as pleasure exploded through him.

"Dante!" Daniel cried out. His fingers dug into the hard muscles of Dante's thighs, his eyes rolled back in his head. Ropes of pearly white seed splashed over his abdomen and Dante's hand.

Dante continued to stroke Daniel's cock until he milked every last drop from him. Daniel lay there panting, shocked beyond belief. He'd actually allowed another man to jack him off. And he'd enjoyed it!

"My beautiful poppet," Dante whispered.

Daniel opened his eyes and tilted his head back to look up at Dante. He could feel the man's hard cock beneath his ass and knew he hadn't found release. Suddenly, Daniel feared Dante would want more than he could give.

He shivered and pulled away, but Dante dragged him back into his embrace. "Talk to me, Daniel. What's going through your mind right now?"

"Don't you . . . you haven't—"

"No, I haven't, and that's okay," Dante replied. His voice sounded low and husky and terribly aroused. "I don't need to. Just knowing I brought you pleasure is more than enough for me."

"But—"

"No buts," Dante said. "All I want from you in return is a kiss given freely. Can you give me that?"

"A kiss?" Daniel asked, stunned. "That's all you want?"

"There is *a lot* I want, poppet, but that is all I am asking for." Dante's eyes brimmed with tenderness and controlled passion but a strength shined in them that told Daniel Dante would respect his choice.

Parting his lips, Daniel raised up to meet Dante's kiss, giving him freely what he denied everyone else. It started out slow and thoughtful, with Dante's lips moving gently over Daniel's, but when Daniel reached up and cupped the side of Dante's face,

the kiss transformed into something more. Dante's mouth suddenly covered Daniel's hungrily, his lips hard and searching, demanding.

Dante's hand clenched in the material of his shirt. The cock beneath his ass jumped and jerked, fighting the confines of Dante's pants. Panic assailed Daniel and he began to struggle, pushing at Dante's arms.

"Red!" Daniel cried as he pushed at Dante's chest. His heart pounded, but Dante released him immediately and he was able to scramble back. Daniel grabbed the blanket and scooted to his side of the couch.

He suddenly felt naked and exposed. His shirt lay open, his pants down around his thighs. Grabbing the pajama bottoms, he pulled them back up then gathered the edges of the shirt together with trembling fingers before covering himself with the blanket.

Dante rubbed his face with his hands through the fall of his hair. Daniel waited. He'd used his safe word. Would Dante accept it or would he violate the safeguard as the last man did?

Dante dropped his hands in his lap and took several deep breaths. Daniel tensed, leaning back against the edge of the couch when Dante moved to kneel on the floor beside him.

Dante's mouth spread into a thin-lipped grimace that held a faint touch of sadness. His emerald eyes seemed duller, filled with pain. Daniel started to jerk his hands away when Dante reached for them but the heartache in the man's face made him hesitate.

"I apologize, Daniel," he said, his voice low and rough with anxiety. "I asked for a kiss freely given and when you offered me that, I tried to take more. You had every right to use your safe word and I'll remember next time not to take more than you give."

Daniel's eyes widened in stunned amazement. "You're not — you're not angry that I used my safe word?"

"No, poppet," Dante whispered, his tense features softening. "I told you I would respect your safe word and I will. You will always use it if you feel you need to, no matter what the situation is."

"Even if it's just a kiss?"

"Even if it's just a kiss," Dante assured him.

Dante looked so sad, so angry at himself, that Daniel felt bad for using his safe word. It had been just a kiss, after all. It wasn't like Dante tried to have sex with him or anything. He hadn't used force. He'd just gotten carried away a little bit.

"It wasn't that bad," Daniel whispered. "I just got scared there toward the end." He shrugged. "I didn't mind it, really."

Dante chuckled lightly. "I give you my permission to kiss me whenever you feel the need, poppet."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Dante grinned. "Now, how about we get you upstairs, get you cleaned up, and tucked into bed? I'm sure you could use some rest after today's adventure."

Daniel did suddenly feel very tired, the events of the past twenty-four hours finally taking their toll on him. He covered his mouth as a yawn tried to escape, flushing when Dante chuckled.

"I guess I *am* tired."

"And rightly so." Dante stood and reached down to pick Daniel up in his arms, blanket and all.

Daniel hesitated for a moment then wrapped his arms around Dante's neck and snuggled in against him. Somehow, the man didn't seem as frightening as he did moments ago. Maybe it was Dante's words; maybe it was that Daniel realized he wasn't in any true danger. And maybe it was because he was exactly where he'd wanted to be for the last six months . . . in Dante's arms.

Chapter Eight

“So, any news on the asshole who kidnapped you?” Joey asked as he picked a slice of orange out of his drink and stuck it in his mouth.

“Naw,” Daniel replied. “He was gone by the time they found the warehouse, the squad car too. They dusted for fingerprints but there were so many they’re still sifting through them all.”

“Do you think they’re going to catch him?”

Daniel shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe. Dante won’t let me go anywhere by myself until they do but—”

Joey snorted. “And he shouldn’t. That guy stole a police car and impersonated an officer to get to you. I’d say he’s just a little more than psychotic.”

“I suppose you’re right but it doesn’t mean I have to like it. I feel like a prisoner in my own home. Dante tries to keep me entertained but he has to work at night and it gets a little boring sometimes.”

“And how are things going with you and Dante?”

Daniel shrugged again as he stared down at his hands. “Okay, I guess.”

“You don’t sound very sure.”

“Truthfully, I’m not.” Daniel chuckled. “Physically, I’m all but healed, just the occasional twinge now and then. Even the marks on my back have faded.”

“And emotionally? Mentally?”

Daniel leaned back in his chair and fit his fingers together. “I guess I’m doing better.”

“But?”

“You remember when I told you about what happened a couple of weeks ago when Dante jerked me off and kissed me? How I used my safe word?”

“Yeah.”

Daniel’s fingers tightened until his knuckles turned white. “He hasn’t touched me since. I know he’s been aroused several times since then. Hell, the man’s endowed enough you can see the bulge in his pants from fifty paces. But he hasn’t made a move toward me. He hasn’t even tried to kiss me again.”

"Do you want him to?"

Daniel frowned. "I guess."

"You guess?" Joey laughed. "Danny, this isn't rocket science. Either you want him to touch you or you don't."

"Yes, okay?" Daniel snapped. "After that time when he – well, I thought he might want to, you know" Daniel shrugged, his voice going low even as his gaze dropped down to his hands. "But he hasn't."

A thought crossed his mind and he looked up. "He said he wasn't, but do you think he was mad because I used my safe word?"

"I think if he said he wasn't mad then he wasn't mad, Danny," Joey said, taking Daniel's hand. "But I also think he doesn't want to push you. He's carrying around a lot of guilt over what happened to you, and with the guy that kidnapped you still on the loose, Dante's got to be stressed out."

"He hasn't even tried to kiss me again. Hell, we sleep in the same bed every night and he never touches me."

"So? Who says he has to be the one doing all the kissing?" Joey asked. "If you want a kiss, go get one."

"But he's the Dom, Joey. He dictates what happens."

"Danny, your relationship with Dante goes a lot deeper than just Dom and sub; surely you know that?" Joey waved his hand absently in the air. "Besides, how is he supposed to know you want more from him if you don't tell him? The last he knew, he tried to get a kiss from you and you used your safe word. Maybe he thinks you don't want anything to do with him."

"It's not that, exactly," Daniel said. "It all got so overwhelming, you know? The last time someone touched me it hurt a lot and then Dante did what he did and –"

"And you got scared," Joey finished for him.

Daniel nodded.

"And I think that is perfectly acceptable, even expected." Joey squeezed Daniel's hand. "What you have to decide now is exactly what you want from Dante."

"That's just it," Daniel said. He pulled his hand from Joey and rested his fists on the table. "I don't know what I want from him."

"But you do want him?"

Daniel laughed. His face flushed. "Yeah, I want him."

"Then I say go get him." Joey grinned and took a sip of his drink. "You originally attracted his attention by cursing. I'd say it was time to kick in with the potty mouth."

Daniel's eyes widened even as he grinned. "You think?"

"Either that, or run around the place naked." Joey shrugged. "Either is sure to get his attention."

"What if I get Dante's attention but he wants to take it farther than I think I can handle?"

"You have the power here, Danny. You tell Dante how far you want to go. Work up to things if you need to. Start out small, a kiss maybe, or a cuddle. Then go from there. You never know what you're going to be able to handle until you try."

"I suppose."

"Danny, you're going to have to show Dante what you want because I don't think he's going to pursue you outright until you demand that he do so. He needs to know you have your head screwed on straight."

Daniel knew Joey was correct. He just wasn't sure how to go about it. Six months ago, yeah, he would have misbehaved to get what he wanted. Now, however, the rules of the game had changed and Daniel wasn't sure he knew what they were.

He wanted Dante. He had no doubts about that. Ever since the night they kissed and Dante touched him, Daniel waited for the man to make a move, to give him some sign their relationship would be more than just that of roommates.

"What is this?" Joey asked, lifting his glass to take another sip. "It's pretty good."

"It's an iced fruit drink that Dante makes for me, supposed to be good for me or something."

Joey's eyes twinkled. "It would taste better with vodka."

* * * * *

An hour later, Joey and Daniel were sitting on the floor in front of the fireplace, laughing hysterically, when Dante and Logan walked into the room.

"Well, it looks like you two are having a grand old time," Logan said.

Joey reached over and grabbed the empty juice pitcher that lay on the floor between him and Daniel. "This stuff is the bomb, Dante."

Dante frowned. He leaned down, picked up the empty bottle of vodka and held it aloft. He looked from Joey to Daniel. "Did the two of you finish off this entire bottle?"

Daniel leaned forward and peered at the bottle. "We did?"

Dante turned the bottle upside down. Not a drop came out. "I'd say so."

Daniel couldn't help but giggle at the astonished look on Dante's face. Daniel hadn't been sure about drinking it when Joey made the suggestion but he was feeling a lot less anxious now.

In fact, he felt *emboldened*. He got to his feet, wobbled a little, then walked over to Dante. He wrapped his hands in the smooth silk of Dante's white dress shirt then leaned up toward him.

"I was bad," Daniel murmured as he watched Dante through the curtain of his hair. "Maybe you should take me to the bedroom and punish me."

Dante's jaw dropped.

Daniel started plucking at the buttons of Dante's shirt, popping them open one at a time. "Then you could fuck me," he suggested.

"Daniel!"

Daniel covered his mouth, giving Dante a surprised look. "Oh, I cursed." He smirked as he went back to the buttons on Dante's shirt. "Well, you're going to have to punish me now."

"Daniel, that's enough."

Daniel felt a rush of joy. Finally, he had Dante's unwavering attention. They would go to their bedroom, fool around a little and find out where his boundaries were, maybe work on pushing them a little.

Daniel stroked his hand over the warm, glorious skin revealed by the parting of Dante's shirt. "Do you think you can show me the error of my ways, Dante?" Daniel pouted.

"Daniel, stop," Dante barked as he grabbed Daniel by the wrist. "That's enough."

Daniel frowned and shook his head. Dante sounded angry, not aroused. But that had to be wrong. He knew Dante wanted him, that he'd only been waiting for him to get his head screwed on straight. Joey said so.

Knowing he must have misheard the tension in Dante's voice, Daniel pressed his body closer to Dante. "Don't you want punish me?"

"Stop, Daniel!"

"Dante—"

Dante gripped Daniel's wrists hard and gave him a little shake as he pushed him back. "Red, Daniel, red."

Daniel's head snapped up at Dante's use of their shared safe word. He could see the deep desperation in Dante's emerald eyes and a cold dread filled him. Joey had been wrong. Dante didn't want him.

He hadn't stayed away because he wanted to give Daniel time. Dante stayed away because he no longer wanted him. Daniel stepped back and pulled his hands from Dante's grasp. He absently rubbed his wrists as he glanced around the room, not because they hurt but because he didn't know what else to do.

His thoughts seemed fragmented, bouncing so fast from one to another and only settling on one thing. *I need to go.* He wouldn't stay where he wasn't wanted. Joey, Logan and Dante all stood silently, as if too embarrassed to say a word. Not one of them met his gaze.

"I'm . . . uh . . . I'm going to go take a shower," Daniel said quietly. He turned and walked to the room he'd shared with Dante for the last couple of weeks. He could

hear arguing as he closed the door behind him but he couldn't seem to bring himself to care.

He felt like he moved in slow motion as he grabbed his backpack out of the closet and shoved several changes of clothes inside. He grabbed his jacket and pulled on a pair of shoes.

As if on automatic pilot, he walked back to the dresser, opened the small wooden box Dante gave him to keep his most precious possessions in, and pulled out a small red jewelry box. He flipped the top open and pulled out the ring his grandmother gave him. It broke his heart to even contemplate selling it but he'd need some money to live on . . . wherever he ended up living.

He pushed the ring into his pocket and pulled on his jacket. With one last look around the room he had hoped to spend the rest of his life in, he opened the bedroom door and walked out. He headed through the kitchen toward the front door in order to avoid the living room where he could still hear people arguing. He didn't stop to listen, couldn't bring himself to care anymore. He didn't care about anything.

* * * * *

"You stupid son-of-a-bitch!"

"Joey!" Logan exclaimed.

"Oh please, you were thinking the same damn thing," Joey snapped.

Dante felt the full brunt of Joey's anger when he turned to look at him.

"Do you have any idea how long it took me to convince Danny to act on the desire he has for you? His agitation was so bad I had to get him a drink just to calm his nerves," Joey added.

"Which is exactly why I said no," Dante replied. "Daniel was drunk. He didn't know what he was doing."

"He wasn't drunk. He had a single drink."

"You went through an entire bottle of vodka."

"No, your palm tree went through an entire bottle of vodka," Joey said. He stepped over and tugged on a long green leaf of the potted palm plant that sat next to the fireplace. "Danny only had one mixed drink because he needed the courage to be able to approach you. But I only added alcohol to his first glass."

"What are you saying, Joey?"

"What part of this don't you understand?" Joey snapped. "Danny has been waiting for you to make a move on him since you kissed him a couple of weeks ago. I convinced him he needed to make the first move, that you were just waiting for him to say something. That's twice now that you've rejected him, Dante. I seriously don't know if you're going to get another chance."

Dante swallowed past the lump in his throat. "What do you mean?"

"Do you know how hard I had to work to convince Danny to make a play for you? He was totally convinced that you set down the rules and if you wanted him you would have made a move on him. I convinced him differently and then you had to go and blow it."

"So, I'm just supposed to ignore everything that happened to him and take him to the bedroom, paddle his ass, then fuck him?"

"Yes!" Joey exclaimed.

Dante flung his hands up in the air on a rush of despair. "The last time I tried anything with Daniel he safe-worded."

"Good."

"Good?"

"Yes, that means Danny trusted you enough to stop when he asked." Joey frowned. "You did stop, didn't you?"

"Of course."

Joey threw his hands up in the air. "Well, there you have it."

"Have what?"

"He's trusting you with himself," Joey said, "trusting you to take care of him and not hurt him. This was the first time since he was attacked that he let himself act on the feelings he has for you."

Dante slumped onto the couch, cradling his head in his trembling hands. "And I turned him down."

"Yep," Joey said simply.

"He's never going to trust me again."

"Nope."

Dante lifted his head and glared over at Joey. "You're not helping here."

"Why should I? I've already tried to help you twice, once by introducing you to Danny then again by talking him into making a play for you. You fucked up both times. I don't know if you deserve my help anymore. Maybe Danny is better off without you."

"I love him, Joey."

"Prove it," Joey challenged, crossing his arms over his chest.

"How?"

"Go in there," Joey said as he pointed toward the bedroom, "and show Danny that you want him. Dominate him, punish him, fuck him into the mattress. Give him what he wants and trust him to know when to use his safe word just as he's trusted you enough to respect when he uses it."

Dante bowed his head and murmured, "What if he doesn't forgive me?"

"Then you have your work cut out for you."

Dante nodded gloomily. He deserved everything Daniel tossed in his direction, every angry word. He just hoped he could get Daniel to talk to him long enough to work things out between them.

Dante climbed to his feet and headed toward the bedroom. He paused outside the door and took a deep breath, flexing his fingers to get the tension out of them before knocking lightly and then opening the door.

"Daniel?" Dante said softly as he stepped into the room. "Poppet?"

He frowned in confusion when he found the room empty, drawers on the dresser pulled open, the closet door ajar. But the red jewelry box on top of the dresser drew Dante's interest the most. He walked over and picked it up, cradling the small, empty box in his hand.

"Oh, Daniel, what have you done now?"

* * * * *

The pawn broker had offered Daniel all of three hundred dollars for his grandmother's antique diamond ring. Daniel kept a hundred for food and bought a bus ticket with the remaining two hundred dollars.

The corner of his mouth lifted a little as he remembered the astonished look on the ticket agent's face when he asked how far two hundred dollars would get him on the next bus out of town. He lucked out. Two hundred dollars would get him nearly halfway across the country.

His trip would end in some small town. Daniel couldn't even remember the name but at this point, he didn't care. It was away from here. He sat down in one of the hard plastic chairs in the bus terminal and glanced at his wristwatch. Forty-five minutes to wait.

He still couldn't believe how stupid he'd been to say what he did to Dante. He certainly couldn't blame it on the alcohol. He hadn't felt that drunk. Only a blaring headache remained to remind him he'd drank at all. But of course, he could also attribute the pounding in his temples to trying to hold his tears back.

He longed to curl up somewhere and cry his eyes out. He just couldn't see himself doing that in a bus terminal, and the public restroom didn't look much better. Maybe once he got on the bus

"Daniel, isn't it?"

Daniel jerked, jumping back from the shadow that fell over him until he recognized Officer Jack McLarren, but just barely. The man wore regular street clothes

this time, not his uniform. He slowly let out the breath that had caught in his throat and nodded.

"Hello, Officer."

"Please, call me Jack." The officer sat beside Daniel and indicated the terminal with a wave of his hand. "What are you doing here? I thought you'd be with Dante."

"Yeah, me too, but I guess things change."

"Where are you headed?"

Daniel shrugged. "Don't know, wherever isn't here."

Jack rested his elbows on his knees and leaned forward. "That doesn't sound very fun. Do you want to talk about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about." Daniel looked away from the officer's inquisitive eyes and down at his shoes. "I made a mistake, that's all."

"A mistake?" Jack asked. "And it's bad enough for you to leave town?"

"I can't stay here."

"What about your friends? Can't you stay with them?"

"No." Daniel shook his head. "I know they only want to help but in this case there's nothing they can do. It's better if I leave."

"What about the guy that kidnapped you? What if we catch him? Will you come back to testify?"

"I guess."

"So, how am I supposed to get in contact with you if you leave?"

"I guess I could call in every couple of weeks or something."

"Daniel —"

"I can't stay, Jack. I'm not wanted here. Dante is just taking care of me because he feels guilty."

"I think you're wrong there, Daniel," Jack said. "You didn't see how upset he was when you went missing. I did. I thought he would lose his mind. That man cares about you more than he does breathing."

Daniel wanted to believe that, he really did, but all the evidence said otherwise. Dante took good care of him, made sure he ate well, that all of his medical needs were met. He even kept Daniel safe, everything one friend would do for another.

But it was glaringly apparent to Daniel that Dante didn't want more from him than that. He'd either lost patience or lost interest, and either way, the end result was the same. Daniel was alone.

He knew he was damaged goods. In many ways, he was now a broken man. He wasn't even sure he could have gone through with the propositions he had given Dante but he'd wanted to try. Apparently, for Dante, it hadn't been enough.

Dante couldn't have made his lack of sexual interest in Daniel any clearer if he'd come right out and said he didn't want him. Thinking of that moment, when Dante rejected him, made Daniel cringe. He'd been so embarrassed he'd wished a hole would appear in the floor so he could sink through it.

"Daniel!"

Daniel's head snapped up at the sound of Dante calling out his name. His jaw dropped as he watched the man sprint across the bus terminal, Joey and Logan behind him. His face looked tense, pale, his hair in disarray.

Dante stopped right in front of Daniel, grabbing him by his arms and pulling him to his feet. Too stunned to protest, Daniel allowed Dante to pull him into his arms. Why was he here? Surely the man felt relieved that he'd left?

"Oh, poppet," Dante whispered. "You had me so worried."

Daniel had a hard time meeting Dante's eyes when the man leaned back and looked down at him, afraid of what he'd see in their green depths. He didn't think he could take any more rejection.

Daniel frowned when Dante caressed his cheek and pressed his lips against his hair. Dante didn't act like a man who'd been glad to see the last of him.

"Dante—"

"I love you, Daniel."

What? Daniel tried to pull away. How dare Dante play with his emotions like this? He felt as if someone had punched him in the gut. Devastated, he turned his head to hide his tears.

"Please, poppet," Dante whispered. "I'm not lying. I love you."

Daniel stopped struggling and finally met Dante's eyes. "Then why –?"

Dante closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, Daniel could see the man's misery clearly reflected there. Dante's brows drew together. He opened and closed his mouth several times as if struggling to find the right words.

"Daniel, you were drinking," Dante finally said. "I thought you were . . ."

"You thought I was drunk?"

Dante nodded. "As much as I wanted to take you to our bedroom, I couldn't when I knew you'd been drinking. I needed to be sure you really wanted what you said, that you weren't saying those things just because you were drunk."

"And if I hadn't been drinking?" Daniel whispered.

Dante's face flushed. "Your ass would be rosy red right now."

Daniel felt a surprising tingle all the way down to his toes. "You say the nicest things, Dante."

Dante cupped the side of Daniel's face and bent to kiss him. Daniel leaned into Dante's hand, his heart racing.

"Did you mean what you said, Daniel?" Dante whispered. "Do you really want me to discipline you? To make love to you?"

"Did you mean what you said?" Daniel countered. "Do you really love me?"

"Yes, I most assuredly do."

"Then I meant it." Daniel frowned. He fingered the buttons on Dante's shirt. "I'm not sure how far I can go but I'd like to find out. Maybe we could work up to the bigger stuff?"

"I'd like nothing better." Dante stroked the curve of Daniel's cheek. "I promise we'll go as slow as you need to."

"Can we go home?"

"Yes, poppet, but first we need to stop by the pawn shop and get your grandmother's ring back."

"How'd you –?"

"How did I know you pawned your grandmother's ring?" Dante asked. "When Jack called me and said he spotted you at the bus station I knew you pawned the ring to buy a bus ticket."

"Oh."

"We also need to thank Jack for calling me." Dante looked past Daniel to where the police officer stood with Joey and Logan. "I think Jack is going to fit into our little family just fine."

"Is he gay?"

Dante laughed. "I have no idea."

Chapter Nine

Dante felt like he had butterflies in his stomach as he walked back into the flat with Daniel. His nerves were frayed. His whole world walked out the door when Daniel left. He needed to find a way to keep it from walking out again.

"Daniel, can I talk to you for a moment?"

Daniel stopped on his way to the bedroom and turned. He looked worried, his eyebrows drawn together, the corner of his lips lowered in a frown.

"Come here," Dante said, gesturing for Daniel to join him. "It's nothing bad, poppet. I just need to talk to you."

Daniel took a few hesitant steps then sped across the room into Dante's waiting arms. Dante took a moment to hug Daniel to him, savoring the feel of the smaller man in his arms, before he gently released him and led him into the living room. Dante took a seat on the couch and pulled Daniel down onto his lap.

"I need you to do something for me, Daniel."

"Anything."

Dante smiled at Daniel's instant response. "Thank you, Daniel, but you need to hear what I want before you agree to it."

"No I don't," Daniel said quickly. "You would never hurt me or make me do anything I didn't want to do."

Dante felt tears prick the corner of his eyes at Daniel's words. He never thought they would be this far into Daniel's healing this fast. He'd be lying if he said he didn't think it was a miracle and one for which he'd always be grateful.

"Thank you, poppet, it means a lot to me that you trust me." Dante leaned over and kissed the side of Daniel's head. "I guess that kind of goes into what I need from you. We're going to have issues, Daniel; any two people who live in the same space will. You can't run off every time we have a problem. That won't solve anything."

Daniel bowed his head. He seemed to be staring at his fingers as he twisted them together. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have left. I just couldn't think of anything else to do. I didn't think you—you wanted me anymore."

"I'll always want you, Daniel."

"You can't promise that," Daniel insisted.

"Yes, I can." Dante chuckled. "I knew from the moment you said your first curse word that you were the man for me. I've never met anyone like you. You have just the right amount of submissiveness and spitfire mixed together to make you perfect in my eyes."

Daniel tilted his head back. "My first curse word? Seriously?"

"Daniel, I like having a submissive. You know that. But I don't want a rug. I want someone who will make me work for what I want, someone who occasionally talks back to me. I want someone I can have a decent discussion with outside of a scene." Dante brushed the hair back from Daniel's eyes and smiled at him. "I want you."

"Okay." Daniel's pale green eyes twinkled. The corner of his eyes crinkled as he smiled. Dante's heart rate increased as Daniel's hand trailed down his collarbone to the opening of his shirt. "Green, Dante."

Dante inhaled sharply, his cock going from flaccid to hard as a rock in a mere second. Daniel was giving him the go ahead on a very primal level. Dante wasn't stupid enough not to take him up on it. He lifted Daniel as he got to his feet then carried him into the bedroom.

Dante carefully watched Daniel's face for any sign of distress as he lowered him until his feet hit the floor. The serene glow on Daniel's face surprised him. He looked fine — perfectly relaxed — but Dante needed to be sure.

"Is this really what you want, Daniel?"

Daniel nodded. His eyes seemed glued to Dante's chest. "Like I said at the train station, I'm not sure how far I can go but I'd like to try, maybe work up to the bigger stuff." He glanced up. "But I know I don't want to try with anyone else."

That was good enough for Dante. He still knew he needed to move cautiously with Daniel. There were sure to be things he wasn't ready for yet, things, as Daniel had said, they'd need to work up to. Dante just had to figure out what they were.

He was hesitant to move too quickly, to frighten Daniel, but the man seemed to have no such reservations. Dante couldn't hold back his groan of need as Daniel's hands moved over his body, unbuttoning his shirt and pushing it from his shoulders. It seemed like forever since he'd felt Daniel's hands on his body.

Dante gazed down at Daniel, smiling at the lip caught between his teeth. He wondered if Daniel knew the power he held. Just one word and Dante would be all over the man. Just one word and Dante wouldn't touch him. Everything lay in Daniel's hands.

When Daniel seemed to hesitate as if he wasn't sure what to do next Dante decided to take control of the situation. He could only hope Daniel would remember his safe word if he needed to stop.

"I've let you get away with a lot in the last couple of weeks, Daniel, but that time has come to an end." Dante bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling when Daniel's eyes widened. "And leaving without permission is definitely on my list of unacceptable practices. You have a spanking coming, don't you?"

Daniel swallowed hard. His eyes closed for a moment. When they opened, Dante inhaled sharply at the lust shining in them. Daniel apparently wanted this as much as he did.

"Take your clothes off, fold them, and put them on that chair over there," Dante said, pointing to a rocker by the wall. "Then come back and stand before me."

Dante saw the soft flush fill Daniel's face, an indication he remembered those words being used once before. A small smile graced his lips as he took his clothes off and folded them, laying them over the chair in the corner. He quickly came back and stood before Dante, his hands folded together behind him.

Dante caressed the side of Daniel's face, trailing his hand down the man's neck and chest. "Very nice, poppet." He moved beyond Daniel and sat on the edge of the bed. "We need to address your disrespectful behavior before we can continue, Daniel. Come lie over my lap."

Dante held his breath as Daniel hesitated for a moment. He let it out slowly when Daniel did as he'd asked. Dante ran his hand over Daniel's back in an effort to calm and reassure him. He caressed lower, moving over Daniel's softly rounded ass cheeks then down to his thighs.

"You have a beautiful backside, Daniel."

"Thank you," Daniel whispered.

Dante settled his hand over Daniel's ass, wanting the man to get used to the feel of being touched so intimately. "What's your safe word, Daniel?"

"Red for stop, yellow for slow down, and green for go."

Dante smiled and stroked Daniel's cheeks. "Very good, Daniel. Now, I think we'll start out today with ten. If you handle this to my satisfaction then we'll move on to more tomorrow.

"Now, count, Daniel," Dante ordered as he brought his hand down across Daniel's rounded ass. "And no coming until I give you permission."

"One!"

Dante paused. "One what, Daniel?"

"One, m-ma – yellow, Dante!" Daniel cried out.

"Okay, okay, poppet, I have you," Dante said as he gathered Daniel's trembling body in his arms. He hugged Daniel close and stroked the hair back from his ashen face. "Tell me what's wrong."

"I can't – I can't –" Daniel stammered. "He made me call him mas –" Daniel shook his head frantically, tears glistening on his eyelashes. "I can't –"

"Shh, poppet," Dante murmured against Daniel's head. His heart ached for the anguish Daniel still suffered at the hands of some unidentified monster. "I understand and I won't require that you call me master. I will happily settle for sir if that will make you more comfortable."

Daniel's entire body shuddered then he sniffed a couple of times before raising his head to look up. "Sir."

Dante smiled, happiness filling his heart at Daniel's softly spoken word. "Sounds perfect, poppet." He patted Daniel's hip. "Now, assume the position. We still have your discipline to administer."

Daniel turned over so quickly, Dante almost dropped him. "Count, Daniel," he said, the moment Daniel's body settled. He brought his hand down on the man's pale ass cheek.

"One, sir!"

Dante watched Daniel's reaction carefully as he smacked his ass again, looking for any sign of discomfort, and not the achy spanking kind. He needed to know Daniel enjoyed what was happening as much as he did.

"Two, sir!"

When Daniel offered no protest, Dante continued swatting him. By the fourth smack, Daniel's ass started looking rosy. Dante massaged the red cheeks for a moment, enjoying the heat he felt beneath his hand, before smacking Daniel again.

"Five, sir!"

Dante paused, his hand in the air. "Still doing okay, Daniel?"

Daniel panted. "Green, sir."

Dante brought his hand down again, this time with a little more force. He felt Daniel wiggle, felt his hard cock press between his thighs. Dante pressed his legs together, trapping Daniel's cock between them, then smacked him again.

"Six, sir!"

"Just four more, Daniel."

"Yes, sir!"

By the time Dante delivered the eighth swat, Daniel was thrusting his hips with each smack. Normally he would require Daniel to be still for his spanking and he'd have to enforce that rule tomorrow but Dante decided he'd let it go this time.

"Nine, sir!"

Dante rubbed Daniel's red ass. He stroked one finger down between the warm cheeks, grazing his tight hole. Daniel groaned, pushing back against Dante's light touch.

"Last one, poppet," he said as he brought his hand down on Daniel's ass. The moment his hand met warm skin, Dante moved his fingers back down between Daniel's ass cheeks and pressed one into his tight hole.

Dante watched in shock as Daniel's head arched back and he cried out, his ass cheeks clenched around Dante's finger. A warm wetness spread over Dante's thighs as Daniel found his release.

Dante hadn't expected Daniel to climax from his first spanking but he shouldn't have been surprised. Daniel loved getting a spanking. He purposely got himself into trouble just to receive one. His climaxing now was a wonderful reward for both of them.

Dante grinned as Daniel shuddered. Then suddenly, Daniel's body stilled, a soft cry falling from his lips. "I'm sorry, sir," Daniel whispered, his head hanging low.

Dante frowned. He pulled Daniel up to sit on his lap, cradling the man to his chest. Daniel burrowed in, hiding his face in Dante's shirt. "There's nothing to be sorry for, Daniel."

"You—you said not to come until you said so."

Dante chuckled. He grabbed Daniel's chin and tilted his head back, looking down into soft, pale green eyes. "It was to be expected, Daniel. It's been a long time since I've disciplined you. I'm sure you've missed it as much as I have."

Daniel's face flushed a deep red. "I have."

"Then we will just have to make this a regular part of your daily routine, won't we?" Dante asked. "I think ten swats every morning will be a good way to start your day."

Daniel started to smile then frowned, confusion filling his face and making his eyebrows draw together. "Isn't a spanking supposed to be a punishment?"

"Not in your case, poppet." Dante chuckled. "You enjoy it too much."

Daniel's laughter filled the room and warmed Dante's heart. It had been a long time since he heard the sweet sound so freely given. Dante determined to do everything in his power to make Daniel laugh more often.

He picked Daniel up and turned, laying him down on the bed before stretching out beside him. He stroked Daniel's chest, then moved his hand lower, caressing his abdomen. "Now, don't we have some loving to get to?"

"Yes, sir." Daniel's voice sounded ragged, harsh. Dante glanced up to his face quickly, worried Daniel's fear had overtaken him. All he found were green eyes blazing with desire and need.

Dante looked down the length of Daniel's naked body, surprised at how aroused he felt just by looking at the man. Long, lean lines meshed with beautiful sculpted muscles and golden tanned skin.

"You are so gorgeous, Daniel," Dante whispered. "I love looking at you."

The soft flush that covered Daniel's body from head to toes made Dante laugh. Daniel could be so endearingly shy sometimes, a qualities Dante truly admired. While he liked having a good-looking man in his bed he didn't want someone who used their looks to get what they wanted.

Daniel seemed almost unaware of the power he held over Dante, and Dante planned to keep it that way. No doubt, if Daniel knew how much control he had, Dante

would find himself in a lot deeper shit than he was now. With very little effort, Daniel could wrap him around his little finger . . . and then where would they be?

Dante rolled to the side of the bed and stood. He gestured to his pants. "Undress me, poppet."

Daniel eagerly rolled over and crawled to the side of the bed, then sat down on the edge. His hands trembled as he reached for Dante's pants. He unbuttoned them, pushed them down and helped Dante step out of them.

Dante stood in front of Daniel, his hard cock jutting out from his body. He let his hands hang loosely at his sides as he waited for Daniel's next move. The man seemed to be staring at his cock like he wasn't sure what to do with it. Dante had a few ideas.

"You may touch me, poppet."

Daniel reached out tentatively. His caress felt so feathery light Dante clenched his fists and sucked in a breath at the sheer arousal that spiraled through his body. When Daniel applied a little more pressure, Dante couldn't hold back his groan. The pleasure he derived from Daniel's soft touch blew his mind.

Dante watched as Daniel leaned forward as if to take his cock into his mouth. His mouth opened then he paused and brought his lips together. He opened his mouth again and leaned forward a bit more then paused again. He looked uncertain, hesitant, and a little afraid.

Dante grabbed Daniel by the arms and lifted him up on the bed, taking the decision out of the man's hands. Obviously, Daniel wasn't up for oral sex yet, and that was fine with Dante. He knew of a lot of other things they could do together.

Dante climbed onto the bed and settled himself between Daniel's legs. He could feel Daniel's cock pressing against his abdomen. Daniel's hands trembled where he gripped Dante's shoulders.

Leaning up, Dante claimed Daniel's mouth in a searing kiss. He felt the moan that passed through Daniel's lips more than he heard it. He sensed the man's fear, but also his desire. They just needed to take things slowly.

"You're doing so well, poppet," Dante murmured against Daniel's lips. "I'm so proud of you."

"Yeah?"

Dante smiled. "Yeah, and I'm going to show you how much right now." Dante scooted down Daniel's body a little at a time. He kissed and licked and nibbled until he reached Daniel's cock. It stood proudly once more, twitching with each gentle touch Dante bestowed upon Daniel's body.

Dante leaned forward and licked the side of the hard shaft, enjoying Daniel's instant reaction. Daniel's thighs quivered and tensed. His hands clenched tightly in Dante's hair as he cried out.

"Dante, sir!"

Dante chuckled and pulled Daniel's fingers from his hair. He leaned over and grabbed a bottle of lube from the nightstand drawer before moving back to lie between Daniel's legs again. He quickly opened the small tube and lubed up his fingers before tossing the bottle onto the bed.

He didn't want to give Daniel time to think about things so he opened his mouth and swallowed Daniel's cock down to the root. Daniel thrust his hips into the air, a loud cry falling from his lips.

Dante loved on Daniel's cock, licking and sucking until he felt the man start to writhe uncontrollably. Dante slipped his fingers between Daniel's ass cheeks and pressed them against the tight circle of muscles there.

Daniel squirmed but not in the way Dante expected. Truthfully, he expected Daniel to pull away, maybe even protest. Instead, the man shocked Dante by separating his legs and pulling them up to his chest.

Dante groaned. *So fucking sexy.* He renewed his efforts. He wanted Daniel mindless with pleasure when he claimed him. He timed his movements on Daniel's cock with the slow thrust of his fingers into Daniel's ass.

Pre-cum leaked from Daniel's cock and his body sucked Dante's fingers right in as if they had been there a million times before. Little whimpers of need came from Daniel, spurring Dante on as he added another finger, stretching the man.

"Dante, sir," Daniel moaned, "please, I need – I need –"

Dante released Daniel's cock and looked up at his flushed face. He pressed another finger inside, slowly thrusting in and out until he felt Daniel could take him without any pain. He only wanted Daniel to feel passion when they came together.

Dante pulled his fingers free and grabbed the bottle of lube and a condom. He quickly rolled the condom down over his cock then poured a generous amount of lube over the condom. Lastly, he dripped more lube into the crease of Daniel's ass. Dante knelt between Daniel's legs, his cock nudging the man's tight hole.

"I'm going to take you now, Daniel, are you ready?" He had to be sure. He had to know he and Daniel were on the same page.

The passion shining in Daniel's eyes when he looked up at him burned into Dante, searing his skin and branding his heart forever. He'd remember that look for the rest of his life.

Dante looked down and watched his cock sink into Daniel's body until pelvis met ass cheeks. There weren't too many sights in the world that made Dante nearly come just by watching but this was one of them. He had to grip the base of his cock and take several deep breaths to keep from losing it right then.

Once he'd regained his self-control, Dante pushed into Daniel slowly then pulled out. He watched Daniel's face for any sign of distress as he repeated the motion several times. When none came, Dante increased the speed of his thrusts.

Dante's harsh breathing mirrored Daniel's little pants. Dante kept his gaze glued on Daniel's, his heart dancing with excitement at the knowledge he was bringing Daniel nothing but pleasure.

"So perfect," Dante whispered. He leaned down over Daniel's body and grabbed one leg, pulling it up farther as he continued to plunge into Daniel's sweet grasp. "So beautiful, my love."

"Dante."

"Come for me, poppet, show me how much you want me."

Daniel shook his head frantically. "How much I love you," Daniel said firmly, even as his body stiffened and wet warmth spread between their bodies.

Dante's heart seized and he froze. Exquisite pleasure radiated from his head to his toes. Before he knew what happened, his orgasm was ripped from his body and he bellowed his release.

He shuddered, falling down onto Daniel, lying still a moment before he raised himself up onto his elbows to relieve Daniel of his full weight. His body still spasmed, little jolts of delight shooting through him as Daniel's inner muscles continued to milk his cock for every last drop.

Finally, much to Dante disappointment, his cock slipped free. Dante raised his head to look down at his love, frowning in concern when he found tears trailing down the man's cheeks.

"Daniel?" he whispered, panicked. "Did I hurt you?" Had he been too rough? Too hard? Had he claimed Daniel before he was fully healed? "Poppet?" he asked when Daniel didn't reply right away.

Daniel's eyes seemed dazed, almost too big for his face, as he looked up at Dante. His mouth opened then closed like a fish out of water. Dante's concern continued to grow, turning into outright terror. And then suddenly Daniel smiled.

"I did it," he whispered, "and I didn't freak out."

Daniel looked so amazed, so proud of himself, Dante couldn't help but chuckle. "I'd like to think I had a little to do with it too."

Dante watched Daniel's eyes widen as he gaped. "I—no, I mean, you—"

"Relax, poppet, I know what you meant." Dante stroked Daniel's cheek. "So, I take it from your response that you're okay? No pain? Not too sore?"

Daniel grinned, his face turning bright red. "I'm good."

"I'm glad." Dante wiggled his hips. "Is this something you wish to try again then?"

"I might." Daniel laughed. It was good to hear. Then Daniel's face grew serious. "I didn't know if I could go through with it, Dante. I thought I might –"

"Freeze up? Have bad memories?"

Daniel nodded.

"Well, you didn't," Dante said. He reached down and ran his fingers through the cum splattered on Daniel's abdomen. He held his wet hand in front of Daniel. "And I'd say you enjoyed yourself just as much as I did."

"Maybe."

Dante chuckled and winked. "Do you wish to see what else you can do?"

Daniel flushed again. "Maybe."

Chapter Ten

"Well, you certainly seem chipper." Joey laughed as he sat on the sofa across from Daniel. "I take it things are going better than they were the last time we talked?"

"Much." Daniel giggled.

"Oh? So dish already."

"Well, we know the equipment still works," Daniel said, "and Dante still has an unimaginable effect on me. We've even moved on to some of the stuff we enjoyed before – well, before things went bad." Daniel fingered the edge of his cotton shirt. "There are still a few things I can't do but Dante seems to think it's just a matter of time."

Joey nodded. "The spankings?"

"Surprisingly, no," Daniel replied. "Dante gives me ten swats every morning."

"Seriously?" Joey asked, looking astonished. "You curse that much?"

"No, Dante just seems to think it's a good way to start off my day. He says he has to find another way to discipline me because I like spankings too much."

Joey's laughter filled the room. He bounced on the couch then lounged back into the cushions in the corner. "I can see that."

Daniel shrugged. "It's a thing."

Joey's eyebrows wiggled. "It's a good thing."

"True."

"So, what are your plans tonight?" Joey asked. "Logan said you two had something big going on and Dante wanted us here as moral support."

"I agreed to go downstairs with Dante."

"Downstairs?" Joey suddenly sat up and leaned toward Daniel. "You agreed to go downstairs into the bar?"

"I figure it's about time. I can't continue to hide up here forever." Daniel glanced down at his fingers for a moment, pressing them together. "Besides, Dante said he'd be there with me, and I'd have you and Logan there, as well."

Joey looked thoughtful, his lower lip caught between his teeth. "Are you sure, Daniel?"

"Fuck no!"

"Daniel!"

Daniel felt his face color when he heard Dante's admonishment from behind him. He tilted his head back to see the man standing directly behind him, his arms crossed over his chest and a glower on his face.

"Hey, Dante."

"What have I said about swearing?"

"Cursing is a sign of a lazy mind," Daniel mumbled. "It just slipped out, Dante, I swear."

"That does not excuse your behavior, Daniel, now into the bedroom with you."

Daniel hesitated for about two seconds before he high-tailed it into the bedroom. He knew from the small smirk he saw on Dante's face as he raced past him that he wasn't really angry with him.

He couldn't keep from bouncing the last few steps, especially when he heard the bedroom door shut behind him then felt strong hands grab his hips, holding him still. Warm breath brushed across his nape, making him shudder with unspent desire.

"You've been very bad, poppet," Dante whispered. "What should I do with you?"

Daniel smiled and leaned his head back against Dante's chest. "You could spank me."

"Ah now, I could but I do not believe that would teach you not to swear," Dante said. Daniel could hear the laughter in Dante's voice. "I don't think it would do anything but encourage you to swear some more."

Daniel whimpered in protest when Dante moved away from him.

"No," Dante said, "I need to find another punishment to keep you focused, keep your mind on why you're being disciplined."

Dante walked over to their toy cupboard and opened it. He glanced over his shoulder at Daniel. "Take off your clothes and lie over the side of the bed, Daniel."

Anticipation filled Daniel to the brim. His legs trembled so badly, he thanked his lucky stars he had to sit on the side of the bed to pull off his socks and shoes. He might have fallen down, otherwise.

Daniel took his clothes off and put them in a neatly folded stack next to him on the bed. He sprawled out on his stomach and waited, his cock growing harder by the minute. So intent was he on listening for Dante, Daniel jumped when he felt a hand touch his hip.

"Gentle, poppet," Dante said as he stroked Daniel's side. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Daniel laughed nervously. "I know. You just surprised me."

"Are you ready for me, poppet?"

Was he ready? Ready for what? "Uh, okay." Daniel shivered as Dante's hands spread his ass cheeks. It wasn't until he felt lube rubbed against his hole that he realized Dante's intention. He couldn't say he wasn't intrigued by the idea.

Daniel hadn't indulged in butt plugs since his attack. As the soft rubber pushed in and out of his ass, Daniel knew it was just one more thing Dante was giving back to him, helping him get past his fear, even if it was in the guise of a punishment.

Daniel squirmed as the plug finally slid in. Dante twisted it this way and that before finally seating it properly. Daniel yelped when Dante smacked his ass a couple of times directly where the plug was, shoving it in with each swat of his hand.

"There, that should do," Dante said. "We don't have to leave for the club for a couple of hours yet. You'll keep this in until it's time to change your clothes. That should help you focus on not swearing."

Daniel whimpered as he pushed himself off the bed. Each move made the plug shift inside him. The plug wasn't a huge one, actually rather slim compared to what he'd used in the past, but it had been so long since he had one in that Daniel felt every movement.

He stumbled over to stand between Dante's legs when the man grabbed him. He steadied himself by gripping Dante's shoulders then looked down at him. Dante's furrowed brow and thinned lips telegraphed his concern.

"Are you comfortable, poppet?"

Daniel smiled. *Forever taking care of me.* Dante's concern showed in everything the man did, from the careful diet he had Daniel on, to being careful and attentive to Daniel's moods every time they tried something new in the bedroom.

Daniel ran his hand down the side of Dante's face. "I'm good, sir." Daniel wanted to show Dante just how good he was, how loved and safe he felt. He dropped to his knees between Dante's legs and reached for the buttons on his slacks.

"Daniel, wha – ?" Dante exclaimed as he grabbed Daniel's wrists.

Daniel pressed his finger against Dante's lips, silencing him. "Shh, let me do this, Dante. I need to do this, for you *and* for me."

Dante watched him intently for several moments before nodding. He dropped his hands from around Daniel's wrists and leaned back on the bed, propping himself up on his elbows.

"I'm all yours, poppet."

Daniel grinned up at Dante. "Yes, you are, aren't you?"

"Always, Daniel."

Daniel unbuttoned Dante's pants and slowly pulled the zipper down. He could see Dante's arousal building as the hard bulge under his black slacks grew with each passing moment. He spread the material, and Dante's cock bounced free.

Daniel licked his lips as he stared at the hard cock before him. He had wanted to cross the invisible line he had drawn between him and Dante for awhile now. He knew Dante never would. Time to take hold of his fear and give Dante a blow job.

With that in mind, Daniel gathered his courage and leaned forward to wrap his lips around Dante's cock. A spicy male flavor immediately filled Daniel's mouth. He moaned, his eyes falling closed as he remembered how wonderful Dante tasted. He couldn't believe he had ever forgotten it.

"Daniel?" Dante whispered, his voice low and breathless, filled with heat and need.

Daniel opened his eyes to see Dante looking down at him. Again, he could see the worry and concern in his beautiful features. Daniel kept contact with Dante's eyes as he started bobbing his head, sucking the man's cock deep into his mouth.

"Bloody hell!"

Dante fell back against the bed then quickly propped himself back up to watch. Daniel made a special show of running his tongue up the long shaft. He could feel Dante's thighs tighten and quiver beneath his hands.

The response encouraged Daniel to do more, to show Dante some of the same loving care he'd been shown. This was one small way he could give back to Dante. He increased his efforts, letting his mind run free, acting instead of thinking.

Daniel lavished the top of Dante's cock with his tongue, running across the slit in the top and down around under the mushroomed head. He could feel Dante shudder beneath him, hear his deep groans of pleasure.

"Oh poppet," Dante moaned, "you have no idea how good your mouth feels on me."

Daniel had a pretty good idea but it still felt good to hear the words. He liked knowing he brought Dante pleasure. Doing so exhilarated him, made him want to do

more. He pushed the material around Dante's groin farther out of the way and started caressing his balls.

"Oh yes, Daniel," Dante cried out.

Daniel felt Dante's hand touch his hair. He looked up quickly, only to see Dante pull away, clenching his hands in the sheets. Daniel reached over and gripped Dante's hand, trying to let the man know he appreciated his control.

Daniel needed to be able to do this without being restrained in any manner. Being restrained or *required* to perform fellacio would remind him too much of what had been forced upon him. Daniel didn't want the past to encroach on the present. There was no room in this intimate situation for anyone except Daniel and Dante.

Once Dante squeezed his hand in return, Daniel went back to loving on his man. Moments later, Dante's thighs trembled and tensed, his breathing becoming erratic as he panted heavily.

"Daniel, poppet, I can't—"

Daniel knew what was coming and prepared, swallowing down the load of hot cream that suddenly filled his mouth. Dante's hips thrust up and he shouted his release. Daniel licked Dante clean then laid his head on his thigh. He smiled when he felt Dante's hand brush through his hair.

"Thank you, poppet," Dante whispered, breaking the silence. Daniel knew he meant thank you for more than the physical pleasure he'd just received. Dante thanked him for the trust.

"Thank you, sir."

* * * * *

"Are you sure this looks okay?" Daniel asked as he twisted and turned in front of the full-length mirror, looking at the outfit Dante picked out for him to wear for his first night downstairs in the bar. "I feel ridiculous."

"But you look hot!" Dante chuckled.

Daniel glanced over his shoulder. Dante sat on the edge of the bed, pulling his black boots on.

"You look hotter," Daniel said before returning his attention to the mirror, shocked once again by what he let Dante talk him into wearing.

True, it was black leather and he loved leather. He just never thought he'd find himself wearing a skimpy pair of black leather boy shorts and pretty much nothing else. Dante didn't even want him to wear a shirt.

"Are you *sure* this looks okay?" Daniel asked again.

Dante walked over to stand behind him, his hands resting gently on Daniel's shoulders. "You look perfect, I promise."

"You don't think it's a little too revealing?"

"Daniel, there are going to be a lot of other subs downstairs tonight dressed in less than you have on right now. You need to be prepared for that. I wouldn't be surprised if you see guys being led around with leashes around their dicks."

Daniel's eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"Poppet, you know how a club like this works," Dante said. "You might see a lot of things tonight that might surprise you but I don't want you to worry about them. You belong to me and no one will touch what is mine."

Daniel felt a shiver of fear run through him. "How can you be sure?" he whispered. "What if *he* is down there?"

"I hope he is, Daniel," Dante growled. His face suddenly darkened with rage. "I want him to know you belong to me, that if he ever touches another hair on your head I will rip his heart out and feed it to him."

"Dante!" Daniel exclaimed. He'd never heard him speak that way. The entire time he'd been back, Dante talked about how none of it was Daniel's fault, about how the man who attacked him was in the wrong. Dante never showed his anger before now.

"I'm sorry, Daniel."

Daniel turned in Dante's arms and laid his hand on the man's cheek. "Don't be. This affected you just as much as it did me. I'm just glad something good came out of it."

"Something good?"

Daniel smiled. He leaned forward and rested his forehead against Dante's chin. "You and me," he said simply. To him, that said it all. A moment later, Daniel felt Dante's lips press against his head.

"It will always be you and me, poppet," Daniel murmured. "And I have just the thing to prove it to everyone."

Daniel watched Dante walk over to his dresser and pull out an oblong black jeweler's box. His curiosity peaked when Dante brought the box back and held it out to him. Daniel took it and popped the lid open, his breath catching in his throat at the black leather studded choker lying inside. Even Daniel, in his limited contact with the D/s, world knew what this meant.

"Dante," he whispered in awe.

"Do you know what this is, Daniel?" Dante asked as he pulled the choker out of the box. "Do you know what it signifies?"

"It means that if I wear it I'm agreeing to a committed relationship with you and all it entails."

"Very perceptive, Daniel." Dante nodded. "It means you agree to be my sub and I agree to be your Dom. It means we're together and no one can separate us." Dante used a small key to open the collar then held it out to Daniel. "Under normal circumstances we would have worked up to a formal collaring but I think we've moved a little beyond that, don't you?"

Daniel nodded, unable to take his eyes of the choker Dante held out to him. It was beautiful in its simplicity, black leather with small, round silver studs. When Daniel took a closer look, he realized each stud was embossed with two capital D's.

Daniel frowned. "You're last name is Giovanni. Why two Ds?"

Dante separated the collar of his black silk shirt to show the silver necklace he wore around his neck. Centered in the middle of the necklace were two capital Ds entwined together. "Two Ds, one for Dante and one for Daniel."

Daniel gapped at Dante, his mouth hanging open. He didn't know what to say. While it wasn't unheard of for a Dom to wear a collar, it certainly was unusual. Of course, Dante's was more like a necklace and would denote him as the Dom in their relationship, as if someone couldn't tell just by looking at the self-assured man.

"You're not in this alone, Daniel. I'm in this as much as you are and I want everyone to know I belong to you just as much as you belong to me."

Daniel leaned into the hand Dante cupped around his cheek. He felt overwhelmed but in a good way.

"As your ma—as your Dom, it's my responsibility to care for you, to insure your safety at all times and make sure all of your needs are met, whatever they may be."

"It's okay, you can use that word."

"No, I don't think so," Dante replied. "It doesn't have a place in our relationship anymore, Daniel. I'm not just your master. What is between us is much more than that, don't you think? I want to be your friend, your lover, your everything, poppet."

"You are," Daniel whispered, having a hard time talking past the lump in his throat. Dante did all the right thing, said all the right things. Daniel would be an idiot to turn the man away. Dante was everything he ever wanted.

"Put it on me?" Daniel asked as he turned to face the other way.

Dante's breathing hitched. "Are you sure, Daniel?"

"I'm sure."

"I'm going to want to have this permanently soldered so it can never come off." Dante placed the collar around Daniel's neck and clicked it closed. A moment later Daniel heard the key turn in the lock.

"Okay." Daniel would have agreed to anything Dante wanted, mostly because he wanted it himself.

When Daniel turned back, Dante was placing the key on his necklace. His heart raced as he watched. With the key hanging from the chain, Dante looked up with a smile.

Dante's fingers trailed over the soft leather. "It looks beautiful on you, poppet."

Daniel mirrored Dante's soft caress, moving his fingers down the thick, corded muscles of Dante's neck to where the necklace lay on his chest. "Not as beautiful as this looks," he said as he fingered the key dangling from the two capital D's. "I like knowing that I belong to you."

Daniel eagerly went into the tight embrace Dante offered him.

"You've always belonged to me, Daniel, even when we were apart."

Daniel's eyes fluttered closed as he laid his head on Dante's shoulder. "Thank you."

"Thank you? For what?"

"For wanting me," Daniel murmured, "for coming back for me and not letting me go. God knows I gave you reason to." Daniel chuckled.

"I had to, poppet. I've never wanted anyone like I want you." Dante paused, then laughed.

Daniel looked up in confusion.

"I'm sorry for laughing. It's just that I've never looked forward to someone cursing as much as I do with you."

Daniel smiled. "Yes, but I have to be careful how often I do that or you might get used to it. I need to keep you on your toes." Daniel patted Dante's chest. "I think you like spanking me a little too much." Daniel yelped when Dante reached down and squeezed his ass.

"Works out well for us then, doesn't it?" Dante asked. "I don't think it's possible for you to control that mouth of yours."

"I can too," Daniel protested.

"Fine, I dare you to go twenty-four hours without swearing."

"What do I get if I win?"

Dante smirked. "What do you want?"

"You."

"You have me, Daniel," Dante said.

Daniel shook his head. He knew he was stepping out on a limb here but he had to try. This was something he'd been thinking a lot about lately. "Uh-uh, I *want* you." Daniel patted Dante's ass to emphasize his meaning.

Dante stared down at him, his gaze intent. Daniel opened his mouth to say he'd take something else, thinking he might have crossed an invisible line, but Dante didn't give him a chance to speak.

"Fine, if you can go twenty-four hours without swearing you can have my ass," Dante said. "And Daniel, no one's *ever* had my ass before, not even Logan."

Chapter Eleven

The pride Dante felt as he followed Joey and Daniel downstairs so overwhelmed him, he wondered that he could even walk. Daniel had not only agreed to go downstairs with him, but a symbol of their relationship now encircled Daniel's throat for everyone to see.

Dante didn't think any sub had ever looked so beautiful. The sweet little grins Daniel kept shooting over his shoulder at him just added to the euphoric feeling Dante floated in. Daniel seemed to be truly happy and that's all Dante wanted.

"He looks good," Logan commented.

"He looks beautiful."

"He's come a long way from the scared, broken man we brought home from the hospital, Dante, and I think most of it has to do with you." Logan grinned. "I don't think I've ever seen him look this happy."

"He has come a long way," Dante agreed. "But I think most of it had to do with him. He just needed someone to show him it was okay to trust again, that not everyone was out to hurt him."

"And you think you've done that?"

Dante waved to the man in front of him, laughing with Joey. "He's wearing my collar, isn't he?"

Logan pointed to the silver necklace around Dante's neck. "You're wearing one too."

"Of course," Dante replied, his voice full of pride. He had no problem letting the whole world know he belonged to Daniel. "I belong to him just as much as he belongs to me."

"I'm glad you realize that. I was a little worried when you two first got together that you were going to go all master/slave on the poor guy." Logan frowned. "I'm no expert but I don't know if relationships like that actually work."

"They do, but that type of relationship isn't for Daniel and me any longer. He can't even say the word master anymore." Dante clenched his fists, his happiness of a few minutes ago fading away. "Apparently, that asshole made Daniel call him *master*. We've settled on *sir*, like you and Joey."

"That might narrow it down, Dante."

"Narrow what down?" Dante asked. He tore his gaze away from Daniel long enough to look at Logan in confusion. Logan continued to stare at him until his words filtered through Dante's mind. Shock made him stumble.

"Whoa, dude, are you okay?" Logan asked as he gripped Dante's arm. "I didn't mean to upset you."

Dante straightened his clothes, trying to shake off the cold chill that had worked its way up his spine. "No, no, it was a good idea. It just never occurred to me that we might be able to find this guy because of the things he did to Daniel."

"Every Dom likes different things. You and I are a perfect example of that. Why couldn't we find this guy by the things he likes?" As they reached the entrance to the main room, Logan and Dante paused. "You know your clientele. You should be able to eliminate most of them."

Dante gazed out at the thick crowd. Logan was right. If he used what was done to Daniel as a pattern he could eliminate most of the people in the club. There were a few he didn't know much about and a few new faces but that still left the number of potential candidates under ten. They suddenly had a lot more to go on than they had a few minutes ago.

"Come on, man, put a smile on that ugly mug of yours," Logan said as he patted Dante on the back. "Daniel's looking this way and I think he's getting nervous. This is his first night back downstairs. Let's make it a good one. We can find the asshole later."

Dante's gaze flickered over to where Daniel stood with Joey. His expression showed his concern, his eyebrows were drawn together and his hands held onto the edge of the bar with a white-knuckled grip.

Dante used force of will to put a serene smile on his face as he tried to wrap his growing anger under control. He wanted to find the man who'd attacked Daniel but making sure Daniel was comfortable was more important. Daniel would always be more important.

"Come on, Logan, let's go join Joey and Daniel and show them how D/s is done in Dante's Dungeon."

Dante didn't wait for Logan, although he knew the man was right behind him. He headed straight for Daniel. As he made his way across the room, he noticed several admiring glances aimed in his man's direction, more than one of them filled with lust. Dante didn't know whether to laugh or snarl.

"Hey, poppet," Dante said as he reached Daniel's side and wrapped an arm around his waist. "We have a table reserved just for us right over here. Why don't we go sit and get some drinks?"

Daniel nodded. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Dante led Daniel to the private booth that was always reserved for him, one of the perks of being the owner. He could see the entire room from there.

"Am I allowed to dance?"

"Only for me." Dante chuckled.

Dante could see Daniel's agitation in the way his lips thinned and his gaze darted around the room.

"I don't know the rules, Dante," he whispered. "Please don't let me do anything to embarrass you."

"Ah, poppet, you could never embarrass me," Dante assured Daniel. He kissed Daniel on the head then gestured to the booth. "Slide in."

Once Daniel was seated, Dante scooted in next to him. He watched Logan do the same on the other side of the booth, placing Joey and Daniel safely between the two of them. They were both very protective of their men.

"What would you like to drink, Daniel?"

"Nothing too strong." Daniel wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Hard alcohol just tastes nasty."

"Oh, you should try a square cow," Joey said excitedly. "They're yummy. I have no idea what's in them." Joey laughed. "And never drink them when you're by yourself. One or two of them will knock you on your ass. But they do taste great."

"Uh, okay, I guess I'll have a square cow."

Dante waved a waiter over and put in their order then leaned back against the bench seat, his arm resting behind Daniel's head. Logan assumed a similar pose next to Joey. The two smaller men chatted away between them.

Daniel seemed animated, excited. He'd behaved more and more that way in the last little while. Dante knew things wouldn't always be easy for them but he hoped for more days like this one, with Daniel happy and not dwelling on the bad things that happened to him.

"Can we go dance?"

Dante grinned. Daniel looked ready to bounce out of his seat. Joey wasn't doing much better. He glanced past them to Logan only to find an amused grin on his face. He knew how the man felt. The joy Joey and Daniel found in life's little moments was infectious.

"I suppose but stay where I can watch." Dante winked.

Daniel's face suddenly flushed, a quick pant blowing out from between his lips. His eyes widened then his gaze suddenly dropped away. "Maybe I should just stay here."

Dante frowned. He leaned closer to Daniel and rubbed his back. "Daniel, if you want to go dance, go dance."

"I can't," Daniel whispered.

"Why?" Dante felt Daniel's body shudder. "Do you want me to go with you?"

"I don't think that would be a good idea either." Daniel's voice sounded strange, strangled.

"Daniel, what's wrong?" Dante asked, growing more concerned by the second until Daniel grabbed his hand and placed it over the hard cock fighting to get free of his tight shorts.

"I just can't."

Dante sucked in a quick breath, suddenly feeling as flushed as Daniel looked. "Bloody hell, where did that come from? Not that I'm complaining, mind you but—"

Dante was nearly shocked out of his socks when Daniel laughed. The sound echoed not only amusement, but arousal, and it went straight to Dante's dick.

"I wanted to dance and you said you'd be watching and—" Daniel bit his lip and shrugged. Dante could see Daniel's pale green eyes peeking at him through the soft curtain of his strawberry blond hair.

Dante swallowed past the lump that suddenly formed in his throat. "We're getting a stripper pole installed in the bedroom first thing tomorrow morning," he choked out. An image of Daniel dancing naked just for him suddenly swamped his head and fueled the desire that took hold of his body. Dante knew he'd trade his entire bar in that moment for a private room.

Daniel's tentative smile pulled Dante out of the red haze of lust he swam in. Dante rubbed his hand along the hard length encased in Daniel's tight leather pants, grinning when he heard a small moan.

He leaned over and licked the soft shell of Daniel's ear. "Go dance for me, poppet."

Trembling, Daniel climbed over Dante, pausing when he straddled Dante's lap. "Are you going to watch me?"

"I doubt I'll be able to keep my eyes off you."

Daniel giggled. He *actually* giggled. Dante inhaled as whatever lust flowed through him instantly turned to a heartwarming feeling of complete love and happiness. Daniel had giggled.

Dante leaned forward and quickly kissed Daniel before smacking him on the hip. "Go dance for me, poppet, before I drag you into some back room and ruin your sexy little shorts."

Daniel climbed off Dante's lap and out of the booth. He waited at the edge of the table for Joey then the both of them walked to the dance floor. Daniel held Dante's gaze as he began to dance. Sweet Hell!

"Breathe, man." Logan chuckled.

"I'm not sure I can."

Daniel moved like a professional, his hips gyrating side to side then forward and backward. His hands moved slowly up his naked chest. The hard bulge in his tight black shorts was clearly visible.

"Fuck," Dante groaned, "have you ever seen anything so damn sexy in your life?"

Logan laughed. "I thought cursing wasn't allowed."

"Well, as Daniel tries to constantly remind me, sometimes you just have to curse." He pointed to the sexy man dancing before them. "*That* requires a curse word."

Dante watched Daniel move until he couldn't stand it anymore. It took all of about five minutes. He waved a waiter over and whispered in his ear. The waiter nodded and walked off, headed toward the DJ.

Dante got up and slowly covered the distance between him and Daniel, each step carefully chosen. He could see Daniel's eyes widen as he drew closer. The sudden flush of Daniel's skin told Dante the man knew he was being hunted.

Dante had to give him credit though; Daniel didn't run. He grinned and crooked his finger at Dante, instead. The action wasn't very sub-like, but Dante didn't care. He had Daniel in his sights and two steps later, he had him in his arms.

Dante growled in Daniel's ear. "You should be outlawed as a lethal weapon."

"Yeah?" Daniel asked as he looped his arms around Dante's neck. "Did you like watching me dance?"

"What do you think?" Dante grabbed Daniel's hips and pulled them against his, letting the man feel the hardness in his pants. Daniel moaned and melted against Dante. Dante liked knowing he had that kind of effect on Daniel, the flushed skin, the wide eyes, the answering hardness in his pants. The desire in Daniel's eyes made Dante feel powerful like nothing else did.

"Dance with me, poppet?" Dante asked as the slow song he'd requested came over the loudspeakers.

Daniel nodded and laid his head on Dante's shoulder. The difference in their height made it easy for Daniel's head to fit nicely into the crook of Dante's neck. They were perfect for each other.

Dante could feel Daniel's soft breath blowing across his neck as he slowly moved them around the dance floor. Daniel followed his lead like they'd danced together for years. Dante paid no mind to the other dancers on the floor. He ignored them when they bumped into them or stood back to watch. He gave all his attention to the sexy man in his arms.

Daniel's sexy body had a strong effect on Dante. But knowing Daniel belonged to him had an even stronger effect. It was all Dante could do not to drag Daniel to the nearest flat surface, rip his sexy little shorts off and fuck him senseless.

Dante sensed Daniel felt the same way. He gripped Dante's shirt tightly, as if to hold himself up. Despite how much he liked dancing with Daniel, Dante decided the

time had come to move this little party back upstairs before he acted on the crazy desires running through his mind, right there on the dance floor.

"Time to go, poppet," Dante whispered in Daniel's ear.

"Go?" Daniel echoed. "We have to go?"

"We can stay if you really want to." Dante rubbed his hard cock back and forth against Daniel's. "But I think we could have more fun upstairs, just the two of us." He winked at Daniel and grabbed a large portion of his butt cheek. "And maybe the flat of my hand."

Daniel's eyes narrowed until they were half-lidded and filled with a sensuous light. "Oh, I'd like that," he breathed heavily.

Dante didn't need any further encouragement. He grabbed Daniel's hand and pulled him across the dance floor toward the stairs that led to their flat.

Daniel suddenly stopped and yanked Dante's hand. Dante turned, quickly taking in the look on Daniel's face. His huge, pale green eyes were the only color on his ashen face. They seemed to be trained on some spot across the room.

"Daniel?"

Daniel's mouth moved but no sound came out. He started to shake his head, a shudder moving down his entire body as he backed up.

"Daniel, what's wrong?" Dante glanced over his shoulder but he couldn't see anything that would have his man so scared. A few people stood across the room, some he knew, some he did not. Dante couldn't pinpoint a single one that explained Daniel's reaction.

Dante stepped forward and stood between Daniel and whatever he looked at. He grabbed Daniel by the arms and gave him a little shake to bring him out of his stupor. When that didn't work and Daniel continued to shake, Dante pulled him close and wrapped Daniel safely in his arms.

"Daniel, you have to talk to me, poppet," he whispered in Daniel's ear. "I can't protect you if I don't know what has you so scared. It's him, isn't it? The man who kidnapped you?"

"Tha-that man," Daniel stammered, "yes, he's here."

Dante snapped his head around as he scanned the crowd. "Which one?"

Daniel's hand trembled as he pointed. "The man in brown leather pants and a white shirt. He's standing next to the bar talking to Tommy."

"That's the man who kidnapped you?" Dante asked as his gaze narrowed in on the man. "Are you sure?"

"I could never forget him," Daniel whispered.

Dante started to pull away from Daniel, intent on reaching the man and slamming his head into the thick wooden bar until he confessed, but the tight grip of Daniel's hand on his, accompanied by a small whimper, stopped him.

"Please, Dante, don't."

Dante looked back at Daniel. The plea in Daniel's eyes warred with his desire to beat the crap out of the man who'd taken his poppet. He wanted answers.

"Dante."

Dante's need to protect Daniel overrode his desire to plant his fist in the kidnapper's face. He folded Daniel back into his arms. "Okay, Daniel." He waved at Logan until he got the man's attention, then motioned him over.

"What's up?"

"Don't make it obvious but that man standing over by the bar? The one with the dirty blond hair talking to the bartender? That's the man who kidnapped Daniel. I need you to watch him while I get Daniel upstairs and call Jack."

"Yeah, sure, man, whatever you need," Logan quickly said. "Joey and I will just dance over here."

"Thank you." Dante turned and escorted Daniel out of the room, keeping him held tightly into the curve of his body and positioning himself between Daniel and the man who'd kidnapped him.

He pulled his cell phone out as they started up the stairs and dialed Jack's number. The more time he spent with the policeman, the more he liked the man. Jack

seemed to be one of the true, honest defenders of the people. He really believed in what he did. Dante couldn't fault that.

"Jack," he said the moment the phone was answered, "this is Dante Giovanni. I need you to get down to my bar as soon as you can. Daniel recognized the man who kidnapped him; he's down here at the bar."

"I'm headed that way now," Jack replied. "Try and keep him in the bar but get Daniel out of there if you can. He doesn't need to be exposed to this until I need him to identify the guy."

Dante grimaced. "I'm already taking Daniel upstairs. Logan and Joey are keeping an eye on him. I didn't want Daniel down there with him."

"Okay, good. I should be there in about ten minutes. And Dante, don't do anything stupid. I can't question this guy if he can't talk."

"Yes, I hear you," Dante said, resigned. "But I don't have to like it."

Jack chuckled. "I promise to give you five minutes alone with him after I question him. How's that?"

"Deal."

Dante snapped the phone closed and hurried Daniel into the safety of their home. Each step seemed to take forever. Daniel walked slowly, as if he were in some sort of trance.

Dante moved him across the living room to their bedroom and settled Daniel down onto the bed.

Dante knelt beside him and took Daniel's cold, clammy hands in his. "Are you feeling okay, poppet?" The second the words were out of Dante's mouth he knew they were stupid. Obviously, Daniel wasn't okay.

"I'm going to run downstairs real quick and insure that this man stays put until Jack can arrive to arrest him, okay? I will be right back. I want you to stay right here, don't move."

"No, please, Dante," Daniel whispered, his voice urgent. His eyes took on a wide-eyed frantic look as he clutched at Dante's hand. "Don't leave me here."

"Daniel, he can't get in here. You'll be perfectly safe. I just need to —"

"No, please," Daniel cried. He yanked Dante's hand. "Red, Dante, red."

Dante came up off the floor to sit next to Daniel, wrapping the man in his arms.

"Okay, poppet, I'll stay."

Daniel wiggled closer, acting as if he wanted to climb inside Dante's skin. He lifted Daniel up and settled him on his lap. Daniel let out a small sigh as if to indicate he now felt a bit safer.

"I need to make a phone call, poppet, and let Jack know I won't be coming back downstairs," he said as he reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell. He flipped it open and dialed Jack's number again.

"Hey, Jack, it's Dante."

"I'm just pulling into the parking lot."

"Excellent. I'm going to stay upstairs with Daniel. He's pretty upset."

"Might not be a bad idea," Jack replied. "Just make sure you're secure until I can get there. I don't want this man anywhere near Daniel."

"I'll double check our security system, but it's a good one. It should be, for what I paid for it."

Jack snorted. "Right, like security systems can't be breached."

"Jack —"

"Sorry, man, but I've seen more high-priced security systems broken into than you'd think. Doesn't matter how much money you've spent on them, if someone wants to get in, they're going to get in."

"I understand what you are saying but I do not see any reason for someone to break in here," Dante insisted. Jack's words made him uneasy, and put him on the defensive. "That man does not even know Daniel is here let alone that Daniel spotted him."

"Maybe, maybe not," Jack said. "We don't know and we won't until we catch him and he talks." Jack gave a deep, eerie chuckle. "And he *will* talk."

"I hear you, Jack, and I appreciate it. Daniel and I will be waiting upstairs for you."

Dante snapped his phone closed and laid it down on the nightstand. He lifted Daniel off his lap, set him on the bed, and pulled the covers around him. Daniel still shivered. Dante thought he might be in shock.

"Daniel, I'm going to go double-check the locks. I'll be right back. You just stay here tucked under the covers and when I get back, we'll have us a snuggle, okay?"

Dante worried when Daniel didn't even nod. He just pulled the blankets closer and wiggled down into them. Dante leaned over and kissed Daniel's forehead then straightened. "Love you, poppet."

Dante had his hand on the door handle when he heard the sweetest words in the world come from the small figure huddled on the bed.

"Love you, sir."

Chapter Twelve

Daniel's stomach knotted. It had been rolling since the moment he spotted the man who'd kidnapped him. Daniel might have knocked the guy out and gotten away from him, but the mere sight of him now still scared the shit out of him.

Somehow, the man downstairs and the man who'd attacked him under the guise of a scene were connected.

Daniel struggled to hold back his tears. He'd come so far in his recovery, and yet now, he felt as if he were back to square one.

Daniel lifted his head and glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Dante seemed to have been gone for quite some time, five maybe ten minutes. Daniel might not know a lot about the security system Dante installed before he moved in but he knew it didn't take that long to check it.

He shoved the blankets back and climbed from the bed. Cocking his head, he listened intently. Nothing. Although the place was soundproofed to keep out the noise from downstairs, this silence felt wrong somehow. Heavy. Frightening.

Cautiously, he crept over to the bedroom door, which Dante had left open. He peered out and saw nothing out of the ordinary, but something made the hairs on his arms stand at attention.

Remembering Dante had left his cell phone on the nightstand next to the clock, Daniel hurried back to the bed and scooped it up. He flipped it open and scrolled down to Logan's number then held his finger over the connect button.

Gathering his courage, Daniel stepped out of the bedroom and tiptoed toward the kitchen. His heart beat frantically when he heard footsteps coming from the living room.

Daniel took a few more steps and looked around the corner. Terror tore at his heart when he saw Dante lying still on the floor. A man stood over him, a man Daniel recognized even from behind, and that recognition made his blood freeze in his veins.

He pushed the connect button on the cell phone and set it down on the small sideboard just outside of the kitchen then walked into the living room. He knew it was stupid but he couldn't leave Dante out there to face that man alone.

Daniel knew what the man could do, how much pain he could inflict in a matter of moments. He also knew how much he enjoyed inflicting pain. Daniel had the scars, both physical and mental, to prove it. He wasn't going to let Dante find out what that was like.

"You need to leave, Craig." Daniel tried to make his voice sound firm when inside he shook with terror. "You were not invited here."

The man swung around, surprise shadowing his face for a brief moment before his eyes lit with recognition. "Well, well, if it's isn't my little bitch."

"I'm not your bitch." Daniel took a quick step back when the man walked toward him. Fear made his hands tremble, made them sweat. He went to rub them

against the leg of his pants only to remember he wore tight, black leather boy shorts. "I belong to Dante."

"To Dante?" Craig laughed as he glanced down at the unconscious body at his feet. Daniel jumped when Craig kicked out at Dante, hitting him in the side. Dante didn't move. "Is this your big, brave Dante?"

"Leave, Craig." Daniel pointed toward the door. He knew his voice sounded shrill. "This is my house and I'm telling you to leave and never come back. I did not invite you into my house."

Pain exploded in Daniel's face and made him drop to his knees. He grabbed his cheek and looked up at the man towering over him. Daniel's fear doubled when he saw the angry glitter in Craig's eyes. *Oh, god, this isn't good.*

"You do not speak to me like that, boy," Craig snapped. Daniel cringed when he saw the man's hands go to the long, thick, black belt around his waist. "You've obviously forgotten who's in charge here."

Craig unbuckled his belt and pulled it from the loops of his pants. Daniel started to backpedal away from him. He whimpered when his feet slipped on the slick tiles on the kitchen floor. Flipping over, he started crawling away on his hands and knees.

Daniel cried out, his head tilting back when a large hand yanked on his hair. He could see the small flare of Craig's nostrils. The worst of his beatings at the hands of this man usually came when his nostrils flared.

Daniel bit his lip to keep the hysteria building inside of him from escaping. He couldn't understand how he could narrow in on such a small thing as Craig's nostrils flaring when he might easily die in the next few minutes.

Craig gave another harsh yank on Daniel's hair. The muscles on his neck strained as his head was forced back even more.

"You are my bitch," Craig growled into his ear. "I created you. I claimed you. I own you."

The words were barbed and hurtful, meant to inflict the most amount of pain and anguish possible. They were meant to make him feel weak and vulnerable and in that moment, that's exactly how Daniel felt.

His gaze went to Dante. A bitter, cold despair gripped him. If he gave in, if he allowed this man to abuse him again, he wouldn't be the only one to suffer. And Daniel couldn't allow anyone to hurt Dante.

As Craig slowly wrapped his belt around Daniel's neck, he reacted. He struck out with his hands and his feet, and screamed at the top of his lungs, even as he felt the belt tighten around his throat, cutting his air off.

Pain radiated throughout his body as Craig landed blow after powerful blow on Daniel's head, shoulders and back. Daniel screamed in agony but didn't stop resisting.

If he was going to die, he was going to die fighting. Craig wasn't going to get the better of him this time. And he wasn't going to get his hands on Dante. Daniel rolled to his knees and started fighting against Craig's grasp on him.

As the last bit of air tried to leave his lungs, Daniel suddenly felt Craig's grip loosen as his elbow connected with the man's windpipe. His jaw dropped when he saw Craig's eyes bulge as he fell to the floor.

Daniel kicked at him, his foot connecting with Craig's face. Craig's eyes closed and his hands fell to the floor. Daniel kicked out at him again, hitting him in the side just as Craig had done to Dante, but the man didn't move.

Daniel scooted away from Craig's limp body until his back hit a wall. Daniel's breath heaved from his body, his chest rising and falling rapidly. He pulled the belt from around his neck and flung it across the room.

Carefully skirting Craig's body, Daniel crawled over to Dante. He still wasn't moving and there was a large gash on his forehead. Daniel knelt next to him, shaking him gently. "Dante?" he whispered.

Daniel heard a soft moan. His heart thudded when he glanced over to see Craig starting to stir. With Dante's safety in mind, Daniel jumped to his feet and ran into kitchen to grab a large knife out of the butcher block holder on the counter.

He raced back into the living room and planted himself between Dante and Craig, knife held in one hand. He used the other to shake Dante until he heard a small moan and started to get a physical response.

"Dante, wake up," he cried. "Please, wake up."

Daniel's eyes widened. He felt the blood drained from his face. Craig was slowly climbing to his feet. Daniel clutched the knife tighter and scooted back closer to Dante. "Dante!"

The small scream faded away as Craig turned to glare at him. Daniel swallowed past the lump in his throat. "I told you to leave, Craig. I didn't invite you into my house and you're trespassing."

Craig wiped a small drop of blood away from the corner of his mouth with his hand then glanced down at his palm. He wiped his mouth again and looked up. Daniel could feel the venom in Craig's glare. It ate at his skin and made his stomach roll.

"Oh, you're going to pay for this, boy, and so is your useless hero," Craig snapped. "He couldn't save you before and he can't save you now."

Craig advanced across the room. Daniel held the knife in front of him, his back pressed tightly against Dante's body, and screamed so loud his own ears rang. "Get the fuck away from me!"

Daniel lashed out with the knife as soon as Craig was within reach. He saw bright red blood well up over Craig's thigh and a look of astonishment cross his face. Craig's face turned deep red. He reached for Daniel again.

Daniel screamed and thrust out the knife again. He jabbed the blade at Craig over and over again until a large form suddenly loomed over him and grabbed the knife, yanking it out of his hands. He started to struggle until he saw Logan kneeling next to him.

"Oh my God, Logan," Daniel cried as he threw himself against the man. He hugged him for a brief moment before pulling away. "Dante's hurt. He —"

"Shh, I know, Daniel, I know," Logan said, patting Daniel's hand gently. "But he's fine, look." Logan pointed behind Daniel.

Daniel turned, tears of elation filling his eyes when he saw Dante leaning back against the side of the couch, Joey hovering next to him. Daniel scrambled across the floor to Dante. He stopped once he was within reach, unsure of where to touch him without hurting him.

"Come here, poppet."

Daniel moved into the arms that Dante held out to him, burrowing as close to Dante as he could get without climbing under the man's skin. He could hear a strong heartbeat under his ear, a chest moving up and down with air.

"I'm okay, Daniel," Dante said. He stroked Daniel's hair. "It's just a little bump on the head."

"I was so scared," Daniel whispered against Dante's neck. "You wouldn't wake up and Craig was going to—"

"Craig?" Dante asked. "You know this man?"

Daniel sat up slowly. To his dismay, his voice broke slightly as he spoke. "Craig is the fucker that assaulted me." Daniel suddenly realized he'd used a curse word. He quickly glanced at Dante. "Sorry."

"It's okay, poppet," Dante said as he patted Daniel's hand. "In this case, I think the sentiment is justified. Called for, even."

Daniel followed Dante's gaze to where Jack had Craig handcuffed on the floor. Paramedics and uniformed officers rushed into the room and moved toward Craig. Daniel shuddered. "How did he get in here? How did he even know where I was?"

"I don't know, Daniel, but maybe we should ask?"

Daniel got to his feet when Dante patted his hip. He held out his hand and helped Dante get to his. He really didn't want to go near Craig. He wanted Dante near the man even less. When Dante stepped toward Craig, Daniel grabbed his hand and pulled him back.

"No, Dante, don't," he said desperately. "Please, I don't want you near him. He's a monster." His voice broke on a sob. "He'll hurt you."

Dante's eyebrows rose as astonishment crossed his face. "Daniel, he's handcuffed on the floor. He can't hurt me."

"He can," Daniel insisted. Why didn't Dante understand? Craig was evil right down to the bone. He enjoyed hurting people. But Dante just gave Daniel a condescending look. Daniel figured next he'd be patting him on the head.

"Daniel, he —"

"Why won't you listen to me?" Daniel cried. "He'll hurt you."

"Daniel," Dante said. He cupped Daniel's face. "He can't hurt me. He can't even stand up right now. You incapacitated him when you stabbed him."

"I-I what?"

"You won. He tried to hurt you, to hurt me, but you beat him." Dante shook Daniel's face a little. "You won, poppet."

"Bu-but —" Daniel looked past Dante's shoulder to the man lying on the floor. Only then did he see the blood puddling on the carpet. He seemed to have several different wounds, most of them in his thighs. He wasn't moving and small groans came from his lips.

Daniel frowned. "I did that?"

"Yes, poppet," Dante said in a strange tone of voice that captured Daniel's attention. "You saved us both. No one else did it, just you."

"H-how?"

Dante chuckled. "I have no idea but I'm glad you did. He could have hurt us both, killed us even, but you saved us."

"I had to," Daniel whispered. "He was going to hurt you. I couldn't let him do to you what he did to me." Daniel fell against Dante. He felt Dante's strong arms wrap around him.

"I know, poppet." Dante tightened his arms around Daniel, making it difficult for him to draw a breath. "I'm so damn proud of you, Daniel."

Daniel was rather proud of himself. He didn't understand how he'd done it but he beat Craig, the man who'd nearly destroyed his life. He'd saved Dante, protected him. As Dante'd said, no one else did it, just him.

"Daniel, Dante," Jack said, "I have some questions I need to ask you about what happened here."

Daniel and Dante turned to find the officer standing next to them. He looked determined. The time had come for Daniel to get everything out in the open. Part of him felt relieved, but part of him still wanted to hide what happened, especially from Dante.

He still felt a little to blame for everything that had occurred. If he'd never gone with the guy in the first place, they wouldn't be going through what they were going through now.

"Daniel, is this the man who assaulted you?" Jack asked as he pointed to the floor where paramedics were working on Craig.

Daniel nodded. "Yes."

"Would you be willing to testify to that in court?" Jack asked.

Daniel grimaced. "Do I have to?"

"Daniel, I know this is hard but the only way to keep this man from doing this again is to put him behind bars."

"But I agreed to the scene with him," Daniel protested. His hands clenched at his sides as he tried not to buckle under the shame he felt. "Who would believe me once they found that out?"

"Daniel, it doesn't matter what you agreed to. You told him to stop, right?"

Daniel nodded quickly. "I begged him to stop. He just gagged me to keep me quiet."

"Stop means stop no matter what you agreed to. What he did to you was not only wrong, it was against the law."

Daniel's eyebrows shot up. Jack sounded so fierce, so angry. His lips had thinned to a mere line, his brown eyes flashing. Daniel knew that Jack didn't have a clue how

things were done in their little community but he didn't seem to care. For him, stop meant stop, no matter what.

"Yes, I told him to stop on several occasions. He didn't. When I started to scream, he gagged me so that I couldn't speak. When he was done with me, he dumped me in front of the hospital like a piece of garbage to be disposed of."

"Will you testify to what he did to you?" Jack asked again.

Daniel felt Dante's hand squeeze his, encouraging him. Daniel swallowed hard then nodded. "Yes, I'll testify."

Jack didn't smile at his response but he looked relieved as he nodded back. "I'll need you to give a written statement about everything that happened."

"Everything?" Daniel squeaked.

"I'm afraid so, Daniel," Jack replied. His facial features softened. "I know it won't be easy for you, and I'll help as much as possible, but we need to know everything that you can remember . . . in detail."

"Does — does Dante have to be there?" Daniel whispered, casting a quick glance up at his lover.

"No, not if you don't want him to be."

"Daniel? You don't want me to be there?" Dante asked, his tone both hurt and confused.

"I don't want — I don't want you to know what he did to me," Daniel murmured. Dante knew most of what happened to him but there were some things that were so horrible Daniel didn't even want to think about them, let alone let Dante know.

Dante looked like he wanted to argue. His mouth opened then closed. Suddenly, Daniel felt himself pulled into Dante's arms, pressed hard against the man's chest. Dante's head rested against the top of his.

"I want to be there, Daniel, to support you." Dante cupped Daniel's chin and tilted his head up, forcing him to meet his eyes. "But if you don't want me there I can wait outside, okay?"

Daniel felt a lone tear fall down his face. "I just—he did some really horrible things to me, Dante," Daniel whispered. "I don't want you to hear what he did."

"Daniel, there is nothing you could say that will make me stop loving you. You need to understand that. And the things I imagine can't be much worse than what actually happened."

Daniel snorted. "You'd be wrong."

Dante rested his forehead against Daniel's and took several deep, slow breaths. He caressed Daniel's cheek. "Okay, Daniel, whatever you want. But I insist you allow me to wait outside for you, just in case you need me. I don't need to hear what happened if you don't want me to but I need to be there for you."

"I understand you want to know everything that happened, Dante, and maybe someday I'll tell you, but not yet, please." Daniel gave a little shake of his head. "I'm just not ready for you to know yet."

"Okay, poppet." Dante kissed Daniel's forehead. "Whatever you want."

"I'm sorry," Daniel whispered.

"Don't be. I'm not. I'm just sorry you have to go through this. I'd do anything to take this off your shoulders."

Daniel nodded and turned to look at Jack. "What do I need to do?"

"Why don't you come down to the station in the morning?" Jack asked. "You can give your statement then. I think a night's rest might do you some good and tomorrow is soon enough."

"Okay."

"There is one more thing I need, Daniel," Jack said.

Daniel raised an eyebrow at Jack. What more could they need besides his statement against Craig?

"The man you pointed out downstairs in the bar?" Jack asked. "We have him in custody. I need you to identify him. I need to know if he is indeed the man who kidnapped you."

"No!" Dante shouted. "Absolutely not."

"Dante!" Daniel exclaimed, shocked by the vehemence in Dante's voice, the way his face suddenly reddened.

"No, Daniel. I don't want you anywhere near that man. I don't even want you in the same room with him."

"Dante, he just needs to point him out," Jack reasoned. "The man doesn't even have to know Daniel's identifying him. You have surveillance cameras in the bar. Daniel can look at those."

Dante nodded. "That would be fine but I don't want Daniel anywhere near that man."

"Dante, I can do it," Daniel said. "I'm not afraid of him. I knocked him out once already and got away from him. He can't hurt me."

"I don't—"

"Dante," Daniel began, patting Dante's chest, "it's okay. Let's just go downstairs and take a look at the man. You can even hold my hand."

Daniel chuckled when Dante snorted and rolled his eyes but he didn't miss the fact that Dante grabbed his hand. Daniel gave it a little squeeze then turned to look at Jack. "I'm ready."

Chapter Thirteen

"Poppet?" Dante called out as he walked toward the front door. "Are you about ready to go? Logan and Joey are here."

"I'll be right out," Daniel called from the bedroom.

Dante opened the door, expecting to find Logan and Joey standing there. The four of them were going out on the town to celebrate Logan and Joey's one year anniversary. Dante couldn't wait until he and Daniel could celebrate the same thing. Only a few more months

"Jack," Dante said in surprise, "what are you doing here? Did something go wrong with the case?"

Jack smiled as he stepped inside. "No, just the opposite in fact. I wanted to come over and give you and Daniel the news personally."

Dante arched an eyebrow but turned to yell for Daniel. "Daniel, can you come out here, please? Jack is here and he needs to talk to us."

Dante led Jack into the living room, and the two men took a seat. Dante rested his elbows on his knees, folding his hands together. He wanted to demand Jack speak right there and then but knew Daniel needed to hear what the man had to say as well.

In the three months since Craig Dawson and Larry Barnes, the kidnapper, were arrested and identified by Daniel, a lot had happened. Daniel and Dante both entered into therapy as a couple to help them deal with some of the things they'd gone through. They were making great progress and their relationship was better than ever. They couldn't be happier.

Which is why Dante was so nervous when he heard Daniel come out of the bedroom. He didn't want what Jack came to say to interfere with the progress they'd made. He turned to say something to Daniel but the minute he laid eyes on him, words failed him.

Daniel Ferguson was a gorgeous man. He took Dante's breath away every time he looked at him. But this . . . the sight before him stole his breath away. Daniel had said he had a surprise. Dante just had no idea it would be such a wonderful one.

Daniel wore the tightest pair of black leather pants he'd ever seen. A white silk, transparent shirt covered him from his shoulders to his zipper. Dante could see Daniel's rippled stomach, and the two brown nipples pieced by silver rings.

The collar he'd given Daniel stood out against his pale skin, the silver studs shining brightly as if Daniel had polished them. Daniel wondered how he did that, considering the collar was soldered on and couldn't come off.

He nearly swallowed his tongue when he Daniel stopped in front of him. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, but no sound would come out. There just didn't seem to be a way to describe how sexy Daniel looked.

"Damn," Jack said. He whistled, reminding Dante that he and Daniel were not alone in the room. "Maybe I should get into the scene. You look hot, Daniel."

Daniel's face flushed. "Thank you, Jack. We're going out with Logan and Joey to celebrate their one year anniversary."

"That's wonderful. Maybe I can add to your celebration." Jack gestured for Daniel to take a seat. Dante wrapped an arm around Daniel's shoulder and tucked the man tightly against his side. He planted a small kiss on Daniel's head before turning his attention to Jack.

"So, what is this news?"

Jack grinned. "It's over, all of it."

Dante frowned. "What's over?"

"The case," Jack said. "Craig Dawson and Larry Barnes are going away for so long they won't even be able to get it up by the time they get out. They will never hurt anyone again, neither of them."

"But how?" Dante asked. "I thought Daniel had to testify, that there would be a trial."

"Nope," Jack said. He sounded gleeful. "After the story hit the news, several young men came forward to report assaults by both Dawson and Barnes, assaults just like Daniel's."

Dante felt Daniel shudder. He tightened his grip around the man. "What does that mean?"

"It means no trial," Jack replied. "Dawson and Barnes found out about the extra charges against them and took a plea deal. They will both be doing twenty-five to life with no chance of parole."

"Twenty-five years," Daniel whispered. "They can't get out for twenty-five years?"

"Not a day before their full sentence is served," Jack said. "You will never see them again, Daniel. A special provision of their sentence is that they can have no contact with their victims while in prison or when they get out."

"Why?" Dante asked. He felt Daniel stiffen beside him and knew he wondered the same thing.

"That's the best part. The judge felt their crimes were so heinous he added that provision to their sentence on his own."

"So, it's over?" Daniel asked. "It's really over?"

"Yes."

Jack's simple answer meant so much. Dante felt Daniel sag against him. He knew how Daniel felt. The relief was tremendous, almost overwhelming. Their lives had been so wrapped up in the things that had happened for so long it was almost weird to think they were over.

"Thank you for coming to let us know, Jack," Dante said. "Would you like to join us tonight?"

"No, I don't think so, but thanks for the invitation."

Dante chuckled. Jack looked nervous, flushed. Dante never asked Jack whether he preferred men or women. It never seemed to matter. But the way he looked and the glances he kept casting in Daniel's direction made him wonder.

"We can almost guarantee that you'll have a good time," Dante said. "We're going to make a quick stop downstairs then head over to Logan's bar where they are holding a party for them. There will be lots of eligible young man hanging around, I promise."

Jack's face flushed even more but Dante could see a twinkle of interest in the man's eyes that settled the issue of Jack's sexual preference. "Come on, Jack, you know you want to. Just give in and come with us. We have a lot to celebrate tonight."

"Alright, I'll go." Jack sounded resigned but Dante knew he really wanted to go. He'd just needed an excuse.

"Can I ask you a question?" Daniel asked, sitting up.

"Yes, sure, what would you like to know?" Jack asked.

"Why did Larry Barnes kidnap me?"

“He worked for Dawson. He helped Dawson find young men and transport them to a location where Dawson would assault them.”

“But why? I mean, what did he get out of it?”

“The psychological evaluation the district attorney ordered said that Dawson and Barnes had some sort of symbiotic relationship, almost like you and Dante. Dawson was the dominant partner. Barnes was his submissive. He did whatever Dawson told him to do.”

“Even kidnapping me?”

“No, that was all Barnes. He had been watching you for some time, thinking to take you again for Dawson. He knew Dawson liked you.” Jack grimaced, clasping his hands together. “When he saw you and Dante go to the hospital, he stole a car and a police uniform. He needed to protect Dawson and getting rid of you was the only way he could see to do that.”

“How did he get his hands on a police uniform?” Dante asked.

Jack chuckled, which seemed weird to Dante considering the circumstances. “It appears Officer Jones had a bag in his car with a spare uniform in it. He planned to sleep over at his girlfriend’s house and needed a clean uniform for work. It was just coincidence that Barnes picked the right cop car to steal.”

“I guess his luck just ran out.” Much to Dante’s surprise, Daniel started to laugh. “Stupid son-of-a bitch.”

“Daniel!” Dante exclaimed. “Cursing is not allowed. What have I told you that about that?”

Daniel grinned. He grabbed Dante’s hand and kissed the palm before falling to his knees and crawling over to kneel in front of him. “I guess you’ll just have to punish me, sir.”

Dante arched an eyebrow, his hand itching to smack Daniel’s bare ass. “I can do that, poppet.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

~The End~

About the Author

Stormy Glenn believes the only thing sexier than a man in cowboy boots is two, or three men in cowboy boots. She also believes in love at first sight, soul mates, true love, and happy endings.

When she's not being a mother to her six teenagers or cleaning up after her two 70-pound lab puppies, you can usually find her cuddled in bed with a book in her hand or her laptop, creating the next sexy character for her stories. Stormy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her web site at www.stormyglenn.com.

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